The Day of the Triffids Study Guide

The Day of the Triffids by John Wyndham

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This novel of speculative fiction, written in the early-1950s, tells a story common to the genre of that era: traditional western ways and philosophies of life are decimated, and threatened with complete destruction, by a combination of mysterious events and the increasing control of a disguised, subversive, murderous entity; in this case, mobile and intelligent plants. As it chronicles the struggles of a small, desperate group of human survivors, the narrative explores themes relating to the conflict between morality and necessity, the nature of human frailty, and the social nature of being human.

The novel begins with the narrator's experience of waking up in hospital and knowing immediately that the environment, both in the hospital and in the larger environment of the world outside the hospital windows, is not what it should be. He describes the events of the day before—how large numbers of people, apparently all over the world, were held spellbound by the sight of bright green lights in the sky, apparently the result of the earth passing through the tail of a comet. He works up the nerve to remove the bandages covering his eyes (the result of recent treatment to help him recover from an attack by a triffid, a strange ambulatory plant), and then discovers that almost everyone else in the hospital, and indeed in the outside world, has been stricken blind.

After a chapter in which he narrates a few details of his own life and a greater number of details about how triffids came to be accepted in society, the narrator (giving his name as William Masen) describes his journey out of the hospital and into the center of London. There, he is repeatedly confronted by harrowing experiences of how almost the entire city is coping, or not, with sudden blindness. During one such experience, he rescues a sighted girl from being held hostage by a violent blind man. He learns her name is Josella, and after a few violent encounters with triffids, they take refuge in a luxurious apartment. There they each in their own way bid farewell to the past society they know is coming to an end and prepare to face a violent, dangerous future.

The next day, William and Josella make contact with a small group of sighted survivors planning to leave London and establish a new community in the more secure, healthier countryside. These plans are interrupted by a raid on the community by a sighted man named Coker, who is convinced that the sighted few have a moral responsibility to help the non-sighted majority. William escapes Coker's enforced leadership of a group of the blinded and attempts to find Josella, who had disappeared during the raid. His search through London and across the countryside results at first in failure and in a second encounter with Coker, who has realized the folly of his actions and is seeking to join a fully sighted community.

William's search for Josella eventually leads him to discover that she has established herself at the head of a small sightless community. She and William join forces to strengthen the community's resources and defenses, and they live a relatively successful life for a few years in spite of the growing threat presented by increasing numbers of increasingly predatory triffids. One day the community is visited by Ivan, a member of the initial group of sighted survivors encountered by William and Josella in

London. He tells them the initial community has found itself a relatively secure location, and is eager for them to join up - William, a biologist, is needed to develop a way of permanently eliminating triffids. After agreeing to join the larger community, however, William and the others receive a visit from the domineering representative of a rival military community, who essentially orders them to join up. William and the others make their escape, a brief epilogue revealing they successfully joined the first community and are working towards the time when the world will be free of triffids and humanity can again live with full freedom in its own world.

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

This novel of speculative fiction, written in the early-1950s, tells a story common to the genre of that era - traditional western ways and philosophies of life are decimated, and threatened with complete destruction, by a combination of mysterious events and the increasing control of a disguised, subversive, murderous entity; in this case, mobile and intelligent plants. As it chronicles the struggles of a small, desperate group of human survivors, the narrative explores themes relating to the conflict between morality and necessity, the nature of human frailty, and the social nature of being human.

"The End Begins"

The narrator wakes up on a Wednesday morning he describes as feeling more like Sunday: quiet, no traffic on the streets outside the hospital where he's staying, no hum of activity in the halls. In narration he describes his increasing unease at the strangeness of his situation (see "Quotes," p 13), an unease increased by the fact (also revealed in narration) that his eyes are completely bandaged following surgery. He recalls what he was told of an extraordinary event the day before: the sky being lit with the bright green light of a comet's tail through which the earth (according to the news) was apparently passing. He then wonders whether the lack of activity in the hospital and the streets is related to the heightened, celebratory atmosphere with which people observed the lights, and works up the courage to remove the bandages around his eyes in the hopes of finding out where everyone is. After carefully removing the bandages, and just as carefully accustoming himself to the light, he leaves his room and explores the hospital, discovering as he does so that everyone, patients and caregivers alike, is blind. Shocked, he makes his way out of the hospital and into a bar, where he discovers the manager, also blind, struggling to open a bottle of liquor. As the narrator helps him, the manager reveals that as far as he can tell, everyone in the world has been struck blind - including his wife and children whom, he says, are all dead. His wife, he says, had the courage to end their lives before they had to suffer with blindness. He adds that as soon as he's drunk enough, he's going to go back to their home and kill himself as well. Shortly afterward, the manager leaves, and the narrator gropes his way "into the silent street."

"The Coming of the Triffids"

In this chapter, the narrator (naming himself as William Masen) describes both the personal and societal circumstances that led the world to the point at which Chapter 1 begins. In terms of the former, he portrays himself as a non-mathematical disappointment to his accountant father, as interested in biology and science, and therefore just the right person to become as interested in, and knowledgeable of, triffids as he eventually became. In terms of the latter, he describes the increasing global need for food (which led to the exploitation of triffids as a food crop), and the simultaneous

development of satellite technology, which according to rumor was a cover-up for the development of space-placed weapons, including biological weaponry. He then describes his theory about the origin of triffids - that they were the product of biological experimentation in some secret laboratory, probably in Russia (see "Objects/Places" and "Style - Setting"). He describes the triffids at length, referring specifically to the highly mobile poisonous stinger at its top end, the triffids' ability to walk on its three legs/roots, to the apparently deliberate clacking of its branches, and to the fact that they are carnivorous, even feeding off the decomposing flesh of their stung human victims. William then describes his friendship with Walter Lucknor, as interested in the triffids as he is but perhaps even more knowledgeable. Walter suggests to William not only that the triffids are able to communicate (through the clacking branches), but that they are also intelligent; he cites the way they consistently, and characteristically, aim their stingers at the eyes of those whom they attack. This, Walter goes on to suggest, places humans and triffids in a reversal of roles - humans, unlike triffids, are ill-equipped to function without sight. According to narration, by this point in the relationship between William and Walter, triffids are being farmed and harvested for the nutrient-rich oil they provide. Both William and Walter work on a triffid farm, and William describes how a sting, across the eyes, from a triffid is what robbed him of his sight - the injury that took him to the hospital.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The book's opening paragraphs effectively draw the reader into the narrative by placing him/her clearly in the same position as the narrator - encountering strangeness, going through a profound deepening of curiosity, and experiencing the shock of discovery. Meanwhile, the technique of interrupting the narrative at the point where that shock is arguably most intense (i.e., at the end of Chapter 1) and interjecting a flashback/some back-story is employed as effectively here as it is in many other narratives. The technique effectively draws the reader even further into curiosity, the determination and/or desire to know what's going to happen next. Also, it's interesting to note how language is used in this section. The author's word choice and phrasing are not particularly evocative or atmospheric; the tone of the piece, here and throughout, tends towards the dry, objective and academic (see "Style - Language and Meaning"). There is, nevertheless, sufficient evocation of atmosphere to create a subtle, creeping sense of foreboding that only deepens as the action progresses. This foreboding increases with the narration of William's encounter with the barman at the end of the chapter, a stark and very telling portrayal of human desperation, and the speed with which people can fall into it, that foreshadows several similar incidents later in the narrative.

Chapter 2 is notable mostly for its narration of how triffids became an accepted, albeit mysterious, component of society. Here the author begins his exploration of the book's central metaphor, anchored in his repeated references to the triffids (and perhaps even the comet/satellite) as originating in Russia. In the context of these references, the triffids can be seen as a metaphor for the unknown, but vividly imagined, dangers of communism and socialism (for the full implications of these references, see "Objects/Places - Russia" and "Style - Setting"). The irony, of course, is that in order to

survive the scourge of the triffids (or the metaphoric scourge of communism), those that remain after the passage of the comet/satellite and the despair it leaves in its wake have to form socialistic, commune-isitic societies of their own.

A key component of this narration of the triffids' influence is the reference to their tendency (habit? policy?) of attacking their victims' eyes, and therefore leaving them blind. The reference, as the narrator points out and as several characters comment on throughout the narrative, seems almost too coincidental to the circumstances of society's almost universal blindness to be ONLY coincidental. There are two points to note here. The first is that the narrative never resolves the question of whether the coincidence IS a coincidence. The second is that the blindness epidemic can be seen as a development of the narrative's metaphoric point about the dangers of communism. In the course of the narrative, trusting the triffids without paying full attention to their dangers leads to destruction, which suggests that the author is making the symbolic point that not paying full attention to the dangers of communism is a kind of blindness and will eventually lead to the destruction of western society.

Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

"The Groping City"

The narrative picks up where it left off at the end of Chapter 1, with William in the street and deciding what to do next. He chooses to head into the heart of London, where he discovers that in spite of his increasing hunger, he has retained enough of a sense of morality that he finds himself unable to loot a store for food (see "Quotes," p. 37). After encountering a young man prepared to do exactly that, and a blind man grimly happy that the rest of the world now has to cope with what he's had to cope all his life, William encounters a sighted man at the head of a group of drunken thugs. When the thugs demand that their leader find them some women, and after the leader grabs some un-sighted women and hands them over, William tries to interfere and free the women. He's beaten up by the leader, and as he recovers, he rationalizes that whatever may happen to the women, they're ultimately better off under the protection of someone sighted. William then finds a source of food that he doesn't have to loot, sits and eats, and contemplates his situation, realizing that he is now, more than ever before, able to define his own life (see "Quotes," p. 43). Narration indicates that William is writing his story several years after the events he's describing took place, and that even after all that time, he still feels empowered to live his life on his terms.

"Shadows Before" As he narrates his journey through the increasingly frightening center of London, William describes his uneasily growing awareness that the frightened, self-interested worst of humanity is coming to the surface. He encounters a large blind man terrorizing a girl and beats him off, and is surprised to discover that the girl (Josella) can see. As she calms down, they share their stories; Josella, it seems, came into town to find a doctor for her blinded father and was captured by the man who, she says, wanted her to find food and navigate for him. She convinces William to take her home so she can help her father, and the two of them find a car they can steal and drive out to Josella's house. As they go, William notices a few triffids walking along the side of the road, and begins to wonder how many of them are out there. When William and Josella arrive at the house, they discover that Josella's father and the family's servants have all been killed by triffids (one of which is in the living room). After fighting off the attack of a particularly large triffid, William and Josella take refuge in the car, where William recalls what Walter said (see Chapter 2) about the reversal of roles that takes place when a triffid's sting removes the sight from a human's eyes. William then starts to wonder if there's some kind of connection between the sightlessness afflicting the world and the triffids.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

There are several noteworthy elements in this section. The first is the introduction of one of its central themes, the conflict between necessity and morality. This manifests in a number of ways: in William's personal conflict over whether to steal (he needs to eat, but traditional morality says stealing is wrong), in the relationship between the thuggish man and Josella (the man needs help, but is using violence to get it), and in William's musings on the relative safety of women. This last could easily be seen as a potentially very controversial perspective on womanhood, and when juxtaposed with Dr. Vorless' comments on the role of women in the new society (see Chapter 7), give the sense that the novel is more than slightly misogynist in perspective (for further consideration of this question see "Topics for Discussion - Do you consider ..."

A second important element emerges at the end of Chapter 3, in which William contemplates his new freedom to determine his own destiny (see "Quotes," p. 43). On one level, this is a very Western philosophy, in that American culture in particular is so thoroughly defined by belief in the power of the individual. On another level, the reference is ironic, in that only a very few individuals in this new society have the power that William now seems to see as a benefit - in other words, he is defining himself as celebrating his membership in a new, privileged, powerful class. This, in turn, carries with it additional resonances with the author's nationality - Britain, the author's home country, is historically riddled with class tension and prejudice.

Other important elements include the portrayal of the ways in which the triffids have infiltrated people's lives (a reiteration of the narrative's metaphoric focus on the subversive dangers of a lack of watchfulness), and the continued development of the unresolved relationship between the blindness epidemic and the increasing threat posed by the triffids.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 Summary

"A Light in the Night"

After leaving Josella's house, she and William collect a large and powerful stash of anti-triffid weaponry, but are shocked to see a mob of blinded humans being herded by triffids. They then find an apartment to use as a temporary base of operations and go their separate ways to find clothes. As he goes, William watches helplessly as a blinded young couple throw themselves out a window, and afterward tells himself he has to become much tougher (see "Quotes," p. 61). Later, after Josella returns, William prepares some food. While it's cooking, he looks out at London, and muses on how, like other great cities past and present, it is coming to an end (see "Quotes," p. 62). Conversation over dinner is, by mutual agreement, of anything but the current situation - Josella tells of her childhood and past, revealing that she has recently become the rather notorious author of a sexy, best selling book (see "Objects/Places"). Later, she and William make plans for leaving London and finding a place in the country with a water supply and self-contained electricity. Josella refers to a country home owned by her family in the Sussex Downs, but William suggests they should find something a little larger. They talk for a while more, but realize they're both tired and need to get some rest. After going to bed, however, they both find themselves unable to sleep because of sounds of misery and confrontation coming in through the windows. Josella notices a searchlight originating some distance away, and she and William both theorize that it was either set up by someone who could see to call other sighted individuals together, or by someone who couldn't see to lure such individuals into a trap. They resolve to investigate the light the next day, and fall asleep in each others' lonely arms.

"Rendezvous"

The next morning William discovers that Josella has pinpointed the origins of the light they saw - the University Tower. They head to the tower, where they witness a confrontation between an angry sighted man at the head of a crowd of the blind, and a silent man in glasses. The first man shouts that the blind have the right to be taken care of, and eventually becomes violent. The man in glasses fires a machine gun into the air, dispersing the crowd of the blind. After debating the argument they just saw (see "Quotes," p. 74), William and Josella agree that the only way that society will survive is that if those who are able to see take care of themselves first. They then join the man with glasses, who takes them to see a man called the Colonel, who takes their name and address and identity information. The Colonel, after explaining that it's important for survivors to be as organized as they can, passes them on to Michael Beadley, who assigns them to go scavenging for trucks and other survival equipment. In narration, William describes how Beadley and other sighted survivors (including the Colonel), seem to take his concerns about triffids too lightly. Later, after a day of finding and filling trucks with supplies, William and Josella return to the University Tower, where they see

a helicopter arrive, reflect on how much the world has changed and how they're probably not going to like what it has become.

"Conference"

That night, the Colonel and Beadley are the first speakers at a gathering of all the people in the community, which now includes, much to William's surprise, a group of evidently sightless young women. The Colonel explains that for safety's sake, the entire community will leave the safety of the tower at noon the following day - but doesn't say exactly where they will all be going. In narration, William comments on the Colonel's failure to say where (see "Quotes," p. 85). Michael then introduces Dr. Vorless, who seems to be a sort of sociologist. Vorless speaks at length about the new societal situation, stating outright that because circumstances have changed, morality has changed, and that the one core moral principle that must define every decision is that "the race is worth preserving." After he defines the circumstances under which the race will be preserved (see "Quotes," p. 87), a lengthy discussion ensues, during which questions of traditional vs. new morality are debated. Meanwhile, Josella tells William that the reason there are so many more blind girls there is that they are to be impregnated by the sighted men. Later, in the moonlight, William and Josella agree to be each other's primary emotional and sexual partner, with Josella eventually persuading William that Vorless is right - babies must come first (see "Quotes," p. 91).

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 Analysis

Again, there are several important elements in this section. The first occurs early in Chapter 5 - the reference to a group of the sightless being herded by the triffids. This is noteworthy for several reasons. It is one of the most starkly horrifying images in the book, it foreshadows the threats posed by triffids throughout the narrative, and is a key development in the novel's metaphoric warning against the controlling, ruthless powers of communism. It's interesting to consider this image in relation to later images of William and other survivors being on one side of a fence or some other barrier and the triffids on the other - are the survivors safe, or are they caged? Meanwhile there is a similar starkness and horror to the image of the suicidal young couple. This is clearly an echo of the barman's suicide at the end of Chapter 1, and as such is a reiteration of the despair that William and the other survivors, sighted or not, strive to keep at bay.

The second interesting element in this section is the contrast between the ways William and Josella say their goodbyes to their previous life - William says his philosophically, Josella says hers in terms of expensive things and her personal appearance. This may be seen as a manifestation of a previously discussed inclination towards misogyny in the narrative, but it may also be seen as simply a contrast of two ways of dealing with the world - spiritually and physically.

The third, and perhaps most important, noteworthy element in this section is the development of the novel's central thematic exploration of necessity vs. morality. This plays out on the confrontation at the base of the tower (later revealed to be led by

Coker), which is essentially a distillation of that conflict - do we do what has always been considered to be the right thing (helping the less fortunate)? Or do we look at the bigger picture and ultimately help the whole race by helping ourselves first? This same conflict is at the core of the meeting led by the Colonel, Beadley and Vorless in Chapter 7 - because the circumstances of existence have changed, do we of necessity have to change the morality within which our lives within that existence are defined? For further consideration of this question, see "Themes - The Conflict between Necessity and Morality" and "Topics for Discussion - Taking into consideration ..."

Finally, there are several important elements of foreshadowing in this section. These include the reference to the Sussex Downs (which foreshadows William's arrival there and the establishment of a kind of survivor's colony - Chapter 13), and the confrontation at the base of the tower (foreshadowing other confrontations between groups of survivors throughout the narrative, and also foreshadowing the reappearance of Coker, the leader of the sightless group, in the following section. Also, the reference to the relationship between Josella and William foreshadows the eventual deepening of their relationship and their parenting of a child (Chapter 16).

Chapters 8 and 9

Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

"Frustration"

William is woken from a nightmare by cries of "Fire!" and rushes out of his room to see what's happening, only to be knocked unconscious. When he wakes up, he discovers he's in an unfamiliar room and his hands are tied. A blind man tells him he's been captured as the result of a trap set by Coker (the confrontational man in Chapter 6). Coker himself appears, and tells William that he (William) is to be the leader of a group of blind scavengers searching for and obtaining food. After Coker goes, William finds out that Josella was kidnapped as well, and is being put in charge of a scavenger gang going through Westminster - William and his gang are assigned to Hampstead. After making their way there, William begins the process of leading the blind individuals on a search for food, the whole while planning to leave in search of Josella. He finds himself increasingly unwilling to do so, however, as it becomes increasingly clear to him that those whom he leads are entirely unable to function on their own. This becomes increasingly clear to him after violent encounters with another group of scavengers (led by an armed man with distinctive red hair) and with a group of triffids, whose stingers lash out at the unsuspecting scavengers and kill them. The night after escaping the triffid attack, William discovers that increasing numbers of the blind people he's been helping have fallen victim to some kind of strange illness that results in most people's deaths. As he sits alone in his room contemplating his next action, he's visited by a beautiful blind girl, who tells him that there are rumors going about that he's planning to leave and she thought that if she offered herself to him (sexually), he'd be inclined to stay. He tells her to go away, but the following day comes back from a scavenging expedition to discover that she too has fallen ill. She pleads with him to fetch her something to help her end her life, which he does.

"Evacuation"

William leaves Hampstead, collects some weaponry, and searches Westminster for Josella, but finds nothing. He then returns to the University Tower, but she isn't there either. What he does find is a reference to a manor house in the county of Tynsham, several of the trucks packed earlier (including his truck with the anti-triffid weaponry) still intact, and his room exactly as he left it. He resolves to leave for Tynsham the following morning, and goes out to sit in a nearby park for a while, where he encounters Coker, who confesses that he now believes that the Colonel and the others, who believed in individual survival, had it right. He and William agree to join forces, and leave the following morning, each taking one of the loaded trucks. As they leave the city for Tynsham, they both feel a lightening of their mood, the oppressive closeness and smell of death in the city giving way to the open, brighter, lighter, and still living fields of the countryside.

Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

The narrative's thematic and narrative focus on the tension between necessity and morality develops further in Chapter 8, with William coming to realize that the looting he's being forced to do is both helpful and necessary for those who can no longer see, giving rise to the sense that his old morality is re-asserting itself. This reassertion, however, is derailed by the encounters with the red-headed man and with the triffids, which essentially teach him that he will ultimately be no good to anyone unless he takes care of himself first. This theme is also developed through the character of Coker, who seems to undergo a complete reversal of philosophy and has come to the same conclusion as William. In other words, in these chapters the narrative suggests that self-preservation, the right and power of the individual to survive no matter how needy those around him/her, is humanity's primary (responsibility? drive? duty?). There is, however, a significant irony in the appearance of the red-headed man, whose appearances here and later in the book portray him as having taken that belief to a violent controlling extreme, a circumstance that suggests that self-preservation, perhaps like other aspects of being human, can get all too easily out of control.

Meanwhile, one of the narrative's secondary themes (the social nature of humanity) is explored through William's encounter with the sexually available blind girl. In essence, she does what she does out of a belief that William, like everyone else in this traumatic situation, is lonely. In other words, she thinks he wants to leave because he wants more and better company, and offers herself to him in order that he will find that company in her, and in staying ease not only her loneliness but that of her fellow sightless. William of course is lonely, but for a particular individual (Josella), not just any individual. In this context, it's interesting to consider whether there's any metaphoric relationship between the mysterious illness so many survivors suffer and loneliness. There is the sense throughout the narrative that those who experience themselves as isolated (either blind or sighted) fall ill, while those who experience themselves as part of a community (again either blind or sighted) do not.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Summary

"Tynsham"

When William and Coker arrive at Tynsham, they discover that the community there has been set up along traditional Christian lines by Miss Durrant (see "Quotes," p. 122), one of the women who had angrily rejected Dr. Vorless' assertions at the University Tower (Chapter 7). Conversation with her reveals that the rest of the community led by the Colonel and Beadley has gone on, and she doesn't know where. As Coker goes off to explore the community and see where his skills might best be utilized, William searches for Josella, but doesn't find her. During his search he encounters a young woman trying to do some mending by candlelight. Both are surprised when, during their conversation, electric lights come on. Coker returns, admitting that the lights came on because of him - he found a gas generator and switched it on. He speaks pointedly to the young woman about the community's failings (see "Quotes," p. 124), leading her to pointedly suggest that he would fit better with Beadley's group. After she goes out in a huff, Coker and William argue about whether it's better to try to lead people like "a flock of sheep" or to let them find their own way.

" - And Farther On"

After spending the day searching for information about Josella and finding none, William decides to pursue the Beadley party in hopes that Josella has joined up with them. He convinces Miss Durrant to tell him where the Beadley party said they were going next - in the direction of Beaminster. William and Coker leave with the trucks they came with and drive off, passing through countryside that still, for the most part, seems clear and safe. They arrive at a town called Steeple Honey, where they are flagged down by a man who, upon rushing into the street to meet them, is immediately killed by a lash from a triffid. After William shoots off the triffid's stinger, he and Coker discuss William's theories about triffids, based on those presented by Walter Lucknor (see Chapter 2). Coker is particularly worried by the possibility that triffids could be both intelligent and communicative, and also by Lucknor's comments about the power relationship between triffids and the blind, saying that those make him (Coker) think that the current situation may not be mere coincidence. Coker and William flee the village after discovering that two more triffids are approaching, making their way safely to Beaminster, where they are stopped by a young man firing a warning shot over their heads.

"Dead End"

When William and Coker leave their trucks, their empty hands indicating

their peaceful intent, the young man tells them the Beadley party has not passed through the area, and that there are only three people in the community. The group

discusses the current situation and agrees to conduct a systematic search of the area for the Beadley party, but after a very depressing day comes up empty. They manage to find and fly a helicopter and find a few small communities like their own, but also find that the people in those communities are unwilling or unable to join them, with many of them waiting to be rescued by Americans, whom they believe to have been unaffected by what's happened in England. Eventually, William, Coker and the others decide their search is hopeless, and Coker argues intently for returning to the better equipped Tynsham, joining Miss Durrant's community, and leading them into self-sufficiency. After Brennell agrees, William realizes he needs to continue searching for Josella. He remembers her comment about the home in the Sussex Downs (see Chapter 5) and resolves to go looking for her there. Coker supports him, but urges him to return (hopefully with Josella) to Tynsham and join the community there. On a cold rainy day, William sets off.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Analysis

Chapter 10 contains yet another manifestation of the narrative's thematic exploration of the tension between necessity and morality. In this case, that tension manifests as conflict between Coker (the pragmatic voice of necessity) and Miss Durrant (the rigid voice of morality). It's interesting to note here that Coker is eventually proved correct. Miss Durrant and the community she leads at Tynsham end up destroyed, and partially (according to narration) by the mysterious internal disease sweeping the land. In light of the previously discussed possibility that there is a metaphoric relationship between that disease and loneliness, it's possible to see the relationship between Miss Durrant's community and the disease as a metaphoric exploration of the relationship between rigid morality and loneliness. In other words, the more rigidly moral you are (like Miss Durrant here and the red headed Torrence in Chapter 17), the more likely you are to be isolated, lonely, and dead.

Another interesting element in this section is the story of the encounter with the triffid in Steeple Honey. There are clear echoes here of the incident at the beginning of Chapter 5 in which a group of the sightless is "herded" by triffids - echoes of both the sort of stark, evocative language, of the unheeded threat presented by the triffids, and of the metaphoric dangers of ignoring that threat (i.e., the dangers of avoiding communism / socialism).

A somewhat surprising and doubtlessly intriguing element is the reference in this section to Americans - specifically, the hope that they will ride to the rescue. This is interesting for a couple of reasons, the first being its basis in history. Europe in general, and England in particular, has a history of feeling rescued by America - specifically, by American armies in World Wars I and II. In that context, while the reference to Americans seems to suddenly come out of nowhere (hence the surprise), it is grounded in a certain degree of historical accuracy. The second reason the reference is interesting is more metaphorical. As has been discussed, William's reference to his feeling of freedom to live an individual life (see Chapter 4) carries with it echoes of the American philosophy celebrating the value of the individual. The reference here, along with other

references to Americans throughout the narrative, carries similar echoes. In other words, the Americans bring with them the freedom, the courage, and the strength to live and function as individuals—the sort of freedom that not only will triumph against the triffids, but in terms of the narrative's central anti-Russian/communism metaphor, will also triumph against the power of creeping socialism.

Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

"Journey in Hope"

In spite of a series of setbacks (including bad weather and mechanical difficulties), and struggling with increasing loneliness (see "Quotes," p. 144), William's search for Josella is not entirely fruitless; he rescues a little girl named Susan, whose parents had been blinded and whose little brother had been killed by a triffid. Susan confesses to having been as lonely as William, but also admits to being as glad as he is that they've found each other and their loneliness is at an end. Together they continue the search for Josella: arriving in Sussex, acquiring a powerful searchlight, shining it into the night, and eventually seeing an answering light. Impatiently, William drives down a string of confusing country side roads that seem, at times, to be leading him away from his destination, but eventually (and helped by Susan) he draws closer to the source of the light and is thrilled to discover that it is indeed Josella's refuge.

"Shirning"

This chapter begins with William's narrative references to how it became harder and harder for him to envision leaving Shirning Farm (the name for Josella's house) for Tynsham. The difficulties, he explains, arose for two main reasons. First and foremost, Shirning was self sufficient, with a good well and a generator. Second, there were people other than Josella there - the pregnant Mary, her inventive husband Dennis, and their triffid-injured friend Joyce, all blind and all of whom needed taking care of. William narrates how before he arrived Mary, Dennis and Joyce survived several triffid attacks and a harrowing trip into a nearby village, how Josella made her way back to Shirning, and how the community settles into a kind of routine, with little Susan becoming quite good at shooting down the triffids that seem to continually be attacking the house. Eventually, William travels to Tynsham to find out what's happened to the community there and discovers it abandoned, victimized (as he theorizes) by the plague that had driven him out of London. When he reveals this to Josella, they discuss the future, with William suggesting they stay put and wait for help from other organized communities and Josella suggesting they're on their own. She and William then agree that in some way, they've become married, leading Josella to comment that "maybe some things haven't turned out so badly."

Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

This section develops the narrative's secondary themes relating to the fragility of the human condition and humanity's need for companionship. There are two main levels to this exploration, one literal and one more metaphoric. On the literal level, the narrative includes here two examples of a successful gathering into community: a community of

two (William and Susan) that eventually merges with the community at Shirning to create a larger community of mutually supportive human beings. The irony here is that the community forms much along the lines of the community (sighted in charge of non-sighted) proposed by the Colonel, Beadley and Vorless (who set themselves up as leaders) and by Coker (who created it by coercion). The Shirning community, by contrast, comes together voluntarily and out of mutual need, but still holds on to essential human morality. In other words, the novel's central tension finds its thematically key place of balance in Shirning, and in the lives of the people who live there. A secondary, but no less literal, exploration of physical community emerges in the final moments of Chapter 13, in which William and Josella find themselves connected within, and nourished by, the community of intimate relationship.

The more metaphoric exploration of the secondary themes relating to loneliness and community can be found in the narrative of Susan and William's utilization of the light, which has clear echoes of the light used by those at the University Tower to draw survivors in London closer to one another. Light here, as it is throughout literature and history, is used as a symbol of hope, of freedom, of safety, and of truth. In other words, it is both a physical and spiritual / emotional beacon to community and its rewards.

Yet another metaphoric exploration of the theme of community can be found in William's theory on the reasons for the loss of the Tynsham colony which, as portrayed by the narrative, was less of a community than a dictatorship led by the domineering Miss Durrant. There is the sense here that the illness that apparently decimated the community and so many other lives is a metaphor for spiritual and/or moral isolation. This sense can be back-traced throughout the narrative and can be seen as manifesting in the other sections in which the mysterious disease appears.

Chapters 15, 16 and 17

Chapters 15, 16 and 17 Summary

"World Narrowing"

The narration of this chapter covers several years, time in which William tries to teach himself to farm, Josella has a baby (David), excursions into London reveal how drastically the city is physically decaying, and the number of triffids lurking around the farm increases. One day about six years after arriving at Shirning, and as they're searching out supplies, William and Josella discuss how their children and grandchildren must be trained to both farm and fight, and how their descendants are to be taught about the past (see "Quotes," p. 172). This leads William into a discussion of his theory that the satellite technology of earlier years (see Chapter 2) was connected to biological warfare, that an explosion of one of the satellites, deliberate or accidental, was the "comet's tail" (see Chapter 1), and that related to the emergence of the triffids or not, the explosion was responsible for the blindness. As he and Josella return home, they agree to spend some time visiting places and ways of life that will soon disappear forever. Their conversation is interrupted by the passing by of a helicopter. They wave and shout at it, but it flies on, leaving William a bit confused (see "Quotes," p. 175).

"Contact"

As William and Josella arrive at Shirning, they discover that the helicopter has landed in their yard, that it was piloted by Ivan (the same man who piloted the helicopter that flew into the university compound in Chapter 6), and that the fire was set in the woodpile by Susan to draw his attention to the farm. After dousing the fire, conversation between Ivan, William and Susan reveals that Ivan and the other members of the Beadley party eventually settled on the Isle of Wight, rationalizing that a natural water barrier would be an effective defense against triffid encroachment. Conversation also reveals that Coker and his group of survivors eventually joined the Beadley group, that Coker and the rest of the leadership there are eager to develop a lasting biological deterrent to the triffids, and that they have been seeking William because of his experience as a biologist which they believe will be essential in finding that deterrent. Later, as he contemplates the opportunity to go, William is told by Josella that the blind members of the community (Dennis, Mary and Joyce) are uncertain about leaving - they have become familiar with the world of Shirning, and don't relish the necessity of learning how to live somewhere else. She also describes the option of leaving the life they've established and looking into a new one not as a defeat (which is how William sees it) but as a "strategic withdrawal". She predicts that when it comes time to leave the home they've built at Shirning, she will "cry buckets," but in narration William comments that "as things fell out, we were all of us much too busy to cry..."

"Strategic Withdrawal"

The next morning, William and Susan go in search of fuel. When they return, they discover that Shirning has visitors - a group of four men in military gear, attracted by the fire of the previous day. William is surprised to see that the leader is the man with red hair who led the attack on his group of scavengers in Hampstead (see Chapter 6). The man introduces himself as Torrence, says he's representing a council that has proclaimed itself leaders of the rebuilding and reclamation process, and explains the Council's plans and process for rebuilding law and order in England and eventually the world. He states what will happen to Shirning and its inhabitants: that a large number of the non-sighted will be brought to the farm to be supervised by William and Josella, and that William and his heirs will be designated owners of the land and its community in perpetuity (see "Objects/Places - The Middle Ages"). Much to the surprise of Josella and the others, William agrees to think about the idea, and invites Susan to show Torrence and his men around the farm. While they're gone, William and Josella plan an escape, a plan that that evening goes smoothly. When Torrence and the men fall into a drunken sleep, William sabotages their vehicle, loads the Shirning community into his own vehicle along with what supplies they can manage, and breaks through the gate in the fence surrounding the farm, leaving it (and Torrence's group) to the ever-hungry triffids.

A brief epilogue suggests that William and his group arrived at the Isle of Wight community, settled there, and have begun the long process of preparing to fight back against the triffids "until we have wiped out the last one of them from the face of the land that they have usurped."

Chapters 15, 16 and 17 Analysis

This section contains the narrative's thematic and narrative climaxes, entwined into one sequence of events as the struggle between morality and necessity, the essential fragility of humanity, and humanity's need for community all come together in the confrontation between William and his choices for the future.

There are several elements to note here. The first is the resonance with William's earlier discovery (Chapter 3 - see "Quotes," p.43) that he is, for the first time, fully in control of his own life and his own destiny. The choices he makes in this section clearly indicate that he is ready, willing and able to accept the responsibility associated with the freedom to make those choices. There is a degree of irony in the fact that William is choosing to join a community led by others, but it must also be remembered that in doing so, he is on some key level fulfilling the destiny he chose earlier in his life: to be a biologist. In other words, by choosing to join the Isle of Wight party, he is choosing to fulfill what both his self and his circumstances have led him to.

A not unrelated element is the way the passage of time is summarized at the beginning of Chapter 15. There is a certain sense that in summarizing the days and weeks and years of life at Shirning in the way he has, the author is suggesting that humanity, at least in the Shirning community, has returned to the living thoughtlessly of the past (that is, the narrative's pre-epidemic past). This idea is born out by the fact that William, according to his own narration, has become more focused on surviving his life instead

of taking notices of the circumstances (i.e., the increased danger of the triffids) of that life. The idea is supported by Josella's revelation of the opinions of Dennis and the other blind members of the community - they are content with the way things are, they are safe, in the same way that everyone before the epidemic was content and safe. For further consideration of this aspect of the narrative, see "Style - Structure" and "Objects/Places - the Triffids." Meanwhile, the reader might well be justified in wondering if the blindness epidemic here can be seen as symbolically representing the epidemic of spiritual blindness at work in the world (ie the blindness that accepted the triffids unquestioningly) before the epidemic happened.

Finally, there is the introduction of the idea of descendants; specifically, the physical and moral descendants of survivors like Josella and William. The idea is developed not only through conversation between William and Josella about what their children and grand-children are to be taught, but also Torrence's reference that land, governance and power can and will be transferred to William's descendents - if, that is, agrees to the terms of the mysterious "council." There is a very interesting parallel dynamic at work here. In both variations on the theme, those in the future are to be told forms of myth - how humanity's carelessness was responsible for the emergence of the triffids, and how the worth of a surviving being (i.e., William) was so great that it justified wealth and influence being passed on to his descendants without them having to earn it. On one level, this can be seen as another manifestation of the tension between morality and necessity: Is it moral to create fictions about the world in order to meet the necessity of survival? On another level, it seems to be a manifestation of the philosophy mandated by Dr. Vorless way back in Chapter 4 - that the race must survive. The question then becomes "On what terms?"

Characters

The Narrator (William Masen)

Masen is the novel's protagonist. Referred to by the other characters mostly as "Bill," he comes across, for the most part, as dispassionate, objective, over-intellectual, and somewhat reactive. This last aspect of his character is perhaps particularly important, in that it can be seen as a distillation of an aspect of the human condition the novel seems interested in exploring.

As Masen himself suggests in his narration, he occupied his childhood and adult life (up to the point at which the narrative begins) as a kind of observer. He makes choices in response to what he didn't want to be (i.e., an accountant like his father) and listening to other people's opinions (like those of Walter Lucknor) rather choosing according to his own ambitions and/or forming his own opinions. The blindness epidemic and the rise of the triffids forces him into a reluctant activity, a defense of self and identity that had never actually been formed in the first place. As he himself points out in narration, this is part of the reason why both the epidemic and the rise of the triffids devastate humanity in the way that they do. To that point humanity had, like Masen as an individual, been complacent and reactive, shallowly content with itself and void of curiousity about new truths (like, for example, the triffids); instead, merely accepting.

In short, Masen's personal journey from reactivity to activity can be seen as a microcosm of the novel's warning that humanity as a whole needs to undertake the same sort of journey in order to avoid menaces like that posed by the triffids. For an exploration of the metaphoric value of that menace, see "Objects/Places - Russia" and "Style - Setting."

Josella Playton

In many ways, Josella is a stereotypical "damsel in distress" rescued by a man, loved by that man, lost by him, sought and found by him, "married" and impregnated and devoted to him. In metaphorical terms, she is a kind of holy grail, that mysterious and powerful artifact sought by the legendary King Arthur and his knights of the round table, an idealized perfection without which the life of the seeker is both shallow and incomplete. In short, as a character she is a product of the writing and culture of the time in which the narrative was created - post war (when the return of men to society also returned women, for the most part, to the status of being secondary citizens) and pre-feminism (when women began to rightfully claim their own identities).

On a deeper level, however, Josella can be seen as representing the shallowness of the society brought to an end by the blindness epidemic. Known in her life before as being the creator of a sexy, sensational novel, the first thing she does after being rescued by William is adjust her appearance. Later (in the apartment) she bids farewell to the world

by celebrating its superficiality in glamorous clothes and expensive jewels (the fact that they are essentially stolen adds an interesting layer of meaning to the circumstances). Once she gets that out of her system, however, she reveals herself to be practical, strong minded and strong willed, and independent, determined to reject her past superficiality (a determination manifest in her repeated insistence upon being regarded as someone other than the author of that silly book). This manifests, however, only as far as the author's evident determination to make her a damsel in distress will permit.

Coker

Coker is one of the narrative's more complex, and therefore more intriguing, characters. While most of the other characters (William and Josella included) are essentially two dimensional, Coker has many facets, aspects of personality which (as he explains to William) he deliberately cultivated in order to give himself as many opportunities to succeed as possible. In short, he is something of an opportunist, going where there is the greatest likelihood of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual survival is greatest. In that sense, he is perhaps as evocative as William of a particular aspect of the human condition in which the novel is interested - its capacity for adaptability, necessary in a world of subversive violence as defined by the actions and attitudes of the triffids.

Walter Lucknor

This character never actually appears in the narrative, but plays an essential and defining role in the other characters', and the reader's, understanding (suspicions?) of what's going on with the triffids. He is a clear (deliberate?) contrast to William, in that he (Lucknor) observes the triffids in considerable detail and seriously considers the meaning and ramifications of what he observes. William merely accepts their presence and takes the benefits provided by that presence for granted. In other words, on one level Lucknor and his comments, conveyed to the other characters and to the reader through William, contribute to deepening perspectives on the triffids, their attitudes, and their actions. On another and more metaphoric level, he is an example of what the narrative suggests most of humanity is not - thoughtful and watchful, less self absorbed, and cautious.

The Colonel, Michael Beadley

These characters are the political leaders of the community of sighted survivors of the blindness epidemic encountered by William and Josella at the university. They appear only briefly (in Chapter 6), but their influence and leadership define the quests of William and the other central characters throughout the latter three quarters of the narrative. In that sense, they can perhaps be seen as metaphoric externalizations of humanity's commitment to survival.

Ivan

Ivan is a member of the sighted community at the university, evidently an individual of considerable mechanical skill. He appears even more briefly than the Colonel and Beadley in Chapter 5, but more importantly reappears in Chapter 15, when he shows up with a timely offer to lead William and the other members of the small Shirning community to the safety of the larger community on the Isle of Wight. He can, in that context, be seen as a metaphoric (not to mention timely) externalization of the narrator's growing uneasiness about his future and his desire for a safer life, as well as his growing (instinctive?) desire and readiness to surrender leadership and/or control of his life to someone more naturally inclined towards it (the Colonel and Beadley).

Dr. Vorless

Vorless is the moral leader of the community led politically by the Colonel and Beadley. He defines that community clearly along gender lines - the men (sighted only) must work, the women (sighted and unsighted alike) must have babies. This policy, it seems, originates in his core belief that "the race is worth preserving." For further consideration of this belief, see "Topics for Discussion - Considering the behavior."

The Blind Girl

This character appears only in Chapter 8, at which point she offers herself sexually to William in exchange for his commitment to stay with, and lead, her gang of sightless scavengers. Nameless, beautiful and vulnerable, she can be seen as manifesting humanity's ultimate vulnerability, its thematically relevant need to connect with others (see "Themes - The Social Nature of Humanity"). In that context, it's interesting to note that William refuses her, simultaneously determined not to take advantage of her vulnerability and also to not reveal his own.

Miss Durrant

Miss Durrant first appears, without being named, in Chapter 6 as an outspoken opponent of Dr. Vorless' moral philosophy of survival. She later appears as the head of the Tynsham community of survivors, in both cases coming across as rigidly Christian, judgmental, and a bit foolish. Through Coker's perceptions and commentary she is portrayed as being fearful but unwilling and/or unable to acknowledge that fear, and therefore doomed. She can be seen as symbolizing humanity's blindness to its own vulnerability, its determination to see itself as eternal.

Torrence

Like Miss Durrant's, Torrence's first appearance in the narrative is nameless - he appears as the red-headed, trigger-happy, sighted leader of a team of blind scavengers making their desperate way through the same area of London (Hampstead) as William is leading his team. Their physically violent confrontation at that point foreshadows the morally and emotionally violent confrontation they have in Chapter 17, when Torrence appears at Shirning and gives the community there (led by William and Josella) no choice but to accept governance under his terms; or rather, the terms of the council for which he works. He can be seen as representing humanity's vulnerability to fear - more specifically, its resorting to violence (physical, moral, spiritual) in reaction to fear.

Susan

Susan appears first as a strong willed (and sighted) little girl rescued from triffid attack by William. Later in the narrative, she is portrayed as being opinionated, instinctively wise, strong willed, independent, and self-motivated. She can be seen as representing some of the best elements of humanity, the reasons why it has survived and why it will continue to survive.

Dennis, Joyce, Mary

These three characters appear in the book's latter sections, and are a non-sighted but able contrast to the sighted and equally able William, Josella and Susan. Dennis in particular is effectively evocative of strong-willed, humanist determination to survive in the face of what seems to be impossible odds. They are, in many ways, an embodiment of the narrative's central thematic perspective on the value of individuality and survival.

Objects/Places

Triffids

Triffids are plants that suddenly, simultaneously, and mysteriously appear all over the world. They are initially regarded as exotic but harmless, strangely mobile, an excellent source of nutrition and occasionally dangerous (in particular, the slashing poisonous stingers in their topmost parts). For the most part, however, and even after the epidemic of blindness strikes, they are perceived as being nothing to worry much about. Eventually, however, they reveal themselves to be predatory, apparently intelligent, and active in their pursuit of control over the land and its people. Meanwhile, because their acceptance into society, their infiltration of it and eventual attacks upon it all take place while society is, in effect, preoccupied with other things, the triffids can be seen as metaphorical externalizations of humanity's capacity for shallow, unconsidered lives. For further consideration of this aspect of the narrative, see "Chapter 15 - Analysis" and "Style - Structure."

Satellites

At the time when the novel was written (the early 1950's), man-made satellites orbiting earth were nowhere near as common as they are in contemporary society. They were, in short, to be found only in the writings of science fiction, where they were often portrayed as they are here - the products of ambitious, untested science corrupted by humanity's desire and determination to win wars. As portrayed in "...Triffids," satellites are a potential source of artificially created disease and military destruction, and a link in the mysterious chain of events that, coincidentally or not, resulted in the creation of the very environment that would make it possible for the triffids to not only thrive, but dominate.

St. Merryn's Hospital

The action begins in this hospital, where the narrator (William) has been resting following surgery to heal his eyes, injured in a triffid attack. It is in the hospital that he first becomes aware that something has gone very wrong with the world, and that he is one of the few who haven't been physically affected.

London

The action of the first part of the book takes place in the center of London, England's capital. Several of its famous landmarks (Hyde Park Corner, Piccadilly Circus) are named specifically as William journeys through the increasingly dangerous city first in search of food and shelter, and then in search of safety.

The Luxurious Apartment

At the end of their first day as survivors of the blindness epidemic, William and Josella take refuge in an abandoned, richly furnished apartment. Both the apartment itself and the time they spend there can be seen as representing the old life of indulgence and freedom they are being forced to leave behind. In other words, in both literal and metaphoric terms, it is their last stop on the journey from an untroubled past into an uncertain future.

Josella's Book

Throughout the narrative, and as a kind of comic relief, Josella is recognized for having written a sexy, sensational novel called "Sex is my Adventure." The book can be seen as representing the shallowness of life before the blindness epidemic and the rise of the triffids, while Josella's repeated rejection of the recognition it repeatedly brings her can be seen as her personal rejection of her previously superficial life. Meanwhile, for an ironic interpretation of the book's title, see "Chapter 5 Analysis."

The University Tower

From the window of the luxury apartment, William and Josella see a light flashing from the top of the University Tower, where they find a small community of survivors setting up the terms under which their survival is to continue. William, Josella and Coker each return to the tower at various points for direction on where to go next. This can perhaps be seen as a metaphor for the need for humanity to return to education and learning to learn how to enter effectively into the future.

Tynsham

This large manor house is the location to which the University Tower community, according to a note left behind by one of them, initially migrates. Eventually, the Tynsham community is taken over by the conservative, strong willed, but ineffectual Miss Durrant, and falls victim to the mysterious plague that takes the lives of so many of those who had initially survived the blindness epidemic.

Shirning Farm

After several adventures in London and across the countryside, William and Josella eventually reunite at Shirning, a well equipped home affiliated to Josella's family. There, a small community puts itself together, survives the first few years after the epidemic, and prepares to survive the next several, until it is visited by a representative of the relocated Beadely community, and eventually abandoned.

The Isle of Wight

This small island off the coast of England is the eventual settling place for the Beadley community, and the eventual goal of William, Josella, and the community they founded at Shirning. It is a place of both safety and hope, the dangers of the triffids having been fought back and the physical/intellectual opportunity for them to be fully destroyed having been created.

The Middle Ages

In European history, the so-called Middle Ages (or medieval times) were around the 7th to 15th Centuries AD. The power of government followed a strict hierarchy, with power on each level of that hierarchy determined by who owned how much land and who had more soldiers to defend that land. At the bottom was the serf, or servant (in terms of the hierarchy established by Terrence and his community - see Chapter 15 - the serfs would be the blind people). Above the serf was the landowner (William and his descendants), above the landowner was the lord (Terrence and his descendants), above the lord was the king (the Council and their descendants). In the Middle Ages above the king was the Pope, but it's interesting to note that in Terrence's world view, there is no equivalent. In terms of the relationship between the Middle Age philosophy of government and that proposed by Terrance, the key factor is that wealth and stature are passed on by right of heredity, not by right of merit.

Themes

The Conflict between Necessity and Morality

This is the narrative's central theme, playing out on several levels. First, it motivates the action, with events in the plot and the steadily increasing sense of narrative tension throughout the book all being defined by the tension between the striving to maintain a degree of human morality and the necessity to cast aside that morality in order to survive. Further to that point, the individual struggles of the characters (which here, as in all good narratives, define the movement of the plot) are themselves defined by their individualized wrestling with the question of survival vs. principles. This is true not only of what they do and how they act towards each other, but also in what they say. In other words, this particular theme is discussed, as well as played out. It could be argued that this emphasis on literal discussion of the book's theme comes across as unsubtle, perhaps even heavy handed. It could also be argued, however, that part of the book's overall intent is to provoke the reader into serious thought about his/her actions and beliefs, and those of society in general. This, in short, is the final level in which the book's central theme plays out - in the reader's mind.

While "The Day of the Triffids" belongs clearly in the realm of so-called "speculative fiction," it just as clearly belongs in the sub-genre of "survivor fiction," in which a group of disparate characters are the minority survivors of a destructive cataclysm. In general, one of the purposes of the sub-genre is to trigger questions in the reader's mind of how s/he might react in similar situations. "...Triffids," like many others in this sub-genre, raises the question not only of how a reader might physically survive, but how s/he might morally survive. In other words "...Triffids," like others of its genre, puts the reader in the moral position of its characters (as opposed to other, non-genre novels which, in general, intend to put the reader in their characters' emotional positions). For further consideration of this aspect of the novel, see "Topics for Discussion - Put yourself in the position..."

The Frailty of Human Existence

Like the main theme examined above, this secondary theme is explored through action, character, relationship, dialogue, and the triggering of the reader's thought process. It might, in fact, be considered a key component of that primary theme, in that the choice between physical and moral survival in the novel is essentially defined by frailty - the protection of physical frailty, the fear of moral frailty, and the realization of emotional frailty (see "The Social Nature of Humanity" below). It's important to note, however, that the novel is exploring questions not only of individual frailty, but societal frailty as well, and not just the larger society in existence at the time of the vision of the comet, but the smaller, micro-societies that come into being in the wake of its passing. The sub-communities in London, the communities of Tynsham and Shirning, and perhaps even the hopeful community on the Isle of Wight at the novel's conclusion - all are come to

their end as the result of various human physical, moral, and spiritual frailties. It's also important to note that this particular thematic question is explored not only by narration of life after the comet, but in the narrator's description of life before the comet. Is it not human frailty, the need for food and the blind trust in the triffids that emerges when it seems like that need is being met, that on some level gets humanity into trouble with the triffids?

The Social Nature of Humanity

The perils and fears associated with isolating members of the human race from one another, along with the longing arising from those fears and isolations, are dramatically and tellingly portrayed throughout the narrative. The author does this in several ways - firstly, and perhaps most evocatively, by repeatedly describing the loneliness experienced by the characters (see "Quotes," p. 144). In the larger picture, he also explores this theme in the novel's basic setup—specifically, by putting so many individuals into the place of being isolated by blindness and portraying their varying reactions, and by putting sighted individuals (particularly William) in situations where their actions are almost entirely defined by their need for (particular) human contact. This last is portrayed with particular vividness in William's almost obsessive search for Josella. An interesting question raised by this relationship is whether their search for each other has more to do with love or with the desire to cling to the first genuine, supportive human contact they made after the blindness epidemic hit. The point is not made to suggest that the two are mutually exclusive, but to suggest that a component of love may well be the possibility that essential, existential human loneliness might be kept at bay, at least for a while and at least in some way.

Perhaps most tellingly, this theme is illustrated by the way in which those who have achieved at least a degree of contact with other human beings either continually reach for more contact (in terms of more people or in terms of more reason or meaning for that contact) or fiercely protect what contact they've made. In other words, the confrontations between survivor groups are, it could be argued, as much about protecting fragile new societies and survival-oriented hierarchies as it is about protecting food supplies.

Style

Point of View

The narrative is written from the first person subjective point of view, that of its central character, William Masen. Aspects of the point of view are therefore, and unavoidably, defined by his personality and background - a certain intellectualized distance of perspective (he's a scientist by profession), a certain pompousness of tone (he's got more education than his family and many of the people around him), and above all a certain middle-class flavor to his morality. This is perhaps more significant than it might be in other narratives because he is also British, because the British class-system is strictly defined and upheld, and because the British middle class, to make a very broad generalization, takes itself, its rules and safeties and behaviors, very seriously. In other words, a member of the British middle class is highly likely to place questions of morality and propriety high on its list of priorities, even in struggles for simple physical survival. For the lower classes, survival is a way of life, a necessity, and questions of morality are at best remote and/or irrelevant. For the upper classes, who are not equipped in any way to survive and, perhaps paradoxically, whose moral code is grounded in the unshakable belief that they above everyone else MUST survive, morality is not an issue. But for the middle classes, moral and social propriety is a way of maintaining position, of asserting personal and social value above both the grasping lower and coddled upper classes. In short, middle-class status is an essential component of the narrative's point of view and that of its central character.

Setting

The first point to consider about the novel's setting is that while there is no doubt about its physical setting (England), there is no explicit reference to the time in which it's set. In terms of the former, the relevant point to remember is that England carries with it a history spanning centuries. This makes the breakdown of its society as portrayed here all that more significant and devastating to its inhabitants, perhaps more so than it might be in America, which has a history of only a couple of centuries. See also "Point of View" above for consideration of the English class system in relation to the novel's perspectives.

In terms of the time at which the novel is set, as undefined as it is, it must be remembered that the novel was written in the late-1940s and published in the early-1950s, during a period in the planet's history commonly known as the Cold War. In a nutshell, the Cold War was for the most part fought diplomatically and politically, rather than militarily. It essentially pitted the then Soviet Union and Eastern Europe against America, Britain and the West - Communism vs. Capitalism. The prevailing socio-political perspective was that the Soviet Union, colloquially referred to as Russia, developed and supported endless secret conspiracies to rule the world. This is probably why the narrative specifically refers to Russia several times as the probable source for

both the triffids and, according to William's eventual theory, the comet that was not a comet but a disease-distributing satellite. In other words, the novel's apparent setting in time makes the clear but sub-textual suggestion that the destructive, predatory, subversive triffids are a metaphor for Russian-style communism and its plans to infiltrate the world and to destroy western society. This, in turn, makes William's determination to fight a heroic symbol of the West's equally heroic struggle to fight the evil of Russian communism.

Language and Meaning

There is a certain detachment to the novel's narrative language, a certain dispassion or coolness. This may be due to its essential Britishness - specifically, the almost stereotypical British reserve. In other words, passion in both narration and action in "...Triffids" is the exception, rather than the rule. In many narratives, such reserve might be considered evocative rather than shallow or limited, allowing the reader to fill in the emotional blanks of what's going on for him/herself. This, in other words, allows the powerful tool of the reader's imagination to function in tandem with the narrative's words and create a picture more compelling than the words alone might trigger. An additional factor to consider in this case, however, is the vocabulary chosen by the author, which seems to be a manifestation of that essential reserve. That vocabulary tends to be highly sophisticated and, at times, almost pretentious - there is the sense that the narrator (see "Point of View" above) uses words of a particular sort to protect himself from the full horror of what he's seeing, feeling, and experiencing. In short, the language of the narrative conveys a mostly intellectual perspective, rather than a visceral one, of the situation. The main result of this linguistic choice is that the reader is intrigued rather than moved by the situation and the way it's described. Yes, there are certain circumstances and events (the terrorizing of Josella in Chapter 4, the herding of the blind by the triffids in Chapter 5, the attack on the townsman in Chapter 11) that are portrayed in stark, vivid terms that effectively evoke a sense of shock and horror. But for the most part, the language of the narrative is that of the thesis, rather than the novel.

Structure

With a couple of notable exceptions, the novel's structure is essentially linear, moving in a straightforward chain of events and circumstances from a clear beginning to a clear end. The first exception is Chapter 2, which is essentially a flashback, exposing information to the reader about how the narrator and the society in which he lives reached the point at which the central action commences at the beginning of Chapter 1. The second exception begins with Chapter 15, in which the narrative is condensed and spans a period of several years - the rest of the narrative (with the exception of Chapter 2) took place over several days. There is a certain thematic resonance to be considered here, in that the narrative focuses on the time after the blindness epidemic for the number of chapters it does, and in the depth it does, as part of its exploration into how quickly and thoroughly human frailty and need can break down the barrier between necessity and morality.

Chapters 16 and 17 continue the linear narrative begun in Chapter 15, with the final lines of Chapter 17 (and indeed of the book) jumping ahead even further. While the sense of thematic relevance to this structural and narrative choice is less obvious, it is nonetheless present. Yes, the narrator (and by extension the author) wants to get through the narratively humdrum details of day to day life and reach the important narrative confrontations with Ivan and with Terrance as soon as possible. But on a more thematically significant level, the author and narrator are portraying the small community of Shirning as having fallen into the slightly self-satisfied habits of life before the epidemic and the rise of the triffids - life passes quickly and thoughtlessly. For further consideration of this idea see Chapter 15, Analysis.

Quotes

"... the odds were that it was I who was wrong, and not everyone else - though I did not see how that could be." p. 7

"It was the same sensation I used to have sometimes as a child when I got to fancying that horrors were lurking in the shadowy corners of the bedroom; when I daren't put a foot out for fear that something should reach from under the bed and grab my ankle; daren't even reach for the switch lest the movement should cause something to leap at me." p. 9

"...I began to feel that there was a party for all the world going on, with me as the only person not invited." p.13

"But then there was so much routine, things were so interlinked. Each one of us so steadily did his little part in the right place that it was easy to mistake habit and custom for the natural law - and all the more disturbing, therefore, when the routine was in any way upset." p. 14

"The human spirit continued much as before - 95 percent of it wanting to live in peace, and the other 5 percent considering its chances if it should risk starting anything." p. 22

"...there are always a few unfamiliar things that somehow or other manage to lodge in the neglected corners of a garden, but enough to mention to one another that it was beginning to look like a pretty queer sort of thing." p. 25

"A catchy little name originating in some newspaper office as a handy label for an oddity - but destined one day to be associated with pain, fear, and misery - TRIFFID ..." p. 29

"I was not yet ready to admit, after nearly thirty years of a reasonably ... law abiding life, that things had changed in any fundamental way. There was, too, a feeling that as long as I remained MY normal self things might even yet, in some inconceivable way, return to THEIR normal." p. 37

"...I came face to face with the fact that my existence simply had no focus any longer. My way of life, my plans, ambitions, every expectation I had had, the were all wiped out at a stroke, along with the conditions that had formed them ... all the old problems, the stale ones, both personal and general, had been solved by one mighty slash ... I was emerging as my own master, and no longer a cog ... I would no longer be shoved hither and thither by forces and interests that I neither understood nor cared about. " p. 43

"It had been impossible at first not to feel some superiority, and, therefore, confidence. Our chances of surviving the catastrophe were a million times greater than those of the rest. Where they must fumble, grope and guess, we had simply to walk in and take. But there were going to be a lot of things beyond that ..." p. 50

" 'If you don't fight to live your own life in spite of it, there won't be ANY survival ... only those who can make their minds tough enough to stick it are going to get through..." p. 61.

"The corpses of other great cities are lying buried in deserts and obliterated by the jungles of Asia. Some of them fell so long ago that even their names have gone with them. But to those who lived there their dissolution can have seemed no more probable or possible than the necrosis of a great modern city seemed to me ..." p. 62

" '...the more obviously humane course is also, probably, the road to suicide. Should we spend our time in prolonging misery when we believe that there is no chance of saving the people in the end? Would that be the best use to make of ourselves?" p. 74

"...man's supremacy is not primarily due to his brain, as most of the books would have one think. It is due to the brain's capacity to make use of the information conveyed to it by a narrow band of visible light rays. His civilization, all that he had achieved or might achieve, hung upon his ability to perceive that range of vibrations from red to violet." p. 81

"whether [the Colonel]...had not yet decided on any particular place, or whether the military notion that secrecy has some intrinsic value persisted in the Colonel's mind ... I have no doubt that his failure to name the place, or even the probably locality, was the gravest mistake made that evening." p. 85

"'The men must work - the women must have babies. Unless you can agree to that, there can be no place for you in our community ... we can afford to support a limited number of women who cannot see, because they will have babies who can see. We cannot afford to support men who cannot see. In our new world, then, babies become very much more important than husbands." p. 87

"'I've tried to put myself in the place of one of those blind girls ... we hold the chance of as full a life as they can have, for some of them. Shall we give it them as part of our gratitude [for the miracle of being saved] - or shall we simply withhold it on account of the prejudices we've been taught?"' Josella to William, p. 91

"...in an environment reverting to savagery it seemed that one must be prepared to behave more or less as a savage, or possibly cease to behave at all, before long ..." p. 110.

"Before long, perhaps, I should be spending the hours of darkness in fear as my remote ancestors must have done, watching, ever distrustfully, the night outside their cave." p. 113.

"'There's a whole lot of people don't seem to understand that you have to talk to a man in his own language before he'll take you seriously." Coker to William, p. 116

" 'Decadence, immorality, and lack of faith were responsible for most of the world's ills. It is the duty of those of us who have been spared to see that we build a society where

that does not happen again ... we are a Christian community, and we intend to remain so.' " Miss Durrant, p. 122.

"'It's an affectation to consider yourself too spiritual to understand anything mechanical. It is a petty and a very silly form of vanity. Everyone starts by knowing nothing about anything, but God gives him - and even her - brains to find out with. Failure to use them is not a virtue to be praised ...' " Coker, p. 124

"Horrible alien things which some of us had somehow created, and which the rest of us, in our careless greed, had cultured all over the world ... I began to loathe them now on account of more than their carrion-eating habits - for they, more than anything else, seemed able to profit and flourish on our disaster ..." p. 136

"...I had always thought of loneliness as something negative - an absence of company, and, of course, something temporary. That day I learned that it was much more. It was something which could press and oppress, could distort the ordinary and play tricks with the mind. Something which lurked inimically all around, stretching the nerves ... never letting one forget that there was no-one to help, no-one to care." p. 144

"...among the scabrous, slowly perishing buildings I seemed able to recall only the muddle, the frustration, the un-aimed drive, the all-pervading clangor of empty vessels, and I became uncertain how much we had lost ..." p. 162

" '...the triffids are a real factor. They are something that no rising civilization has had to fight before. Are they going to take the world from us, or are we going to be able to stop them?'" William, p. 170

" '...do you think we should be justified in starting a myth to help [the children]? A story of a world that was wonderfully clever, but so wicked that it had to be destroyed - or destroyed itself by accident? Something like the Flood, again? That ... could give the incentive to build, and this time to build something better." p. 172

"...it suggested that someone somewhere was managing to make out better than we were ... was there a tinge of jealousy there? And it also made us aware that, lucky as we had been, we were still gregarious creatures by nature." p. 175

Topics for Discussion

The true origin of the triffids and their relationship with the comet, if any, remains undefined. Does this add or subtract to the overall effect of the narrative? Explain your answer.

Are any of the book's central characters (William, Josella, Coker, Susan) heroic, or do they do what they do what he does simply to survive? What defines a hero? When does a survivor become a hero?

Given the book's clearly intentional parallels between the physical threat of the triffids and the moral threat posed by Russian communism, what do you think a contemporary parallel might be? In other words, if "The Day of the Triffids" were being written today, where might an author suggest such a combined physical/moral threat might come from?

Taking into consideration the circumstances and situation, do you agree with Dr. Vorless' theories and policies as outlined in Chapter 7? Why or why not? Do you agree with Torrence's theories and policies as outlined in Chapter 15? Why or why not?

What do the actions of the book's characters, both the central and the peripheral, say about humanity in general, and about humanity under stress in particular?

What are the contemporary resonances of some of the novel's central allegories and metaphors (the dangers of reckless scientific exploration, nature's vengeance on destructive humanity, the relationship between physical blindness and societal self-absorption)?

What do you think is the metaphoric warning contained in society's early misconceptions and exploitations of triffids, and in the triffids' apparent reactions?

Do you think there was a connection between the blindness epidemic as caused by the comet and the rise of the triffids? Explain your answer.

Put yourself in the position of a sighted survivor of the blindness epidemic. How do you honestly think you would react? Why? Debate your choices.

Considering the violent, acquisitive and/or submissive behavior of many of the characters in this narrative, and indeed of people in general, do you share Dr. Vorless' strong belief that "the race is worth preserving"? Why or why not?

Do you consider the narrative to be misogynist (anti-women) in tone and perspective? Why or why not?

Is William and Josella's acceptance of the leadership of the Colonel and Beadley representative of humanity's capacity for surrendering independence, as hard won as it might be, to the control of charismatic and powerful leadership? Discuss your answer.