

# **Mortality Study Guide**

## **Mortality by Christopher Hitchens**

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# Plot Summary

"Mortality" by Christopher Hitchens is the story of the writer and political analyst's life during the last nineteen months of his life after he was diagnosed with Stage 4 esophageal cancer. At the time, Christopher Hitchens was just launching an American book tour and was very excited and enthused about it. He woke early in his hotel room in New York City on the morning of the day that the tour was beginning, with a pain and agony that he could not understand or describe. His chest felt weighted down with concrete and he could hardly breathe. He barely made it across the room to call for help. Was he having a heart attack?

However, help, in the form of EMTs with their scary boots and helmets looking ready for battle, came quickly. The EMT team helped to bring a measure of comfort to Christopher as they immediately dispatched him to the hospital. The ER doctors were able to restore a normal status to his heart, lungs and blood pressure. However, they gave him the dire advise to see an oncologist. Amazingly, Christopher recovered enough to keep his commitment for an appearance on the Jon Stewart show and a showing with his friend Salman Rushdie that night without anyone suspecting that something very serious was wrong with him.

On the morning that he went in for a biopsy on the tumors that the doctors discovered in the collarbone area and in his lymph nodes, Christopher knew that his life would be forever changed. Cancer was taking away the life that he knew and loved. Unfortunately, Christopher was correct about his assessment of his future. His days became paradoxical. Part of them were dedicated to trying to live, to lengthen his life through therapy and chemicals, while the other part of his days were taken up with the legalities of dying - meetings with lawyers about finalizing his estate. He had to take care of both his life and his death because he didn't know which one he would wind up with in the near future.

One of the worst days for Christopher was the morning that he woke up and his voice sounded like a squealing child. His deep and distinctive voice was gone. His voice and his intellect had earned him generous speaking fees and landed him on many television shows. He hoped that his voice would return to its former rich resonance but he feared that it would disappear altogether. He received his answer when one morning he went to hail a taxi and nothing came out.

Christopher had lost his speaking voice but he had not lost his writing voice. He had so many fans who enjoyed his writing and the intelligence and thought behind it. But there were many other debilitating effects of the disease and side effects of the treatment. Typing on his computer and feeling the painful tingling on his fingers as they hit the keys was a omen that he may even lose his writer's voice.

After all the pain, agony, worry, and humiliation of being a cancer patient, Christopher still could not prolong his life. Who knows if he extended his life a few weeks or months but they were weeks or months of misery. He recalled how men that he had admired



had wanted to just die instead of trying to hang on to a life that had lost its quality and purpose. Christopher's wife, Carol, of course hoped that he could have prolonged his life and beaten the monster that destroyed their life together. But she very carefully maintains all his writings, notes and scribbles confident that Christopher's voice hasn't been silenced. In the end, he will have the last word like he so often did in life.



# Chapter I

## Chapter I Summary and Analysis

Christopher Hitchens woke in his hotel room in New York City almost unable to breathe. He could hardly get across the room to call for help. After he was able to contact the desk, help came quickly. Christopher noticed the boots and helmets of the EMTs and wondered why they needed such heavy equipment. The physicians at the emergency room gave Christopher some temporary relief to his heart and lungs and stabilized him. They told him he would have to see an oncologist.

Christopher had just launched a book tour and was booked that evening to be on the Jon Stewart Show and appear at a sold-out event at the 92nd Street Y on the Upper Eastside with his friend, Salman Rushdie. Christopher did not want to disappoint anyone and also wanted to sell some books so he kept both appointments without a glitch and without anyone suspecting that something was wrong.

Being in the hospital was like being in a new land with a new language, awful food and people that feel around all over you after having just been introduced to you. That was how Christopher's cancer was discovered and when he learned the dire news that it had spread to his lymph nodes and that there was a large tumor on his collarbone. They didn't at first know the source of the cancer. A biopsy was taken and results wouldn't be back until the next week.

The results indicated that the cancer had metastasized. There were tumors in his lung and lymph nodes but the cancer had originated in his esophagus. His father had died of esophageal cancer at 79 years of age but Christopher was only 61. But he wasn't surprised. He had not been taking care of himself and suspected something was wrong. He had been in denial. All kinds of thoughts went through his mind. Would he live to see his children marry? Live to write the obituaries for villains like Henry Kissinger and Joseph Ratzinger?

Christopher received the worst news on the day that his book hit the best seller list. In exchange for a few more years, one agrees to things he would have never imagined like undergoing chemotherapy, radiation therapy and even surgery. But there's an exchange for more time - loss of hair and appetite and the inability to concentrate and digest food. Everyone thinks of cancer patients as not "having" cancer but as "battling" cancer which gives the impression that it can be beaten if the victim fights hard enough. When the powerful chemicals are infused into one's body to attack the cancer cells, it is euphemistic to say that it is not a pleasant experience. The hair on Christopher's head began to come out in the shower a few weeks after the first treatment. He was shocked when his razor slid down his face without meeting one bristle. The drugs made him feel like he was neutered. Penelope Cruz could have been his nurse and he wouldn't have even noticed her.

But Christopher's blood pressure and heart returned to normalcy. He felt better and was determined to maintain the hope that he would be spared.



# Chapter II

## Chapter II Summary and Analysis

Some felt that Christopher's cancer was God's revenge for blaspheming Him. Bitter comments like this and hopes that Christopher would burn in Hell after suffering from cancer were all over the Internet. Even if his voice would eventually go, Christopher could still write, he thought, in response to the venom he was being hit with. Would the cancer get to his brain, he worried. If so, in his agony, might he be delirious and call for a priest?

Christopher spent his days fighting to live and preparing to die. Undergoing the chemotherapy and seeing his doctors was part of the fight. Seeing his lawyers for finalizing his estate was part of the preparation for his death. Letters and messages he received all mentioned prayer. Since he was an atheist, some promised not to insult him by praying for him. Others wrote that despite his atheism, they would pray for his recovery. There was even a "Everybody Pray for Hitchens Day" announcement on the Internet. Some of the very religious men he debated with about the existence of God participated in the prayer day.

Christopher couldn't help but ask what exactly they were praying for. They prayed for his recovery, his salvation, and his reunion with God. A Muslim friend prayed for him at the grave of Omar Khayyam, the great Persian poet. There was no evidence that Christopher could find no evidence that praying for a terminally ill person had any positive results. He learned that sometimes well-intentioned people felt more distressed because their prayers hadn't helped them. If he did pull through, Christopher thought, it would annoy him if his friends thought their prayers saved him.

Christopher's friend, Dr. Francis Collins who headed the Human Genome Project visited Christopher and discussed new treatments with him. It should be noted that Collins never mentioned "prayer." Also on the Web, was a site where bets could be wagered on whether Christopher would convert as he neared death. Christopher finally put aside the "prayer" issue and just hoped that if people prayed for him that it made THEM feel better. Besides, weren't those praying for him hypocrites. The God they loved had arranged a fate for him. By his friends praying to change God's plan indicated that they thought it was a flaw plan and that God should re-think the issue and reverse his decision.

In the temples and churches, people have a special day of prayer during which they thank God in unison for what he was going to do anyway. Christopher was always astounded to learn that Evangelical preachers were eager to count the checks and money before the service was even over. He was always amazed by the hypocrisy of the prayers of Protestant churches, especially those descended from Calvinism, a sect that believes that some people are predestined to heaven and some to hell no matter how perfect or imperfect their lives are.



# Chapter III

## Chapter III Summary and Analysis

In 1971, the War on Cancer was launched by the US Government. The thinking was that if "we can put a man on the moon..." surely cancer could be cured. Four centuries later, Christopher was told to fight his cancer. There are always whispers of a new treatment or breakthrough but it is a lonely battle. Cancer patients get lots of unsolicited advice - from the value of digesting peach pits to the intake of huge doses of testosterone. Among the most bizarre pieces of advice was the notion that he should have himself frozen cryonically to be brought back to life at a time in the future when a cure has been discovered.

Christopher had a measure of success in his therapy. Some of his tumors were shrunk and tweaked. However, it was too late for the latest advancements that could lead to a cure. One recent treatment, genetically engineered T cells, has great promise. The immune system could be strengthened through this process to fight the cancer. However, Christopher's system was not suitable for this type of therapy. Another treatment was showcased on 60 Minutes involving tissue engineering via stem cell therapy. Unfortunately, Christopher's cancer had spread too far for that particular treatment to have any impact. Disappointment followed each glimmer of hope for an effective treatment.

A real long shot that Christopher considered was having his entire DNA "sequenced" along with the genome of his tumor. Dr. Collins was dubious about the results. But perhaps if Christopher took part in the treatment, it would at least help others in the future. A stumbling block in this type of treatment was the religious fanaticism that existed against the use of stem cells.



# Mortality

## Summary and Analysis

Continuing his book tour and lecturing made Christopher feel alive again. Although people were sympathetic and wished Christopher the best, in some cases exchanges with book buyers were awkward at best. In one case, a woman held up the line to tell Christopher about a cousin who had liver cancer. The cancer was incurable but it went away but then came back and killed him. The man was a homosexual and his family disowned him and he died alone. She assured Christopher that she knew exactly what he was going through.

Christopher would usually tell those who asked about his progress that it was too early to say. He never wanted to go into great detail about all the humiliations and misery one undergoes during such a serious disease. But when pressed, he was never dishonest. One truth about Stage 4 cancer is that there is no Stage 5. Harsh statements from others, however, were more difficult to take. One friend reminded him that he might never see England again. Needless to say, he didn't have to be reminded. Common characteristics that many cancer victims can fall victim to are self-centeredness and solipsism.

Professor Randy Pausch who had terminal cancer made a video about his fight to live that went viral. It showed him doing push-ups and putting on a happy face. It was quite sugary and difficult to bear. People, even the terminally ill, should have more respect for the intellect of their audiences.



# Chapter V

## Chapter V Summary and Analysis

The impact of the diagnosis of malignant cancer surprisingly tends to fade in time. However, there are little reminders almost on a daily basis - like sores and ulcers on the tongue, numb feet and having to eat like a baby among many others. The most alarming moment for Christopher was when suddenly one day, his voice had transformed into a childish squeak. The threat of losing his voice altogether always loomed. One day he went to hail a cab and nothing came out. Christopher's unique voice was important to him and his most distinguishing feature. He wound up talking less but recalled how he had told students long ago to find their "voice" in writing. The biggest compliment that a reader ever gave Christopher was to tell him that he felt as though Christopher was addressing him directly.

Cancer is not the only thief of one's voice. German-Jewish Nobelist Nelly Sachs literally lost her voice at the image of Hitler. It's not only joyful sounds that emit from the throat. There is bawling, droning, whining and yelling. The human voice resonates from an unattractive piece of gristle called the vocal cord. It can be used to stir one's memory, create music, speak of love and move others. To not have it, for Christopher, was to die a little. During the year of his sickness, his friends often came to talk to him. Some were famous friends who people paid to listen to. Christopher got to listen for free. He wasn't able to eat or drink with them but he enjoyed hearing their words. He spent a good portion of each of his days in a waiting room preparing to get a big dose of protons fired into his body. Nevertheless, Christopher maintained the hope of regaining his freedom to speak.



# Chapter VI

## Chapter VI Summary and Analysis

Before his diagnosis, Christopher wrote that he wanted to be alert at his death. He wanted to be an active not a passive part in it. After he was actually engaged in the death march, he no longer used phrases like "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" (p. 59). He had been through experiences when he had felt stronger for the battle - times when love and hate were tested. Walking away from a near-death automobile crash while on a reporting assignment in a foreign country came to mind.

Nietzsche caught syphilis in an early sexual encounter, possibly his first. Throughout his life, he suffered from horrid migraine headaches and spells of blindness. Eventually his condition devolved into dementia and paralysis. While it may not been the cause of his death, the syphilis didn't make him stronger. A religious acquaintance pointed out to Christopher how Nietzsche, also an atheist, had suffered in his life knowing that Christopher had admired him. Nietzsche fell ill and was cared for thereafter by his mother after an incident with a horse. The animal was being beaten and Nietzsche rushed to save it. He suffered a terrible seizure on the spot. He had just recently discovered the works of Dostoyevsky and had been very influenced by them. There was an eerie correlation between the incident with the horse and a dream suffered by Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment."

Modern philosopher, the late Professor Sidney Hook, was also an atheist. He suffered from a serious disease at the end of his life. He went through pain and misery from the treatments and had decided he would have rather just died. On one stay at the hospital, he asked the attending physician to turn off his life support or show Hook how to do it. The doctor refused, of course, but Hook hated how his illness made his family suffer, how miserable he was and that so much money was being expended for nothing.

Neither Hook nor Nietzsche had been made stronger because of their illnesses and misery. Christopher knew how they felt - and that more important than to die with dignity was just to "have died" with a little agony and pain as possible. When he recalled the deaths of these two men, Christopher had not yet gotten to the brink as Hook had. However, he had experienced misery. He recalled looking down at his body which was riddled with a red radiation rash. He was in so much pain that he would put off swallowing as long as he could. When he finally did, the tide of agony flowed up his throat to his neck, culminating in a mule-kick to the back of his head. He doubted he would have gone through the treatment had he known the side effects. But bottom line, it apparently was giving him more time and it ultimately made him feel better. But again, the experience didn't make him stronger. He was decidedly weaker.

Christopher's weakness led to his contracting a vicious staph pneumonia in a Washington, DC, hospital that almost killed him. At times he would talk of giving up to the inevitable but his wife and friends wouldn't hear of it. The only thing he had to look



forward to were his daily injections of pain killer. How could he feel strong when his only nourishment was through a tube? He lost a third of his body mass and the atrophy of his muscles enfeebled him more.

The chief side effect of the pain killers was a numbness in the extremities. He feared that he would lose the ability to write, his fingers beginning to tingle against the keyboard. He feared it would make him lose his will to live. With each day that passed, Christopher felt he lost more of the little he had left. So much blood had been taken from him that his arm looked like a junkie's arm and it was increasingly difficult for the nurses to find a good vein. Having blood taken used to be only barely uncomfortable. After his illness, it was painful experience that he dreaded it.



# Chapter VII

## Chapter VII Summary and Analysis

Sometimes the well-meaning hospital staff made things worse by their euphemistic approach to treatment. Phrases like "This won't hurt much" or "How are we today?" or "Did you meet with Pain Management?" began to seem cruel and absurd.

To understand exactly what a subject went through when waterboarded, Christopher arranged to have the procedure done to him. He found that it was not a simulation of drowning, it was actual drowning. Christopher had undergone this torture for an article in *Vanity Fair* some time before his diagnosis. From that experience, he suffered from a post-torture stress, a fear of asphyxiation, which was triggered during his illness by the aspiration of moisture in preparation for his daily tube feeding.

Christopher laid in many American hospitals. Often religious orders operated these hospitals. The crucifix was a standard feature in every room. The crosses didn't bother him personally but it recalled to him that during the Inquisition, the Catholics forced the condemned to a compulsory view of the cross until their executions. The hypocrisy wasn't lost on Christopher - the same church that cared for the sick, including him, had tortured non-believers under the same cross. Torture was certainly part of being a cancer patient. In fact, Christopher had considered calling this book, "Obscene as Cancer."



# Chapter VII

## Chapter VII Summary and Analysis

When he fell ill, Christopher was at the peak of his career. His two greatest assets - his voice and his pen - had been impacted. For quite some time before that, he had been burning the candle at both ends and perhaps venturing into a status of less than robust health. There is an irony in that the tumor that wants to kill, also dies when the body does. So what has it won? Christopher had to work hard and remind himself not to allow himself to dabble in self-pity.

Christopher had always prided himself in his stoic materialism. He was wealthy. He went on a book tour to sell himself and to sell books. While on the road if he felt tired and his voice had grown husky, he thought he would see the doctor when the tour was over.

There were positive results from all his treatments. He had lost fourteen pounds without trying. A strange rash that he'd had for years and no doctor could cure vanished. And the chemicals provided him with the ability to sleep well and deeply. But wasn't prolonged sleep a waste of the time he had left? As he wrote about dying, the tumor was burrowing more deeply within him. He was surprised and flattered by all the tributes to his life that, to Christopher, were greatly exaggerated.

Christopher was well aware of the dire condition of his health. When he woke up on the day of his biopsy, he knew that his life would be changing forever. Relative to the prayers of others, he wondered how a benevolent god could ignore their supplications. For those who say that Christopher was being punished by god, wouldn't he have thought of something more spiteful and clever than inflicting esophageal cancer on a heavy smoker? He was right to think his life had changed forever. His nose hairs were obliterated and his nose ran all the time. He had alternating bouts of constipation and diarrhea.

Some years before Christopher came down with cancer, British journalist, John Diamond, had been diagnosed with cancer. He maintained his weekly column and his upbeat attitude as he wrote about the experience of being a cancer patient. He was honest and straightforward, admitting that he was afraid and experienced the occasional panic attack but did have moments of courage as well. Diamond wrote that although aspects of one's life was changed forever with the onset of serious illness, all things in life did not change. There were still the occasional rows with the wife. Like many other readers, Christopher was a fan and silently urged him on each week. His fans hoped for a cure but it wasn't to be. Diamond had to die.

Christopher didn't look at his experience as "fighting cancer." The cancer was fighting him. He wasn't brave. It was a condition he couldn't run away from or he would have. He compared coming down with a devastating disease to being kicked forward in time,



unexpectedly sent to the finish line before his time. Others, probably out of not facing the reality of death because it frightened them, would refer to his condition as an episode. If it was truly an "episode" Christopher was honest enough with himself to know that it was the final episode.

The memory of his cousin commenting that he might not see England again was painful and brought it all home. Phrases that he would read in everyday life - like "expiration date" - had a new and ominous meaning for him. Would he live long enough to be required to renew his driver's license? Losing weight was not losing fat. The cancer was after one's muscle, not one's fat. It was difficult to endure the "chemo-brain" - the dull, stuporous state from too many chemicals in the system. The body began as a friend, then transformed to a neutral entity and finally to a foe. "No one ever comes into his own. . . such is the cost of immortality. No person is whole. No person is free." (93)



# Afterword by Carol Blue

## Afterword by Carol Blue Summary and Analysis

Although most would probably not agree with Richard Dawkin's assessment that Christopher Hitchens was the greatest orator of our time, his wife, Carol Blue, believed that her husband was a hard act to follow both on and off stage. She recalled the long dinners they hosted with a diverse guests ranging from ambassadors to political dissidents. Christopher would often stand to give a toast that was both touching and funny and one that might last for twenty minutes.

In June of 2010, in New York City, Carol ran to meet Christopher who was launching an American book tour. She remembered seeing him in his white suit, looking glorious. The truth was, he was dying though they did not know it yet. He had been to the hospital that day thinking he had had a heart attack. But later they knew it wasn't a heart attack; they learned that it might be cancer.

The new reality that faced Christopher and Carol, one that was between life and death, lasted for nineteen months. Their goal was for Christopher to be in the five to twenty percent who would be cured of the disease he had. Just as he had, Carol missed his perfect voice. Before his illness, his distinctive voice would change from a morning voice to the one that greeted their daughter after school to the final voice of the day that said goodnight. And, like his readers, she missed his writer's voice. She missed his emails and letters and notes that he would leave for her everywhere.

The first time Christopher went public about his illness in an article in Vanity Fair, he felt rather ambivalent about it. He wanted to be honest with his readers but he also wanted to protect his family's privacy. He did not want his disease to define him. He was near death when he wrote the last chapter of this book.

When Christopher was admitted to the hospital for the last time, Carol and he hoped it was for a brief stay. He had plans to write a more expansive book and thought he'd have time. From the hospital he apologized to his editor promising to be back home soon. There were movies he still wanted to see and he wanted to see the King Tut exhibition. His abrupt ending was unexpected.

Still the voice of Christopher Hitchens through his writing remains and in many ways, he will have the last word.





# Characters

## Christopher Hitchens

Christopher Hitchens was a well-known writer, journalist, and lecturer. He was known for his biting wit and his great ability to hone in on details that were lost on others. His perception and intuition coupled with his intellect and his amazing ability to express himself both orally and in the written word made him a frequent guest on political TV shows and in lecture halls. He was a staunch atheist and maintained those convictions until his death.

Christopher was born in England and educated at Oxford. He authored more than twenty books including essay collections and other writings. On the personal side, he was married and the father of three children. He was a much lauded writer and lecturer. He was a finalist for the 2007 National Book Award for the international bestseller entitled, "God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything." Christopher's 2010 memoir was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for autobiography.

Christopher was a Brit but he spent a lot of time in America, a country he grew to love and think of as his own. He was named a visiting professor of liberal arts at New York City's New School. He also spent time as a professor of journalism at the University of California in Berkeley. Christopher was a columnist and contributing editor for many literary publications including Vanity Fair and the Atlantic.

His last book, "Mortality," was written after he received the dire diagnosis that he had Stage 4 esophageal cancer. He took every treatment available to him as painful and humiliating as they were. He wanted more time with his family and more time to write and speak. But after a nineteen month battle, he had been defeated by the monster that turned his life upside down. However, his portfolio of writing and recorded appearances were not destroyed by the cancer and live on to give him voice.

## Carol Blue

Carol Blue was Christopher's wife of twenty years when he was diagnosed with Stage 4 esophageal cancer. She remembered the day that they found out that he had some serious problems. She recalled rushing down the street in New York to meet him. He was launching the American tour for his new book. They were both very excited. When she met him, she recalled how absolutely glorious he looked in his new white suit. At that very moment, Christopher was dying but neither one knew it. Despite the fact that he had spent the morning in the hospital for some unknown condition, he kept several appointments. Later when he told Carol that the doctors had told him to see an oncologist as soon as possible, she knew that Christopher was probably seriously ill.

Recognizing that she was his wife and naturally biased, Carol considered Christopher a hard act to follow on and off stage. She thought of the long dinners they would host with



a guests ranging from ambassadors to political dissidents. But everyone was welcome. They all looked forward to Christopher making one of his lengthy toasts during which his keen mind and biting wit were at the forefront.

After receiving the dire diagnosis, their life together had changed forever. Christopher and his family suffered through nineteen months of treatments, dashed hopes, pain, and depression. They held onto the hope that he would be saved, but as time marched on that possibility steadily slipped away. Just as Christopher suffered when he lost his beautiful, deep voice, Carol did, too. She recalled how his rich tones would be a bit hoarse in the mornings. By the time their daughter came home from school it was full and resonated. At night when he said goodnight, he was soft and tender.

Christopher had wanted to write more, much more but time ran out on him. Because she loved Christopher and loved his mind and words, Carol has been careful to hold on to every scrap of paper he scribbled on. In life, Christopher often had the last word. By saving his writing for posterity he may well have the last word even in death.

## **Jon Stewart**

On the day that Christopher first fell ill, he was launching his American book tour. Even though he was quite ill and had spent the morning in the hospital, he kept his commitment to appear on the Jon Stewart Comedy Hour that night.

## **Salman Rushdie**

Even though Christopher had been told to see an oncologist in the morning, that very evening he kept an appointment at the 92nd Street Y on the Upper Eastside in New York for a joint appearance with his friend and author, Salman Rushdie.

## **Henry Kissinger**

Christopher was afraid he wouldn't live long enough to write the obituaries for elderly villains like Henry Kissinger and Joseph Ratzinger.

## **Rabbi David Wolpe**

Rabbi David Wolpe was the author of "Why Faith Matters." Christopher often debated with him in public forums on the subject of faith and religion.

## **Pastor Douglas Wilson**

Pastor Douglas Wilson was a frequent debating partner with Christopher on the subject of faith. He wrote to Christopher to tell him that his congregation was praying for him.



## Omar Khayyam

Omar Khayyam was the supreme poet of Persian progressives. An Iranian friend of Christopher's told him that he prayed for him at the grave of Khayyam.

## Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was a German philosopher and an atheist who Christopher greatly admired. He contracted syphilis at a young age and suffered all his life with migraine headaches and spells of blindness.

## Sidney Hook

Christopher was a fan of the late Professor Sidney Hook who was a philosopher and an atheist. He suffered from a serious disease at the end of his life. He was so miserable during treatment that he asked his doctor to remove the life-saving devices or tell him how to remove them.



# Objects/Places

## American Book Tour

On the day that Christopher Hitchens was scheduled to launch his American book tour for a new book that he wrote, he learned that he had a very serious condition and was advised to immediately go see an oncologist.

## New York City

Although Christopher was born and educated in England, he spent a lot of time in the United States. He grew to love America and think of it as his own. He shared an apartment in New York City with his wife and daughter.

## Jon Stewart Comedy Hour

Even though Christopher fell very ill on the morning of the launching of his book tour, he was able to keep his commitment to appear on the Jon Stewart Comedy Hour that evening.

## 92nd Street Y on the Upper Eastside

Even though Christopher had been in the hospital in the morning, he kept an appointment for a joint appearance with author and friend, Salman Rushdie, at the 92nd Street Y on the Upper Eastside.

## UC Berkeley

Christopher was a professor of journalism at the University of California at Berkeley.

## New School University, New York City

Christopher was named a visiting liberal arts professor at New School in New York City.

## England

Christopher was born in England. One of the most hurtful things that was said to him, although it probably not meant to be cruel, was when his cousin asked him if he thought he'd ever see England again.

## **Waterboarding**

At certain times during his treatment, Christopher would be reminded of the horrid sensation he had when he was waterboarded. He underwent the torture so he could understand what it was like first-hand. He told his readers in the Vanity Fair article that he wrote about waterboarding that it didn't simulate drowning but was actually drowning.



# Themes

## Terminal Illness

Everyone knows that death will come to all of us eventually. However, the blow is generally softened by the fact that we usually don't know just when that will occur. Christopher Hitchens was diagnosed with Stage 4 esophageal cancer, meaning that the disease was aggressive and had metastasized - spread from its original source, the esophagus, to lymph nodes and the collarbone. He learned that there were treatments but noticed that no one called them "cures." Christopher had a brilliant mind and spoke and wrote in what he saw as the truth. He was wise enough to know that his chances of survival were slim at best. But he vowed for the sake of his wife, children and his work that he would do everything possible to extend his time a few more months or maybe even a few more years.

Christopher tells his readers what life is like after the dire diagnosis is delivered efficiently and officially by a physician. Those fellows don't fool around. They don't toy with a patient about his condition. They deliver the bad news and tell the cancer victim what his prognosis is - what treatments are available for him. Unfortunately, since Christopher's condition had been left unchecked, it was able to take hold and would be difficult to treat.

Advanced treatment would only be successful in patients whose disease was in its early stages. If there was any regret, perhaps it was his heavy smoking and his tendency to burn the candle at both ends. Did the smoking and his poor health choices lead to the disease? Could he have avoided it if he had practiced good health? Ate right? Those thoughts had to run through his mind. But if he did venture into that kind of mind-game, it would have been an exercise in futility because there was no time machine that he could take to the past. What's past is prologue and he had not taken care of himself. But had he led a healthier existence would he have gotten the disease anyway? Those were questions that he or no one could really answer.

People prayed for Christopher even though he was an atheist. It didn't bother him. Perhaps it made the people who prayed feel better. After his diagnosis he spent his days battling for life but preparing for death at night. He had to juggle both because he didn't know what side of the card would be flipped up. He took every treatment he was told to take and listened to his doctor's every word during the day. In the evening he would meet with his lawyers to finalize his estate. It was a paradoxical, bizarre world of conflicts and confusion that Christopher found himself in. He didn't like it, of course, but there was no escape. The door that he didn't even know he'd entered, was slammed and locked behind him.

What Christopher Hitchens taught his readers was getting cancer was horrible. That it's humiliating, debilitating, painful, and depressing. But he also showed his readers by



example that one does not have to abandon his principles even in the direst of circumstances.

## Prayer, Religion and Atheism

When word was spread that Christopher Hitchens was diagnosed with Stage 4 esophageal cancer, many of his critics and ideological enemies had a strange reaction; they gloated. Why did they relish the horrible predicament in which a fellow man found himself, one in which he was suddenly facing almost certain death. Christopher was a dedicated atheist and remained so until his last days. He really believed what he wrote, what he lectured on and what he believed. He did not believe that there was an all-powerful god who created the heavens, earth and all living creatures.

Oddly, the very faithful who ridiculed and criticized Christopher and who purported to be Christians did not behave as Jesus taught and presumably would have behaved. He turned the other cheek to his enemies. He never gave up on converting people. He loved everyone, understood them and prayed for them. Those "devout" critics who wrote that God was having revenge on Christopher by inflicting esophageal cancer upon him, a disease that could cause him to lose his voice. Is that how Jesus Christ led his life and taught his followers? Jesus was not a man to seek revenge on those who didn't adhere to his beliefs. He tried to reach them through his truth but did never disparaged them.

The many messages that Christopher received from friends, acquaintances and even strangers during his ordeal usually contained some mention of prayer. Some acknowledged that since Christopher was an avowed atheist and wouldn't insult him by praying for him. Others wrote that they prayed for his recovery despite the fact that he was a non-believer. Christopher wasn't insulted or hurt by either approach. He figured that if praying helped THEM feel better, it was worth it. It occurred to Christopher that if he recovered, those who prayed for him would take it as the proof of the power of prayer. He'd have to deal with that if he was fortunate enough to have that little problem present itself.

Christopher was grateful for the treatment and care he received during his many hospital stays. However, being the bright and observant man that he was he couldn't help but notice a bit of hypocrisy. He was treated in several Catholic hospitals and received great care. In each room, a crucifix hung on the wall. As a scholar of history and religion, he was compelled to make the comparison between the care he, an admitted atheist, received and the abuse of the sinners during the Inquisition - both done under the auspices of the cross.

At one point it occurred to Christopher that if he became delirious during his treatment, he might ask for a priest. But that didn't happen. He remained lucid and true to his beliefs until his passing.



## Priorities

There probably isn't a more formidable entity than death to wake one up to his priorities. It was no different for Christopher Hitchens after he learned that he was suffering from Stage 4 esophageal cancer. Christopher was a brilliant man and knew that the prognosis was not good despite the talk of treatments and cures. He was honest enough to know that Stage 4 cancer was the end of the line. There was no Stage 5 waiting for him.

Ironically, Christopher was just launching a tour in American for a new book he had written. He looked forward to it and wanted to sell books and in the process sell himself for more speaking and TV gigs. He was proud to say what a dedicated and stoic materialist he was. He wanted to make money! Nothing wrong with that but once he realized that the disease he had could take him away, he poignant fears and regrets about leaving earth had nothing to do with money.

Would he see his children marry? Did he have an expiration date like a can of peas? Would he live to the day that his license expired and have to renew it or would he expire before that requirement? When a cousin clumsily pointed out that Christopher, a Brit, may never see England again, he was torn up inside with a hurt that never left him during his entire struggle because he knew it was probably true.

On the day that Christopher's voice sounded like a toddler's squeal, he would have gladly handed over all his money and worldly possessions to gain his rich and distinctive voice back, a voice that resonated on TV and in lecture halls. It's a good bet that he would have gladly appeared on a no-fee basis in order to speak publicly again.

Christopher left too soon and the world is bereft of his brilliant mind and compelling voice. In the end of his life, he had learned what was really important - his wife, children, family, and his talents, which, as an atheist he did not ascribe to God, but for which he was very thankful.





# Style

## Perspective

"Mortality" is an autobiographical work and was written by Christopher Hitchens in the first-person perspective. It is an account of what his life was like after contracting a serious illness. In his wisdom he knew the stakes were high and his chances were slim when he was told that the cancer had metastasized and the doctors described his condition as Stage 4 esophageal cancer. Christopher Hitchens was an accomplished writer and had written over twenty books. No one could be more qualified to write about the horrible turn of events in his life than the patient himself. He had a keen mind and a biting wit that comes through in this book even though he was in the middle of the challenge of his life and was trying to defeat a foe that was relentless, stealthy and powerful.

Christopher Hitchens was a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair*, the *Atlantic*, and *Slate*. He was a scholar of history and religion and wrote works on historic figures like Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine and George Orwell. He had several international bestsellers including "god Is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything."

Christopher participated in many debates with religious leaders about the existence of God. As an atheist, he of course, did not believe in an all-powerful God and would take the anti-god stance. Christopher was a lecturer and appeared on many political panels and TV shows. He was always in demand for his unique insight and his ability to push the envelope without causing social disruption. Those qualities shine through in this work that is at once very personal, open, and honest.

## Tone

Although Christopher Hitchens was writing about his impending death in his book, "Morality," there was an absence of bitterness and anger. He expressed his hopes that he would survive and took every treatment that was offered to him but he never showed signs of bitterness or "why me?" He mentioned that terminal cancer patients had to be careful not to fall into the traps of self-centeredness and even solipsism. He adhered as much as he could to that advice.

Christopher was a scholar and professor and had a brilliant mind. He was well educated and well-read which shows up in this work. He quotes Eliot and talks of Nietzsche and Hook. He is well-versed in literature and poetry and includes several passages including William Cory's translation of Callimachus tribute to Heraclitus. It read in part, "They told me, Heraclitus; they told me you were dead. They brought me bitter news to bear, and bitter tears to shed." (p. 53). Saul Bellow is quoted as follows: "Death is the dark backing that a mirror needs if we are able to see anything" (p. 89).



Christopher also used humor in this work which was part of his style. He mentions the horror of seeing oneself on YouTube videos. He wonders what he'll do if he lives and those who prayed for him will think they did it. He fears that he will become delirious and ask for a priest. He wonders if he'll last until he has to renew his license. He hates to see the phrase, "expiration date."

Even though "Mortality" is a tale of dying and death, it is done in a manner that is interesting and informative and even at times, humorous.

## Structure

"Mortality" by Christopher Hitchens is structured in a straightforward manner and is told in mainly a chronological order with a few references to past events. Hitchens tells the story of life, the nineteen last months of his life, after being diagnosed with Stage 4 esophageal cancer. The time span of the book are those last months in which he struggled to live and came to terms with the specter of death.

There are eight chapters with the first chapter describing the day that he knew he had a serious health problem which was confirmed to be late stage cancer a short time later after biopsies were conducted. The second chapter addresses the vitriol of some of the faithful that suggested God inflicted the disease, which would take his voice away, upon Christopher in revenge for being an atheist and for the hateful things he said about God. Despite his feelings about God and faith, he received the hopes and prayers of many for his recovery.

The third chapter deals with treatment for his disease. Some he underwent and some were not available to him because his disease had progressed too far. The fourth chapter describes some awkward moments when well-intentioned people tried to cheer him. The fifth and sixth chapters focuses on the reality of his condition. He lost his voice which was his most distinguishing characteristic. He also debunks the myth that one is stronger after going through a great challenge or tragedy. In the seventh chapter, he speaks of the irony of an atheist winding up in a Catholic hospital and the hypocrisy of a benevolent religion being under the same cross as those of the Inquisition who forced sinners to look at the cross until they were executed. The last chapter is a collection of miscellaneous thoughts and notes from his last days.

The Afterword, written by his wife, Carol Blue, describes how difficult the last months of his life were not only for Christopher but for her and their children.



## Quotes

"The new land is quite welcoming in its way. Everybody smiles encouragingly and there appears to be absolutely no racism. A generally egalitarian spirit prevails, and those who run the place have obviously got where they are on merit and hard work" (Chapter 1, p. 3).

"My father had died, and very swiftly, too, of cancer of the esophagus. He was seventy-nine. I am sixty-one. In whatever kind of a 'race' life may be, I have very abruptly become a finalist" (Chapter I, p. 4).

"To exist, a cancer needs a living organism, but it cannot ever become a living organism. Its whole malice - there I go again - lies in the fact that the 'best' it can do is to die with its host" (Chapter II, p. 11).

"I sympathize afresh with the mighty Voltaire, who, when badgered on his deathbed and urged to renounce the devil, murmured that this was no time to be making enemies" (Chapter II, p. 17).

"'Until you have done something for humanity,' wrote the great American educator Horace Man, 'you should be ashamed to die'" (Chapter III, p. 33).

"Nobody wants to be told about the countless minor horrors and humiliations that become facts of 'life' when your body turns from being a friend to being a foe" (Chapter IV, p. 40).

"I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker, and I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, and in short, I was afraid" (Chapter V, p. 45).

"So we are left with something quite unusual in the annals of unsentimental approaches to extinction: not the wish to die with dignity but the desire to have died" (Chapter VI, p. 66).

"I became a torture victim because I wanted the readers of Vanity Fair to have an idea of what was involved in the sordid and obscure controversy about 'waterboarding'" (chapter VII, p. 79).

"'Remember, you too are mortal,' hit me at the top of my form and just as things were beginning to plateau. My two assets my pen and my voice—and it had to be the esophagus" (Chapter VIII, p. 85).

"The alien was burrowing into me even as I wrote the jaunty words about my own prematurely announced death." (Chapter VIII, p. 86).

"Now so many tributes that it also seems that rumors of my LIFE have also been greatly exaggerated" (Chapter VIII, p. 87).

## Topics for Discussion

Why did critics of Christopher Hitchens suggest that God was punishing him by taking his voice from him?

What did Christopher fear the most about his condition? How did this fear manifest?

How were people sometimes cruel when speaking to Christopher about his condition? Was their cruelty intentional?

How did Christopher feel about people praying for him?

How did Christopher relate to other historic figures that he admired? What did he have in common with them? How did death come to them?

Describe some of the treatments that Christopher had to endure. What impact did they have on him both physically and psychologically?

How did Christopher feel about being in Catholic hospitals? What hypocrisy did he find in the religion that was devout in its care for the sick?