

# Lord of Light Study Guide

## Lord of Light by Roger Zelazny

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# Plot Summary

"Lord of Light" is a science fiction novel that takes place on a planet that has been inhabited by people from Earth for many generations. The first settlers of the planet have developed technology that allows them to magnify their mental powers and transfer souls into new bodies. They have used this technology to create a mythology based on the Hindu religion, positioning themselves as gods with unique powers and keeping the majority of the inhabitants of the planet in a state of technological ignorance. The gods live in a domed city called Heaven and are led by the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

Among "the First," as they are called, is a man called Sam, which is short for Mahasamatman. Sam has the power to control electromagnetic forces and was instrumental in capturing the powerful but bodiless inhabitants of the planet when the first colonists arrived. Sam resists the pressure from the other colonists to become a god himself and isolates himself in a large estate. After several years, he emerges from his isolation to obtain a new body and begins a campaign to overthrow the gods by introducing Buddhism as a non-violent alternative to the Hindu mythology. Sam also is an "accelerationist" who wants to allow technology to develop among the people of the planet.

Sam raises an army of followers and releases the aliens that had been held in captivity since he had first defeated them. However the gods are able to capture Sam using their advanced technology. He is taken to Heaven and executed as an example to anyone else who would challenge the gods. Sam does not die, however, as his soul has been strengthened after having been possessed by Taraka, the leader of the aliens. He transfers to the body of a demigod and escapes Heaven with the help of the god Kubera and the goddess Ratri.

With the help of the death god Yama, whose personal conflict with Brahma leads him to join forces with him, Sam engages in an epic battle against the gods. He is once again captured, but many of the gods have been killed and their hold over the world has been weakened. As punishment, Sam's soul is transmitted into "Nirvana" in the form of electromagnetic energy that circles the planet. Several decades later, Yama retrieves Sam's soul from Nirvana and gives him a new body. Along with the goddess Ratri, the three of them once again plot to fight the gods, this time joining with Brahma to battle against Nirriti, a Christian enemy of the gods, in exchange for promises that the gods will allow technology to develop. Brahma, Sam, and Yama are apparently killed in the final battle, but Yama does not die and there are hints that the souls of Brahma and Sam also live on.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Chapter 1 opens by mentioning the legend of a god-like figure who had gone to Nirvana after his death, but was recalled after 53 years, through the prayers of his followers, to lead a battle against Heaven and the gods. This figure has many names. His followers call him Mahasamatman, however he himself shortens the name to Sam. While Sam has never himself claimed to be a god, he has also never denied it.

The opening scene takes place in the monastery of the night goddess Ratri. Lord Yama, a powerful figure who is skilled in technology and has been cast out of the city of Heaven by the gods, stands working a complicated "prayer machine" that directs energy skyward through a lotus-shaped transmitter located on the roof of the monastery. The prayers are directed at a golden-colored cloud that circles the planet in space and which is called the "Bridge of the Gods." It is a dangerous and secret project that would certainly be stopped by the gods if they knew about it.

Lord Yama is assisted by a talking ape named Tak, who keeps an eye on the clouds that obscure the sky, looking for a clear opening. Tak has also been cast out of the celestial city by the gods. He was formerly a man but has been reincarnated as an ape in punishment. Yama attends to his controls and announces to Tak that they have been successful in catching what they were after. Sam's soul has been extracted from the Bridge of the Gods and drawn into the prayer machine.

Tak leaves Yama and climbs into the tower where the goddess Ratri lives in seclusion. He introduces himself and she replies that she once knew a man named Tak many years previously who had been the archivist in the celestial city. Tak explains he is the same man, and she is saddened to see how he has been punished. She speaks to him about her hope that Sam might one day return and continue the fight against the gods. Tak excitedly tells her that Sam has returned, and leads her to Yama.

Yama and several monks are standing around a bed on which lies a man, apparently asleep. As Tak and Ratri approach, the man stirs. Ratri greets him as Lord of Light. Yama greets him as Mahasamatman and Buddha. Tak simply calls him Sam. Yama interrogates the man, asking if he knows who he is, and if he is the same person who had led the fight against the gods many years before. Sam is puzzled at first but slowly remembers that he did fight alongside Yama and others but that he had lost. Yama picks up the story there and explains that Sam had been captured by the gods and had his soul projected into the magnetic cloud surrounding the planet.

Sam replies that he was aware of his condition and appears angry that Yama would recall him. Yama explains that he is needed once more to continue the fight against the gods. Sam wearily agrees. Over the next several days, Yama and Tak take Sam on walks through the forest and fields that surround the monastery, engaging him with the



world in order to ease his transition back into mortality. After a time Sam begins taking walks on his own and one day Yama notices he is wearing an iron ring on one hand. Wondering where he could have obtained, it, he sends Tak to follow Sam on one of his walks.

Tak follows Sam to a cave where he meets with a strange creature with four arms and the head of a water buffalo. They both kneel on the ground and are engaged in some kind of ceremony that Tak does not understand. Occasionally bright flames of lighting burst downward and hover above the ground. Tak is overwhelmed by one of these bursts, and when he regains his senses he sees Sam sitting alone in the cave.

Tak explains what he has seen to Yama, who explains that Sam was gambling with a Rakasha one of the original inhabitants of the planet that had been captured and imprisoned by the first settlers who had arrived on the planet from Urath. Some of the Rakasha had been released by Sam in his earlier fight against the gods and now wandered the planet again. They are creatures of energy, he explains to Tak, able to take any form and also to inhabit the bodies of humans. They love to gamble and always honor their gambling debts. Sam has obtained the ring through gambling.

One day a beggar appears at the door of the monastery and is invited in by one of the monks. He is given food and clothes and invited to stay as long as he wishes. The beggar asks many questions of the monks, wondering why they have put their monastery in such a secluded place. He asks if perhaps some new teacher or leader has arisen there that he might learn from. His conversation is interrupted by Yama, who recognizes the beggar as Mara, the god of illusion, in disguise. The beggar denies it at first, but Yama approaches him with a steady, dark gaze. The beggar changes appearance, and causes the illusion of flames, then appears to be a giant cobra and finally in the shape of the goddess Kali, which especially enrages Yama. Yama strangles Mara to death and instructs the monks to burn his body with full religious rites.

Yama, Ratri, Sam, and Tak discuss the meaning of Mara's visit. The gods must be suspicious, Yama concludes, and they should leave the monastery for Khaipur, Ratri's palace. They set out with several monks, and as they move through the forest they are surprised when a spacecraft swoops overhead. It is the Thunder Chariot of the god Shiva. Yama looks up at it and curses himself for having built it.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 begins the story near the end. The main character, Sam, has been in a state of suspension, his soul having been transmitted to the magnetic cloud surrounding the planet in punishment for fighting against the gods. The death god Yama, who has also been cast out by the gods, uses his advanced technological skills to retrieve Sam and put his soul in a new body so that the fight can continue. Ratri and Tak are also connected to the events that caused the downfall of Sam and Yama, and the four of them share a similar purpose in wishing to end the tyranny of the gods.



Zelazny does not explain the full background of the situation but reveals small details as they relate to the present story. He makes reference to the founding of the celestial city, which is also called Heaven, and the fact that there are a few people still alive who were present when it was founded, including Yama and Sam. The technology of transmitting souls from one body to another is demonstrated, implying that Yama and the other gods have been alive for many generations, probably in a series of new bodies.

The nature of these gods is also hinted at in this opening chapter. Each of them has several attributes, which are special powers they possess. Ratri, the goddess of night, is able to cast darkness around her. Yama, the death god, has a penetrating gaze that can kill. Mara, the god of illusion, can conjure up imaginary hallucinations. Sam's attributes are not fully explained in this chapter, but they are hinted at in his title Lord of Light and his encounter with the Rakasha. He has the ability to control electromagnetic forces, which will become evident as the story progresses. Each god also has an "aspect," which is a special appearance. A reference to this is made in the way Ratri's appearance changes from a plain-looking woman to a beautiful dark young woman before Tak's eyes.

Sam is referred to as "Buddha" by Yama and others, although he does not explicitly claim to be the Buddha. The other gods have names taken from Hindu gods. Sam's representation of a non-Hindu religious figure is part of the central conflict of the story. He and other characters refer to his introduction of Buddhist philosophy as an alternative to the main religion as part of the reason he was deemed a threat by the sitting gods.

As Yama fights Mara, Mara changes his appearance to that of the goddess Kali, which causes Yama to hesitate briefly. This hints at a special relationship between Yama and Kali which will be filled out later in the novel.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 goes back in time to a point when Sam, known as Lord Siddhartha, desiring a new body, leaves the seclusion of his large estate and travels to the city of Mahartha. He has been secluded for some time and is not aware of the changes that have taken place in the outside world.

Sam and his band of military men and servants stay at an inn operated by a man named Hawkana, who is eager to please his wealthy guest. At a feast, he brings him a bottle of Burgundy wine, originally from the "vanished Uratha," which pleases Sam greatly (p. 39). Sam calls for the oldest musician in the hotel, indicating he wants the musician oldest in years, not in body. Hawkana tells him that a boy working in the stables was a musician in a previous incarnation.

Sam has the boy brought before him and asks if he can play "The Blue Danube." The boy says he knows the song, and plays it out on a flute borrowed from one of the professional musicians at the feast. The musicians look on scornfully as the boy plays several old songs for Sam or songs that have been forbidden by the priests.

The next morning, Sam removes his jewels, puts on plain clothes, and walks through the city to its large seafront, where he sits and watches the activity. He is followed from the inn by a dog. After a time, Sam speaks with a foreign sea captain who has been unloading his ship. The captain tells him he has come through a dangerous voyage where he was fired on by the "Cannon of Nirriti," which is in battle with Heaven. Sam tells the captain he is looking for a sailor, a man named Jan Olvegg. The captain eyes Sam suspiciously, but directs Sam to ask for the sailmaker Janagga.

Sam finds Janagga and the two friends catch up. Janagga explains to Sam that he has been denied transfer into a new body because he cannot pass the mind-probe that the Masters of Karma perform before allowing the transfer. These Masters serve the gods, who are other first settlers who have taken on the roles of gods living in the celestial city, and who use the mind probe to eliminate possible dissent. Janagga has "sinned" by showing ordinary people some machines. The gods have decided to withhold technology from the masses, he explains, the better to keep their grasp of power. Anyone in favor of "accelerating" the technological development is seen as a threat and risks having their soul transferred into an inferior body or into the body of an animal in order to work off their sin. The mind probe technology has been developed by Yama, who Sam last knew as a curious teenager who was always tinkering with devices and dissecting animals.

Sam knows he will not pass the mind probe, he tells Janagga, because he has been thinking of how he can oppose the gods. He asks Janagga who the chief of the gods is, and he explains they are ruled by Trimurti, a counsel of the three gods Brahma, Vishnu,



and Shiva. Sam asks who these gods were originally, but Janagga replies that they have changed their bodies and identities so many times he does not know.

Sam goes to the temple of Brahma and bribes the priest there to put him in direct touch with Brahma. The priest is reluctant, but contacts the god by telescreen. Brahma is lounging in his garden in Heaven and is angry with the priest until he is told that it someone named Sam who wishes to speak with him. Sam is brought to the screen and greets Brahma, who is cautiously cordial. Brahma invites Sam to take his place as a god, which he is entitled to as one of the First. Sam says he is considering it, but has some questions first. He asks Brahma why the gods are withholding technology from people. Brahma replies that they had missed their chance early on and to introduce advanced technology at this point would damage the culture. He again offers Sam godhood, and is insulted when Sam appears to want to think it over. Finally, Sam agrees and Brahma instructs him to return to the temple the next day for his new body.

Suspecting a trick, Sam hypnotizes another guest at the inn into pretending to be Sam and to go to the temple the next day for the body transfer. When the guest returns, his body looks healthy enough at first but then goes into an epileptic seizure. Enraged, Sam leads his military fighters to the Palace of Karma, where the ten Masters of Karma are located. After a showdown between his forces and the wardens of the palace, all but one of the Masters have been killed. Sam exacts his loyalty under threat of his life and with the help of his own doctor uses the transfer machinery at the palace to reincarnate in a young, healthy body.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

With Chapter 2, the story begins again at the "beginning." Sam, who has been identified as one of the first colonizers who arrived on the planet from Earth several generations ago, has been living a somewhat secluded life away from the influence of the other First settlers. These settlers have been migrating their souls from one body to the next and have been alive for many generations. Successive generations have also been migrated into new bodies from time to time, but recently the First have started selectively choosing who gets to survive as a human or be migrated into some lesser life form based on their loyalty to the pantheon of gods as measured through their prayers and donations to the temple. They have also adopted a policy of withholding technology from the wider culture and destroying signs of it when it arises.

Sam is appalled at this and decides to fight against the gods. He learns what he can from Brahma, who he eventually recognizes as the reincarnation of a woman named Madeleine that he remembers from the first group of settlers. He also learns much from Jan Olvegg, now calling himself Janegga or Janneveg, who was the pilot of the ship that brought the first settlers from Earth.

The connection to Earth, which is now called Urath, is indicated when Sam enjoys a rare bottle of Burgundy while listening to an old musician play The Blue Danube and





other songs from Earth. Urath is said to have "vanished," suggesting that the original ship of settlers left to avoid a catastrophic event.

Yama is mentioned here. He is not one of the First, but of an early generation. He is described as a sometimes cruel youngster who is now feared as the god of death. Other gods who will play an important role in the story are also mentioned.

The chapter ends with Sam's first strike in his campaign against the gods, the taking over of the Palace of Karma and the killing of most of the Masters.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter 3 opens with more of the legend of Sam, explaining how many came to hear him speak and teach until he was deemed by some to be the Buddha. The goddess Kali, also called Durga, never making a formal opinion on whether Sam is actually a god or not, nevertheless sends her own personal assassin to kill him.

Sam has gone to live in a wood near the city of Alundil, where he is surrounded by followers and pilgrims who come to hear him teach. In the nearby city, the main temple is to the goddess Kali, and it stands near the temple to the death god Yama. Each year there is a large spring festival in the city, a festival that has grown larger each year from the attraction of Buddha. It is during this festival that Rild, the assassin of Kali, comes to Alundil.

Sam walks with his followers into the city to observe the festival, which includes performances of dramatic dance plays. As he sits and watches, one of his monks brings him a message that a stranger has been found in the nearby marshes, suffering from a fever.

After the dance, Sam walks back to his wood and is taken to the feverish stranger. He notices the young man carries a red silken cord, which he knows is the traditional weapon of the assassin of Kali. The young man is unconscious and feverish. Sam instructs his monks to say nothing about him to anyone and he sits and tends to the young man until he awakens from his fever. He looks at the man carefully, noticing that his hands, lower arms, and other parts of his body appear to be hard and dead.

Rild awakens and is surprised to hear Sam call him by name. Sam calmly speaks with him, telling him he had spoken in his sleep. He invites Rild to eat and drink and regain his strength. He returns his cord to him and says he will do nothing to try to stop him in his mission. Rild is grateful that Sam has saved and spared his life even though he has come to kill him. He abandons his mission and decides to become a follower of the Buddha. In time, Rild begins to teach as well, and takes the name Sugata. Soon he is regarded as a second Buddha.

One day in winter the city of Alundil is astonished to see Garuda, the great shrieking bird that can only be ridden by a god, fly over the city. All watch as the bird circles, lands somewhere outside the city, then climbs and disappears. Sam and Sugata see the bird, too, and Sugata remarks that a god has arrived nearby.

On the rocky bank of a river, Yama, dressed all in red, walks toward the city of Alundil. As he approaches the crossing to the river a monk blocks his path. He politely asks the monk to step aside, but the monk is Sugata, who tells Yama he will not let him pass. Yama recognizes Sugata as Rild, who he himself had trained once. The men engage in



a fierce battle, Rild protected by the treatment he has received from Kali that makes parts of his body as hard as armor. As they fight, they taunt one another, and Yama praises Rild's ability. In the end, Rild is knocked into the river, but he grasps Yama tightly as he falls and they both plunge into the water. Only Yama emerges, however, and he continues walking toward the city.

In the city, Yama visits the temple of Kali and speaks with the priest there, who is unaware of Yama's identity. He asks him about the Buddha, but the priest is reluctant to speak about him. Yama goes to the forest where Sam resides and finds many monks seated under the trees, sitting as if in a trance. He asks to see the Buddha, but none of them respond. He sits beneath a tree to wait.

As soon as he sits down he falls asleep and begins dreaming. He dreams that he sees the Buddha seated calmly beneath a tree. As he approaches and announces he is there to kill him, but the Buddha is defended by four riders who thwart Yama's attack. When he awakens, he walks on and finds Sam seated on a rock in the middle of a large field. He comes to Sam, who is unarmed, and the two of them converse.

Yama tells Sam it has been decided he must die for introducing Buddhism to oppose the official religion. He invites Sam again to join the gods, saying he will vouch for him. Sam declines and says he plans to continue his fight. Yama scoffs at this, telling him there is no way for him to escape, but when he gets closer to Sam he becomes caught in quicksand that surrounds the rock.

Temporarily captured, Yama locks Sam in his death gaze, but Sam tells him he has been cultivating his own attribute and is resisting his power. He tells Yama how he might escape the quicksand by calling for help from his monks, then walks away.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Sam's relationships with Kali and with Yama, as well as the relationship between Yama and Kali, are complex and form a central "love triangle" in the story. When news of Sam's gaining influence reaches the gods, Kali sends her personal assassin to stop him. Yama comes to kill him after the assassin fails, but also fails. Yama's devotion to Kali is suggested in this action, and Sam angers the death god by taunting him over his apparent submission to her wishes. Later in the story Sam's own previous relationship with Kali will be revealed, complicating the relationship he has with Yama. In another reversal, Yama later joins Sam in his opposition of Kali.

Sam is a trickster who does not believe what he preaches, but is using Buddhism as a tool of opposition to the Hindu-based mythology of the gods. Ironically, by pretending to follow what he preaches, he inspires Rild, who truly accepts the teachings as genuine and becomes, in Sam's own estimation, the true Buddha.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 opens with a part of the legend of the Lord of Light that describes the Rakasha imprisoned in Hellwell. The Rakasha, it is explained, were the powerful original inhabitants of the planet who have great powers and can assume any shape. The Lord of Light, concerned about the "state of the world," went to Hellwell to bargain with the chief of the Rakasha.

The action resumes with Sam walking deliberately up the treacherous and narrow path that leads to the door to Hellwell. The door is high on a mountain called Channa, a massive metal door with a large ring. Sam reaches the door and rests on the narrow ledge in front of it. After eating his lunch, he makes some gestures with his hands on a plate on the door and it opens. He pulls it open, steps inside, and closes the door.

Warm air rushes up from a seemingly bottomless well. A path winds downward along the wall of the well. Sam lights a torch and begins walking down the path. Soon he sees a flickering flame below him, set in an alcove of the wall. As he passes the flame, a voice calls out begging Sam to free it. He passes more and more flames as he continues downward, each one pleading with him to be freed.

Sam reaches the bottom of the well where a flame that is larger than the others burns. It changes color as Sam approaches and then addresses him as "Hated One" (p. 114). Sam addresses the flame as Taraka. He has come to ask for help from the Rakasha. Taraka is scornful. He reminds Sam that he was the one responsible for imprisoning the Rakasha in Hellwell and that he cannot trust him.

Sam makes an offer to free Taraka if he will penetrate the domed celestial city and bring him intelligence of how to get inside. If Taraka will agree to help him attack and destroy the city, he will release them from Hellwell. Taraka agrees, and Sam releases him. Once free, however, Taraka tries to test Sam's power to control him and finds that Sam's ability to bind the Rakasha is still strong. He flies off to the celestial city to find out what he can while Sam waits.

Taraka returns and tells Sam that there are air vents that Rakasha might go through, and of elevators that lead into the city from the mountain below it. Sam thanks him and releases some of the Rakasha as part of the bargain. Then he lies down to sleep.

Sam dreams, and when he awakens he finds he is walking up the path out of Hellwell, but it is as if he is watching himself move. He realizes his body has been possessed by Taraka. Within his mind he can speak with Taraka, who says he simply wishes to enjoy the pleasures of having a body for a while before helping Sam with his fight. He sends Sam into a darkness from which he emerges occasionally. After a few days however



Sam strengthens and he becomes more aware of what his body is doing and even of participating. He tries drive Taraka out of his body, but is once again subdued.

He gains consciousness again in a large palace where Taraka has been living as a prince surrounded by Rakasha servants. One day a servant rushes to them and says a powerful visitor has come and is calling for them. From his description Sam realizes the visitor is Agni, the god of fire. Taraka, unafraid, goes to meet Agni, who wears a gauntlet and visor that allow him to see great distances and shoot powerful flames. Taraka brings the palace crashing down on top of Agni, but he uses his flame to burn through the debris. Sam and Taraka escape Agni when Taraka whisks them flying through the air, but the palace is completely destroyed.

Taraka flies their body back to Hellwell. Soon word comes that a spaceship with four gods is approaching. Sam releases more of the Rakasha and Taraka takes him deep into the caverns of the mountain where they wait to hear word from the others of the battle. Yama, Agni, Shiva and Kali enter Hellwell and battle the Rakasha in a grand fight. Taraka and Sam manage to escape the mountain and get to the space ship, where Sam tries to get it airborne. Agni tries to stop them and Sam is able to use his powers to disable his flame shooter, but he cannot escape. Taraka leaves his body and sam loses consciousness.

He awakens on the ship with Yama watching him. They are on their way to the celestial city to see Brahma, Yama tells him. Sam taunts Yama about the trick he played on him with the quicksand, and again asks why he chooses to serve the gods. He guesses that it is because of Yama's love for the goddess Kali. Yama does not respond directly but tells Sam that he and Kali are about to be married, even though it is not traditional for gods to marry.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Sam's background is described more fully in this chapter when he revisits the site where he imprisoned all the native inhabitants of the planet many generations earlier. He is called the Binder after this act, hinting at his godly ability to control electromagnetic forces. the Rakasha, the native beings, are energy creatures that can take on many forms and travel through the air. Sam is able to control and capture them.

He makes a difficult bargain with Taraka, the strongest of the Rakasha, and Rakasha partly defaults on the deal when he takes over Sam's body to live a high life as a man for a while. Taraka ultimately repays Sam, however, by strengthening his soul and allowing him to survive his execution in a later part of the story.

Sam is captured and taken to the celestial city where he is allowed to move about freely while his fate is decided. This begins a central part of the story where he works to undermine the authority of the gods from within the city.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Chapter 5 begins with part of the legendary text that tells of Sam's return to the celestial city, where little is known about what happened. He died there, attacked by one of the giant cats that wander the forest next to the city, the legend says, but he returned.

The first part of the chapter is a description of the celestial city partially told from the point of view of one of the giant cats of the forest of Kaniburrha. This forest exists under the same dome as the celestial city in the cold polar region of the planet. The large cats wander the forest, hunting, but have been charmed so they do not see the city. Should they wander into the city, they imagine they are still surrounded by forest.

The god Kubera relaxes by a pool and gossips with Lakshmi, another of the inhabitants of the city. They speak of Yama and Kali's upcoming wedding and the rumor that she is demanding a human sacrifice in honor of their wedding. Kubera mentions how vicious Kali has always been, sometimes taking the body of an animal to attack her enemies. Like Yama, she also has the power to kill with a gaze, and he speculates that only Yama could resist it.

Elsewhere in the city, Rudra the Grim and Lord Murugan speak about Sam. Rudra had known him long before. He was one of the first, one of the few who had come from Urath. He developed the power to control electromagnetic forces Rudra tells Murugan, and used the power to enslave the bodiless beings that had attacked the first settlers. He gained the name Binder for this feat. Now he has released the Rakasha again, Rudra has heard. They speculate on what Brahma will do with him.

In a temple built by Kubera at the edge of the city, Sam and Kali sit talking about their past lives together. They had once been in love and had many children, and Kali asks if he does not still love her. He replies that those two people long ago had been in love, but Kali suggests they cannot have changed that much. She offers to join him in his fight against heaven to share technology and knowledge with the world, but he rejects her help saying she offers it too freely and would just as soon turn against him. Finally she asks him if he would like to make love to her. He asks about Yama, and she dismisses the thought. She does as she pleases, she says. They go off together into an adjoining room.

In the archives of the celestial city, the goddess Maya comes to ask Tak, the keeper of the archives, to give her information on Accelerationism. He says he can, but that her name will be put on a special list kept by the gods. He tells her that his own name is on the list, not because he is an accelerationist but because Sam is his father. This surprises Maya, but Tak reminds her that gods have many children over the generations and that Sam probably does not even know that Tak is his own. He dissuades Maya from accessing the information and encourages her to forget all about Sam.



Vishnu and Brahma sit in the Hall of Mirrors while Brahma reads to Vishnu from the Buddhist teachings of Sam. Brahma then addresses Vishnu as Tathagatha, one of Sam's titles. Vishnu is confused at first but then understands that Brahma intends to rewrite the mythology of the gods to say that the Buddha was actually Vishnu who had come to reform the religion. In this way the gods can absorb Buddhism and maintain control.

Kali comes to see Brahma and to ask what he plans to do with Sam. Brahma replies that he has not yet decided and asks for Kali's opinion. She asks if he will once again offer him godhood, certain that he will accept it in order to live. Brahma believes that Sam will still oppose the gods, but Kali suggests that Lord Mara, the god of illusion, might somehow alter his mind to keep him in line. Brahma casually suggests that if Kali spends three days with him in his Pavilion of Joys he might be convinced to offer Sam a second chance. She replies that Lord Yama will be busy in his workshop for at least three days and they walk off together.

Sam goes to see the goddess, the lord of plunder. Helba is a thief who alternates between male and female bodies. When she is male, she robs and steals and amasses fortunes, then when she is a woman she relaxes and enjoys her wealth. Sam asks for her help in stealing something of his that is kept in the archives. It is a small belt, a talisman, that magnifies his powers. She reluctantly agrees. She helps him get the belt, but he is caught at the archives by Tak, who tries to stop him but refuses to harm him. Sam floats into the air with the aid of his belt but is overcome by an illusion cast over him by Lord Mara and does not escape.

After her three days with Brahma, Kali tells him she has changed her mind about offering Sam godhood. She instead wants a human sacrifice in honor of her wedding. Brahma agrees, leaving Sam's execution in her hands. Lord Mara temporarily lifts the illusion over the great cats so they come into the city hunting. Sam is killed by one of these cats, who, it is suggested, may actually be a god in disguise. Before he is killed, Tak helps defend him against attack, but is stopped by one of the gods.

Sam's body is burned atop a large pyre and the feast of Kali and Yama's wedding goes on for seven days. Afterward, however, several of the gods leave the city with their servants and followers out of protest for the execution of Sam. Those who stay but who are suspected of having supported his plan for accelerationism are killed or forced out. Tak is put on trial for his actions in defending Sam and sentenced to have his soul migrated to the body of an ape.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5 opens with a series of short episodes and conversations about Sam's capture and arrival in the city. More of his background is learned, including that he was once in love with Kali and had many children with her. One of these children is Tak, who is a man rather than an ape as he appears in the opening chapter of the book.



Somewhat surprisingly, Sam is allowed to move about the city freely. This is because the gods wish to see which of the gods and lords of the city might sympathize with Sam and his accelerationism. A list is kept of everyone who is suspected of supporting him.

Kali is revealed to be a capricious person who uses her body to get what she wants and who changes her mind frequently and drastically. She is known to sometimes take the body of an animal and attack her enemies, a hint that it is actually Kali posing as one of the cats of Kaniburrha who finally kills Sam. That Sam does not truly die is hinted at in the legendary passage at the opening of the chapter.





# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

The part of the legend that opens Chapter 6 mentions the death of Brahma and the belief by some that Sam did not die in the celestial city but somehow lived on.

The opening scene takes place in Brahma's garden, where he is found lying motionless by one of his servants, who summons Vishnu and Shiva. They arrive with the god Ganesha and, determining that Brahma is dead, immediately decide that they must appoint someone new as Brahma as soon as possible, as there must always be a Brahma. Ganesha declines the nomination by Vishnu and they discuss other possibilities. Yama is rejected for being too serious, Krishna for always being drunk, and Kubera for being too intelligent. Agni is left as a possibility.

Ganesha suggests they think of the greatest problem they face at the moment and when Vishnu replies that he does not think there are any pressing problems Ganesha suggests they invent one. He suggests accelerationsim, and that they appoint Kali as the new Brahma because of her well-known hatred for the movement.

Kali and Brahma are called from their honeymoon to the garden of Brahma where Vishnu, Shiva and Ganesha ask Kali to become the new Brahma. She agrees after conferring with Yama, even though it means taking a male body and ending their marriage. Yama pleads with her not to do it, but she accepts.

Yama sets about looking for Brahma's killer and visits his friend, Kubera, to discuss the matter. He tells Kubera in confidence that Brahma has been killed, probably poisoned, and as they are talking news comes that Shiva has also been killed. Kubera suggests it is probably the same person who committed both murders, possibly out of revenge. The Accelerationist movement is not sufficiently organized for such things, he believes, pointing to a personal motive.

After Yama leaves, Ratri comes to speak with Kubera, passing Yama on the way. She asks what has troubled him and Kubera says it is a confidential matter. She replies that she knows Brahma is dead and suspects Yama is after his killer. She explains to Kubera that she had found Brahma barely alive in his garden but had done nothing to help, wanting to see him die. She escaped the garden under her cloak of darkness, but fears that Yama will suspect her. Kubera says he will protect her.

Yama uses his mind probe to interrogate 37 people and gods who might have been in contact with Brahma but none of them are found guilty. Kubera comes to his workshop and looks over the tape recordings of the mind probes that Yama has kept over the years since his early experiments with the device. Meanwhile, outside the celestial city, the printing press and flush toilet have been rediscovered.



Kubera approaches the figure of Lord Murugan, who is resting alone on a grassy hillside. He addresses Murugan as Lord Kalkin, one of the early titles of Sam's, and Sam calmly greets him back, asking how Kubera had determined who he was. Kubera replies that he reasoned that if Sam were still alive he would be the prime suspect in the killings of Brahma and Shiva. He had gone through Yama's mind tapes and compared the results from Murugan's recent probe to old tapes belonging to Sam. He reasoned that having the ability to control electromagnetic forces might enable Sam to beat the mind probe. One thing he did not understand was how Sam had beaten death and managed to enter Murugan's new body several days after he had been killed. Sam responds that when Taraka the Rakasha had occupied his body he had strengthened his soul so it might survive outside a body.

Kubera asks his intentions and Sam says he will continue to kill the gods for as long as he can until he is caught, starting with Yama. Kubera replies that since Yama is his friend, Sam will have to kill him as well. Sam this would be unfortunate and asks Kubera not to reveal his secret. Kubera proposes a wager. If Sam wins, he will leave him alone and not tell anyone his secret. If Kubera wins, then Sam will agree to leave the city with Kubera. The game is to be "Irish Stand Down," a contest where each man strikes the other until one of them falls over. Sam delivers a healthy blow, but Kubera knocks him out.

Kubera takes the unconscious Sam to the great bird Garuda to fly away from the city, but the cries of the bird alarm Yama and Ratri, who come to the bird's giant cage. Yama is suspicious of Kubera's explanation that he has urgent business and needs to leave with Lord Murugan. He pulls the hood off Garuda's head and prepares to take off. Yama asks Ratri to hide Garuda's head in darkness, which she does, but then Kubera tells her to hide Yama's head instead and join them on the bird. Ratri does so, and they take off. Kubera explains that Murugan is actually Sam and he is taking them to the city of Keenset.

In Keenset, Sam, Kubera and Ratri set about building an army to oppose the gods. They reluctantly accept the help of Nirriti the Black, a Christian who had left the celestial city many years before and commanded an army of soulless zombies. Taraka returns to Sam and promises the help of the Rakasha.

One day word comes that a god dressed in red is approaching with many machines. It is Yama, who has come to offer his help to Sam in opposing the gods. Sam accepts his help and draws up battle plans.

The battle, when it comes, is epic. Nirriti's zombies mindlessly cut down the first wave of attackers and the Rakasha pull down the buildings of Keenset on top of the invaders. In a chariot driven by Yama, Sam directs the battle. In the end, however, he is overcome by an illusion cast by Mara. Yama is struck down and taken prisoner and Ratri captured and they are all taken back to the celestial city. Ratri is expelled and cursed to be a mortal. Yama is found dead in his prison cell, although it seems he dies from the explosion of a small box hidden in his helmet. It is speculated that the box may have



transmitted his soul into another body. Sam, having escaped death once, has his soul broadcast into the Bridge of the Gods, the magnetic cloud surrounding the planet.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

The story takes on elements of a murder mystery with political intrigue in Chapter 6. Someone has murdered Brahma and the few gods who are aware of it are immediately concerned with replacing him so they do not risk losing grip on power. Ganesha proves to be a political schemer, suggesting they revive the "problem" of accelerationism in order to solidify the power of the new Brahma and reduce the risk of any challenges. Ganesha's scheming will play a role in the end of the story.

Kubera, who is briefly considered for the post of the new Brahma, is shown to be shrewd and very intelligent, perhaps even more intelligent than Yama. He quickly solves the murders of Brahma and Vishnu and decides to join forces with the newly reincarnated Sam, although he has to forcibly remove him from the city.

A surprise twist comes in the form of Yama's apparent betrayal of the gods to join Sam. His motivations are not explained, but his decision comes after Kali has decided to end their marriage to become the new Brahma. Sam welcomes his help.

The author's description of the battle takes the form of a legend, with the actions of the armies and warriors described in a grand tone. Sam, Yama, and Ratri are all taken prisoner, and Yama apparently commits suicide while imprisoned. However there is a strong suggestion he migrated to a new body to escape. Brahma simply shrugs at this possibility.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Chapter 7, the final chapter, opens with the legend of the return of Mahasamatman to oppose the gods. Chronologically, the chapter follows the first chapter and takes place after Sam has been brought back from the magnetic cloud into a new body.

Jan Olvegg is brought before Nirriti the Black to be interrogated. Nirriti know that Olvegg is one of the First, even though he has not become a god himself, and he wants to know why the gods are letting bits of technological advancement occur since the battle of Keenset. Olvegg suggests that infighting among them has weakened them. Nirriti invites Olvegg to join him in opposing the gods and Olvegg agrees, although he is uneasy with the alliance. Meanwhile Taraka broods over his defeat at the hands of Sam and of Yama at the battle of Hellwell. He awaits the day when he might face them again and prove his might.

Yama and Sam await the arrival of Kubera, who has been secretly introducing technology into the world over the past fifty years. Yama lays out the forces Sam has at his disposal. He has the powers of Kubera and Yama at his service and an army could be raised from his former kingdom. He has the backing of the Rakasha, and Sam calls Taraka to meet with him.

Sam decides they must ally with Nirriti and his forces to beat the gods and he asks Taraka to take this proposal to Nirriti. Taraka agrees, but does not deliver the message, hoping that he will have a chance to fight against Yama and Sam himself. When Sam hears no response from Nirriti he contacts Brahma instead and proposes to ally with the gods to defeat Nirriti on the condition that Brahma will allow technology to progress. Brahma, who is still the soul of Kali, is astonished to learn that Sam is still alive. He agrees to join forces and meet Nirriti at the city of Khaipur.

Meanwhile, Nirriti begins a deliberate campaign of attacking cities and defiling the temples in order to provoke the gods. He is visited one day by Ganesha, who seems to be supporting Nirriti's campaign and who gives him intelligence of the gods' plans. Ganesha tells Nirriti that the gods intend to let him take the city of Khaipur but to meet him in battle at the city of Kilbar. Ganesha's information is deliberately false, however.

Nirriti is surprised at Khaipur. his forces put up a valiant struggle, but the forces of Sam and the gods win the day. Brahma is mortally wounded in a struggle with Nirriti, who is also badly injured. Yama, attempting to save Brahma, is attacked by Taraka, who has taken over the body of a warrior named Indra. the two struggle and Yama is victorious over Taraka. He leaves Nirriti to die and picks up Brahma, carrying his body to the city.

Jan Olvegg is badly wounded and Sam has him taken to the Hall of Karma in the city of Khaipur to transfer to a new body. At the entrance to the hall he finds the bodies of the



Masters, apparently killed by Yama. the body of Brahma is on the transfer table. Yama's whereabouts are unknown.

Olvegg and Tak are given new bodies. Tak comes to speak with Kubera after receiving his new human form and asks to take Vishnu's Thunder Chariot so he and Jan Olvegg might travel. Kubera tries to convince him to stay, but he says he must go. He hints that Yama is still alive somewhere and tells Kubera where he might look for him at an inn.

Kubera goes to the inn that Tak had told him about and asks about any guests fitting Yama's description. He is shown to a room where he finds Yama and a young girl, who he says is his daughter, Murga. The girl cannot speak in full sentences and appears to have a mental deficiency. Yama says it is from "transfer effect." He repeats meaningfully that the girl is his daughter. Kubera understands that the girl is really Kali, and he offers to help Yama help the girl.

Technology slowly begins to emerge and flourish in the world. The Masters of Karma are replaced by the Wardens of Transfer and Sam is recognized as the Lord of Light.

Here the story mentions that there are several versions of what happened to Sam. All of them mention that while riding his horse one day he was visited by a giant red bird that carried him off, never to be seen again. Yama also left the city of Khaipur, leaving his daughter in the care of Kubera and Ratri. Other legends arose that tell of his further adventures.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

The circular structure of the novel is completed with chapter seven, which takes place some fifty years after the end of Chapter 6 but immediately after the end of Chapter 1. The seeds of Sam's rebellion have been growing in his absence. Kubera has been introducing technology slowly throughout the world. The dissension among the gods in the celestial city, set in motion by Sam's two executions, has undermined their effectiveness in suppressing this technology. When Sam offers Brahma the opportunity to join him, he is willing.

The character Nirriti is only mentioned in passing for much of the book, but he provides a counterpart to Sam. Like Sam he opposes the gods of Heaven, and like Sam he has adopted an opposing religion as a framework for his opposition. Unlike Sam and the gods, however, Nirriti appears to actually believe his religion is genuine. And unlike Sam, he takes a militant and aggressive stance toward the gods.

The love triangle between Yama, Brahma/Kali, and Sam grows more complex and is partly resolved in the final chapter. Despite having taken the body of a man and ending their marriage, Brahma/Kali is still excited when he learns that Yama and Sam are still alive. Yama, despite having worked for decades to oppose Brahma, nevertheless saves his spirit after the final battle, apparently transferring Kali's soul into the body of a girl. The hasty transfer causes some brain damage, however, giving the story a tragic twist. Yama ultimately leaves the girl in the care of Kubera and Ratri, heading off in obscurity.

The novel ends in a deliberately vague way, mentioning that there are several version of how the story ends. This adds to the mythological quality of the story, acknowledging that myths and legends change over time even though they may have some basis in fact.



# Characters

## Sam

Sam is the main character of the novel and is one of the original colonizers of the planet who came from Earth several generations previously. Sam is his most ordinary name, but over the course of his many reincarnations, he has been called many others, including Lord Kalkin, Mahasamatman, Tathagatha, Buddha, and the Lord of Light. He also assumes the identity of a man named Lord Murugan for a time.

Disgusted with the actions of the other original settlers, who have withheld technology from the new worlds and set themselves up in a pantheon of Hindu-like gods, Sam leaves the domed city in which they live and quietly introduces a counter movement based on Buddhism. He is not truly a Buddhist, but simply promotes the teachings as a means to oppose the gods. As his movement becomes stronger, the gods begin to push back, resulting in two large battles separated by 50 years, in which Sam is first defeated but then victorious.

Sam is a con-man of sorts, using trickery and deception to fight and escape his enemies. He also has the god-like ability to control electromagnetic forces, but he resists being formally recognized as a god by the others. He is executed once by the gods for his opposition, but manages to survive by transferring to another body. Later he has his soul transmitted into space, but is drawn back into a body after 50 years by Yama to continue his battle against the gods.

Sam has been romantically involved in the past with the goddess Kali when both were in different bodies. He has fathered many children, including Tak, the keeper of the archives in the celestial city.

## Yama

Yama, the god of death, is one of the early descendants of the original settlers. He has the ability to kill using his gaze and is a technological genius. As a teenage boy, one of his experiments backfires and damages his body and he takes on a new body of an older man. He has taken on a series of new bodies over the years. He dresses entirely in red.

Yama is in love with Murga, a woman who later becomes the goddess Kali and then the chief god Brahma. He marries her when she is in the body of Kali, but their marriage ends when Kali decides to become the new Brahma after the old Brahma is killed by Sam. Her decision upsets Yama, who ultimately decides to join his forces with Sam against Brahma. While Yama is the enemy of Sam for much of the book, he also holds him in respect. Sam recognizes this respect and sometimes uses it to his advantage to escape.



In the end, Yama remains faithful to Murga/Kali/Brahma by saving her soul after the epic final battle against Nirriti the Black. His efforts are only partly successful, however, and he leaves his brain-damaged lover in the care of friends and departs.

## Kali

Kali is one of the goddesses who live and rule in the celestial city. Before she became Kali she was known as Murga. She is a deceitful person who shares with Yama the ability to kill with her gaze. She is not above using sexual favors to get her way with the other gods.

Kali marries Yama the deathgod in a grand ceremony in the celestial city. In honor of the event, she calls for a human sacrifice and has Sam executed by one of the white tigers that roam the forest outside the city. Although it is never explicitly mentioned, it is suggested that the cat that kills Sam is actually Kali herself in animal form.

After Sam kills the god Brahma, Kali is asked to assume the role of the chief god. She accepts, even though it means taking a male form and ending her marriage to Yama. This ultimately drives Yama to oppose her, but after the gods have been weakened considerably and Sam offers Brahma the choice to join him, she becomes allies with Sam and Yama again. She is badly wounded by Nirriti in the final battle and is carried off by Yama, who transfers her soul into the body of a young girl. Something called "transfer effect" renders her brain-damaged, however. Yama raises her with the help of Kubera and Ratri and then leaves her in their care.

## Ratri

Ratri is the goddess of night. She is a supporter of Sam's movement and assists him in escaping the celestial city. She has the power to cast darkness. For her role in helping him she is expelled from the city and stripped of her godhood. Later, she provides a secret place for Yama to build the machinery needed to bring Sam back from the magnetic cloud around the planet.

## Kubera

Kubera is one of the god-like people who lives in the celestial city. He has the ability to extend a feeling of drunkenness and well-being to people around him. He is highly intelligent and is the first to solve the mystery of the murders of Brahma and Vishnu. He supports Sam, but opposes his plan to selectively kill off the gods one by one. He forcibly takes Sam from the celestial city and helps him mount an organized campaign against the gods.





## Tak

Tak is the keeper of the archives in the celestial city and one of the many children of Sam. When he tries to help Sam escape attack by the cats of Kaniburrha, he is stopped and punished by being put into the body of an ape. He later assists Yama and Ratri in bringing Sam back to the planet to oppose the gods. After the final battle, Tak once again takes the body of a man.

## Taraka

Taraka is the chief of the Rakasha, the energy-beings who originally inhabited the planet but who were imprisoned by Sam in the mountain called Hellwell. Sam releases Taraka as part of a bargain to help him fight the gods, but Taraka possesses Sam's body against his will and lives a luxurious life until they are nearly killed by the god Agni. Taraka rejoins Sam to fight the gods, but gives in to his pride and desire to test his strength against Yama, who defeated him at the battle of Hellwell. In a long struggle, Yama manages to defeat Taraka, who disappears.

## Nirriti

Nirriti is a man once known as Renfrew who was one of the first settlers of the planet. Rather than join in the Hindu-like religion as a god, Nirriti professes a Christian faith and leaves the celestial city. He commands armies of animated zombie corpses. Sam proposes an alliance with Nirriti against the gods, but his proposal is never delivered by Taraka, who Sam entrusts with the message. Sam then joins with the gods to fight against Nirriti, who is killed by Brahma in battle.

## Brahma

Brahma is the chief of the gods of heaven. Originally the role of Brahma is occupied by the soul of a woman named Madeleine, who is one of the first settlers. This Brahma is poisoned by Sam after his first execution and the role is taken up by Murga, who most recently had been in the role of Kali.

## Vishnu

Vishnu, with Shiva and Brahma, is one of the three ruling gods. He is killed by Sam.

## Shiva

Shiva is one of the three ruling gods of Heaven, along with Brahma and Vishnu.



## Rild

Rild is the official assassin of Kali who is sent to kill Sam. Sam saves his life, however, and Rild joins his movement instead. He soon gains a reputation as a wise teacher and is thought by Sam to be the "real" Buddha. Rild dies at the hands of Yama while defending Sam.

## Agni

Agni is the god of fire. He wears a helmet and gauntlet which allow him to see and fire his weapon over great distances.

## Mara

Mara is the god of illusion. He prevents Sam from escaping the celestial city in his first attempt by clouding his vision with illusion. He also uses his power to defeat Sam at the first battle against the gods. Mara is later killed by Yama in the monastery of Ratri.

## Jan Olvegg

Jan Olvegg is one of the first settlers of the planet and was the captain of the spaceship that brought them from Earth. He is an old friend to Sam. He joins with Nirriti to oppose the gods, but is badly wounded. Sam ensures that he is transferred into a new body and he later joins Tak to travel the planet.



## Objects/Places

### The Celestial City

This is a large domed city in the polar region of the planet where the gods live. Beside the city, also under the dome, is a wilderness forest.

### Uratha

Uratha is what the people of the planet call Earth, which has "vanished" after some kind of catastrophe. The first settlers of the planet came in a spaceship from Earth.

### Keenset

This is a city which is the location of the first major battle between Sam and the gods.

### Hellwell

This is a giant mountain cavern built by the first settlers to hold the Rakasha, the original inhabitants of the planet. When Sam frees the Rakasha to fight with him against the gods, some of the gods come to Hellwell and fight them.

### Mahartha

Mahartha is a city near where Sam had been living in isolation for many years as a prince. He comes to Mahartha to get a new body, which is when he discovers the major changes that the gods have made.

### Alundil

Alundil is the city near which Sam sets up his monastery and begins to spread the teachings of Buddhism. He leaves Alundil after Yama finds him and tries to kill him.

### The Star of India

The Star of India was the original spaceship that brought the first settlers from Earth.



## **Khaipur**

Khaipur is the city where the final battle between Sam and the gods against Nirriti the Black takes place.

## **Garuda**

Garuda is a large and menacing bird the gods have partly tamed and which they ride from place to place.

## **Thunder Chariot**

The thunder chariot is some kind of spaceship or aircraft the gods use to travel around the planet.

## **Attributes**

Attributes are the specific powers a god has. Each one has at least one power, which is often magnified by some kind of device.

## **Aspects**

Aspects are the special appearances gods take when they are brandishing their attributes.

## **Talisman**

The talisman is a device that Sam uses to magnify his attribute of control over electromagnetic forces. It allows him to fly through the air.

## Social Sensitivity

At first glance, *Lord of Light* might seem a novel devoid of any social concern. Certainly it lacks the themes readers usually associate with science fiction — awful warnings about technology run amok, overpopulation, nuclear war, or ecological disaster. Its premise suggests highly imaginative escapist fare. In the remote future a ship filled with colonists from earth reaches a distant planet. The crew, armed with remarkably advanced technology, has conquered the natives and established itself as a virtually immortal ruling elite, lording it over classes of servants, peasants, and artisans descended from the original colonists.

To strengthen their hold over the masses, the former crew members have used their technological skills to assume godlike powers and personas, drawn from Hindu mythology. They become "gods" and rule over a populace denied education, technology, and freedom. One of the "gods" rebels against this static, hierarchical society, and the readers are treated to a spectacular war of the gods.

Yet even such a plot summary begins to suggest the levels of social concern.

The novel is about a rebellion against a stagnant, repressive society, about an attempt to liberate people from the chains of ignorance and superstition imposed on them by arrogant leaders.

The setting is indeed exotic, but a novel of revolution doubtless struck a chord in many readers — especially during the 1960s. The "gods" want to maintain the status quo; the hero, Sam, and a few friends want everyone to have the benefits of all the knowledge and technology available. Given the nature of this conflict, Zelazny's use of Hindu mythology is no mere gimmick, for Hinduism, with its intricate rituals and rigid caste system, is precisely the kind of system he sees as sterile and oppressive. The novel even reenacts the historical conflict between Hinduism and Buddhism, for Sam briefly assumes the persona of the Buddha to attack the ruling class and stir up the people.

From this perspective, then, the novel argues the need to overthrow entrenched authoritarian rule in order to liberate a society.



## Techniques

The plot of *Lord of Light* follows a pattern typical of Zelazny. The novel opens in the middle of its action, with a disoriented hero (Sam brought back from a kind of death) groping to find his way. As Sam prepares to renew his rebellion, he reviews the past that led him to this juncture. Thus the reader begins poised on the brink of some great action, is kept in suspense while the background is filled in, and finally experiences the climax. This proves a good method of grabbing the reader's attention, building the suspense, and gracefully handling the necessary exposition. It has already been suggested that Zelazny's adaptation of the Hindu pantheon for his fictional purposes is quite suitable for the novel's attack on static, lifeless societies. It should be noted, moreover, that Zelazny adapts the Hindu mythos very freely — changing characters and emphases to suit the needs of the novel. The god Yama, for instance, plays a more important role in the novel (as Sam's former antagonist who becomes his staunchest ally) than he actually does in the Hindu pantheon.



# Themes

## Circularity

The Hindu religion upon which the "gods" of the planet in "Lord of Light" base their authority is based on an idea that life is circular or cyclical in nature. Life does not begin and end at birth and death, but the soul is reincarnated in a series of new bodies. A person who lives a good life can be expected to be reincarnated into a higher social position while a person who has been sinful might be reincarnated into a lower class or into the body of an animal. Thus life is a series of cycles with each ending also a new beginning. The prayer wheels used by the priests in the novel mimic this circular motion. Zelazny also pokes a bit of fun at the idea by imagining a prayer "machine" that is very similar to a slot machine, where prayers can be sent to the gods by putting a token in a slot and pulling a lever that sends the prayer wheels spinning.

This seemingly mystical cycle of reincarnation has a practical reality in the novel, however, as the gods actually possess the power to transmit souls from one body to another. They use their temples and prayer machines to judge those who are more devoted and dedicated to the gods and give them progressively better bodies and presumably more access to the secrets of the gods. They can also control those who oppose them by putting them in diseased bodies or into the bodies of animals.

The novel as a whole is based on a circular structure, opening near the end of the story and then circling back in time to arrive at the point where the book began. The main character, Sam, "dies" twice in the course of the story but each time is brought back in a new form.

## Religion

Sam and the gods each use religion as a framework to exert influence over people. The gods have constructed a Hindu-like religion with a large number of gods, each with a specific role to play and with special powers and authority. In reality, these gods are actually technologically advanced humans who have mastered the ability to transfer souls from one body to another and to magnify certain mental powers they possess. The mythology they create allows them to live a technologically advanced and luxurious life in a separate city from the rest of the planet while maintaining their authority.

When Sam decides to oppose the gods, he does so by introducing an alternate religion based on Buddhism. Rather than a collection of active gods with distinct personalities, Buddhism has a leader who teaches a simple and passive way of life. Sam chooses it primarily because it is so distinctly different than the Hindu-like religion that prevails.

Neither Sam nor the gods truly believe in their own religion, however. They simply use religion to manipulate others into supporting them. There are two truly religious characters who do appear in the story, however. One is Rild, the former assassin who



chooses to give up his profession and follow Sam. Rild, who comes to be known as Sugata, takes the teachings of Buddhism seriously and actually begins to live and teach by its guidance. Sugata ultimately gives up his pacifism, however, to defend Sam, his master, against the god Yama.

The second character who appears to be truly religious is Nirriti the Black. Nirriti is a Christian and is portrayed as a fanatic. Like Sam, he is opposed to the rule of the gods, but he is mainly opposed on religious grounds. He dresses in black, like a Christian priest, and commands an army of zombies who have been "resurrected," a grim parody of Christianity and its central belief of a resurrected god. Unlike Sam and the gods, Nirriti appears to believe that he serves a true God.

In the end, the Hindu-like mythology collapses under the political infighting of the many gods who populate it. Buddhism gains a foothold, but Sam departs into obscurity and does not remain as a visible leader of the religion. Nirriti is killed in battle and no mention is made of the fate of Christianity on the planet.

## Love triangle

Three of the main characters in "Lord of Light," Sam, Kali and Yama, are connected in a "love triangle" that adds extra significance to their interactions and raises possibilities that their motives are affected by this relationship. The author does not reveal the full extent of their connections until the last third of the book, which casts earlier events in a new light and adds depth to the story.

The love triangle is complicated by the fact that the characters can take on new bodies and identities because of their mind-transfer technology. Sam, who comes to be known as the Lord of Light, is one of the first settlers on the planet who came directly from Earth. Murga is a woman who was also apparently one of the First, as they are called, and she later became the goddess Kali. Sam and Murga were in love at one time, and had many children together, presumably over the course of many generations while they changed bodies. At some point they separated. Sam is still attracted to Murga in the form of Kali, but he no longer loves her as he once did. Murga/Kali appears to be interested in rekindling her old flame with Sam, but it is unclear if she is truly interested or simply trying to manipulate him.

Yama was not one of the First, but was born in an early generation of settlers and has been alive nearly as long as Sam and Murga. He is in love with Murga in the form of Kali and, it is suggested, submits to his role doing dirty work for the gods out of his devotion to her. When Sam and Yama meet near Alundil, Sam taunts Yama about this. He praises Yama's skill and power and belittles him for submitting to the other gods out of blind love for Kali. This taunt is cast in a new light later in the story when it is learned that Sam and Kali were once devoted lovers as well.

Yama is angered by Sam's taunts, but he is not acting simply out of jealousy it seems, but because of the perceived insult to Kali. He has a genuine respect for Sam and





appears reluctant to kill him. Sam takes advantage of this reluctance to escape. Likewise, Sam might have killed Yama while he slept under the trees in his monastery, but did not.

The triangle appears to be resolved when Yama and Kali are married and Sam is executed in honor of the event. It is not over, however, as Sam returns and kills Brahma, providing the occasion for Kali to betray Yama by taking on the role of Brahma and ending her marriage to Yama. This act then prompts Yama to betray Kali and join with Sam.

The three are reunited once again, however, at the grand battle of Khaipur, where Yama saves Brahma/Kali's life and the original balance is reset after a fashion.

Zelazny leaves open the question of whether some or all of these events may have been planned by Sam, Kali or Yama. Sam and Kali do meet secretly in the celestial city before his execution, and Kali implicates Brahma in the decision to execute Sam. It seems possible that they worked together to bring about the ultimate end of the rule of the gods.

Another possibility left open is that Yama is actually the son of Sam and Murga. They had many children, it is explained, so many that they do not know what has become of all of them owing to the constant changing of bodies and the long lives of the gods. Tak of the Archives is one of these children, for example. If Yama is the son of Sam and Murga, the story mirrors that of Oedipus the King, who unknowingly married his mother and killed his father.

## Significant Topics

Zelazny suggests, both here and in many other stories and novels, that personal enlightenment is the necessary prelude to political or social liberation. Typically his protagonists are confronted with challenges which, successfully met, lead to some kind of enlightenment or spiritual/emotional growth. Those characters who fail the test usually face death, sometimes physical but more often spiritual. Connected with this movement towards enlightenment is the notion of immortality. A large number of Zelazny's protagonists enjoy immortality — whether as a supernatural given or as the result of technology. Immortality allows for some interesting plot developments, but for Zelazny it is primarily a metaphor for the human need for growth and fullness of experience. The characters' long lives give them the chance to play a variety of roles, to experience all that life has to offer.

And this richness of experience, the knowledge of many lives, becomes the source of enlightenment. Such is the case for Sam.

But enlightenment is not just a private affair. Whatever form it takes in Zelazny's fiction — the attainment of spiritual and psychic wholeness, the awareness of one's shared humanity, or simply the recognition of the responsibility that accompanies power — enlightenment is followed by action in the social sphere. For Sam it is the recognition of



how his former crewmates have abused their power that provokes his determination to liberate the people from bondage — a determination that leads him to wage two bloody wars. In *Lord of Light*, as in many other works by Zelazny, the land is sick and must be restored, often through the destruction of the old order. Often the healing of the land is achieved only at a terrible cost; Sam dies and is brought back to life only by a former enemy. And then to win his final battle he must cause the deaths of many of his former friends and destroy much that is beautiful before his world is free to grow naturally.

# Style

## Point of View

Lord of Light is written mostly from the point of view of an omnipotent narrator who is relating the thoughts and motivations of all the characters. The story line follows the main character, Sam, but also changes locations to describe conversations and events at which the main character is not present.

Religious and political themes run through the novel, but it is difficult to identify any specific religious or political point of view being expressed. The main character is generally a sympathetic character, but he is also deceitful and sometimes petty. The gods are his primary opponents in the story, but they can be funny and likable, as well. The gods are withholding their advanced technology from the general population, but it seems this is done more out of expedience and convenience rather than as a deliberately "evil" plot. They are quick to anger when challenged, however.

Sam is a trickster figure. He uses deceit and cunning to get his way, but since he appears to be using these techniques toward a greater good, the reader may find them forgivable.

## Setting

Lord of Light takes place on an unnamed planet where colonists from Earth have come to escape some major catastrophe. The planet was originally inhabited by bodiless energy creatures called Rakasha, which are captured and imprisoned by the settlers in a deep mountain cavern called Hellwell. These first settlers discover that they are able to develop special powers which can be magnified by technology. One of them develops the technology to transfer their souls, along with their powers, into new bodies, enabling them to live virtually forever. The planet has been populated by the successive generations from these first settlers.

These first settlers and some those from the earliest generations have proclaimed themselves gods and have instituted a religion based on Hinduism, with a wide range of deities each with special powers and authority. The religion allows for reincarnation, which is handled by the Masters of Karma, who probe the minds of people wishing to be reincarnated to determine if they harbor any opposition to the gods. Those that do are reincarnated in diseased bodies or as lower animals.

The culture is frozen in a pre-industrial state by the gods who destroy any signs of emerging technology. Some of the early settlers oppose this policy and call for "accelerationism," or the increased introduction of new technology into the population. The gods oppose this accelerationism wherever they encounter it, including among themselves, driving out any of their own who favor it.



The gods live in a large domed city in the polar region of the planet. The dome also covers a large forest next to the city which is left in a semi-wild state. The planet is surrounded by a magnetic cloud called the Bridge of the Gods.

## Language and Meaning

"Lord of Light" is a science fiction novel, but is often written in the style of a religious epic, using formal and sometimes grandiose language. At the same time, the characters are former inhabitants of Earth and use English idioms and slang in their speech. The result is an often amusing mix of high and low styles.

While the story is a science-fiction tale, it is largely free of invented jargon or futuristic language. One exception is the term "accelerationism," which refers to the movement dedicated to accelerating the pace of technological advancement among the general population.

The ruling class of people in the story pattern themselves after the many gods in the Hindu religion, and their names and titles are often taken directly from the epic stories of that religion. Passages from Hindu and Buddhist legends are included in each chapter, strengthening this connection. In addition, each chapter begins with a short passage set off from the rest of the narrative which is written in the style of a legendary epic describing the feats of gods and men that lived long ago. The narrative account of the actual events follows these bits of legend.

## Structure

"Lord of Light" is divided into seven distinct chapters in a circular structure. The opening chapter describes events near the end of the time frame of the novel, with the second chapter jumping back in time to earlier events that led up to the opening point of the story. The seventh and final chapter then begins at the point the first chapter ends. The circular structure of the novel mirrors the circular nature of the story and the theme of reincarnation and the cycle of life.

In the first chapter, Sam's soul has just been secretly retrieved from "Nirvana" by Yama. The reason Yama has done this, or why it must be secret, is not immediately explained. With the second chapter, the time frame jumps backward by fifty years or so, to a time when Sam is just beginning his gradual campaign to overthrow Heaven. Chapters two through six describe his campaign, and it is established that his soul is special in that it cannot be truly killed. As a result, when he is captured during the epic battle against the gods in Chapter Six, he is not killed but has his soul transferred to the electromagnetic cloud surrounding the planet. This then takes the reader back to the point at which Chapter One opens, after Sam has been in this state for several years. The final chapter then continues the first chapter, but does not provide a complete resolution to the story.



## Quotes

"His followers called him Mahasamatman and said he was a god. He preferred to drop the Maha- and the -atman, however, and called himself Sam. He never claimed to be a god. But then, he never claimed not to be a god" (Chapter 1, p. 1).

"Mara's teeth bared in a snarl. His neck was as thick as a bull's. His biceps were as big about as a man's thighs. His chest was a barrel of strength and his legs were like great trees of the forest" (Chapter 1, p. 26).

"One time a minor rajah from a minor principality came with his retinue into Mahārtha, the city that is called Gateway of the South and Capital of the Dawn, there to purchase a new body" (Chapter 2, p. 37).

"They are not ready, and will not be for many centuries. If they were to be exposed to an advanced technology at this point, the wars which would ensue would result in the destruction of the beginnings they have already made" (Chapter 2, p. 58).

"Near the city of Alundil there was a rich grove of blue-barked trees, having purple foliage like feathers, It was famous for its beauty and the shrine-like peace of its shade....In that wood did this teacher abide with his followers, and when they walked forth into the town at midday their begging bowls never went unfilled" (Chapter 3, p. 73).

"'It is amazing,' he said, 'how that mutant brain of yours generated a mind capable of transferring its powers to any new brain you choose to occupy" (Chapter 3, p. 107).

"It is told how the Lord of Light descended into the Well of the Demons, to make there a bargain with the chief of the Rakasha. He dealt in good faith, but the Rakasha are the Rakasha. That is to say, they are malefic creatures, possessed of great powers, life-span and the ability to assume nearly any shape" (Chapter 4, p. 110).

"If it will give you any satisfaction in the end, I still care for you. Either there is no such thing as love, or the word does not mean what I thought it to mean on many different occasions. It is a feeling without a name, really - better to leave it at that. So take it and go away and have your fun with it" (Chapter 5, p. 159).

"They came. out of the sky, riding on the polar winds, across the seas and the land, over the burning snow, and under it and through it, they came" (Chapter 5, p. 171).

"During the time that followed the death of Brahma, there came upon the Celestial City a period of turmoil. Several among the gods were even expelled from Heaven" (Chapter 6, p. 185).

"Another name by which he is sometimes called is Maitreya, meaning Lord of Light. After his return from the Golden Cloud, he journeyed to the Palace of Kama at Khaipur, where he planned and built his strength against the Day of the Yuga" (Chapter 7, p. 223).



"The one thing that is common to all the legends is that a large red bird with a tail thrice the length of its body came to him one day at dusk as he rode upon his horse beside the river. He departed Khaipur before sunrise the following day and was not seen again" (Chapter 7, p. 256).



## Topics for Discussion

What role does religion play in the novel?

How does the structure of the novel contribute to the story itself?

Is Sam justified in his use of deceit and trickery?

How does the relationship between Sam, Kali, and Yama affect the outcome of the story?

Why do you think the author does not reveal everything to the reader?

Discuss the fanatical Christian figure of Nirriti. What role does the character play in the outcome of the story?

The ultimate fate of the main characters is not explained. Why does the author do this?

How does the story compare to other myths or legendary tales you have read? What elements does it have in common?

## Literary Precedents

Zelazny gives every indication of being an omnivorous reader, and *Lord of Light* is at times a very literary novel.

His style owes much to the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists he studied in graduate school, and to the metaphysical and symbolist poets. In addition Zelazny is well versed in mythologies from around the world — including Hindu writings of course, but also the myths of "the dying god" gathered by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1922) — and in Jungian psychology. A science fiction novel comparable in its imaginative use of myth and in its witty, allusive, poetic style is Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* (1967). But it is doubtful, given the publication dates, that there is any influence beyond a shared set of literary concerns.





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