# By the Waters of Babylon

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

Benét's father was a US military officer with a strong interest in literature. Benét spent his childhood moving between army bases, and his older brother and sister were also writers. He published his first poetry collection as a 17-year-old freshman at Yale University. During WWI, Benét left college for a year of civilian military service, but eventually returned to Yale to earn both a BA and an MA in English. In 1920, he traveled to Paris, where he met his future wife, Rosemary Carr. The couple returned to Paris in 1925. A prolific writer across many genres, Benét is best known for his poetry, novels, and short stories, but he also wrote screenplays, radio broadcasts, and even an opera libretto. Benét's writing often focuses on historical and folkloric themes, and his 1937 short story "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and his 1928 epic poem "John Brown's Body" are among his best known works. Benét died in New York after a heart attack at the age of 44.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Benét did not see military combat during WWI—he spent his year of civilian service working as a cipher-clerk—but he would have been keenly aware of the devastating effects of the war, which left over 20 million people wounded and more than 17 million dead. The war's high casualty rates were, in part, a result of new military technology like machine guns and poisonous "mustard" gas. Benét's year in Paris coincided with the heyday of young expatriate American writers like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who came to be known as the "Lost Generation." The story was first published during the Spanish Civil War, just months after the Bombing of Guernica on April 26, 1937. The bombing, which caused international humanitarian outcry, intentionally targeted civilians in a busy marketplace and was carried out by German and Italian allies of the fascist Spanish National government.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The title "By the Waters of Babylon" is an allusion to Psalm 137 in the King James Bible. The first verse of the Psalm reads, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion." The Psalm recalls the Babylonian Captivity, a period between 598 and 538 BCE, when the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II conquered Jerusalem and transported enslaved Israelites to the city of Babylon. Like the Israelites, John's tribe was forced out of a city (newyork) destroyed by a terrible war.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** By the Waters of Babylon
- **When Written:** 1937
- **Where Written:** United States of America
- **When Published:** The story appeared in the July 31, 1937 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* as "The Place of the Gods," and was first published under the title "By the Waters of Babylon" in *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction* in 1943.
- **Literary Period:** Modernist Literature/ Lost Generation
- **Genre:** Short story, Speculative fiction, Post-apocalyptic fiction
- **Setting:** Upstate New York and New York City (referred to as the "Place of the Gods" or "newyork") in a post-apocalyptic, post-technological world.
- **Climax:** John finds the remains of the "dead god" and realizes that the gods were, in fact, an earlier, technologically advanced human society.
- **Point of View:** First person limited

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Benét's Fears for the Future.** In the years leading up to WWII, Benét grew increasingly alarmed by the rise of fascism in Europe. His fears for the future of democratic society inspired him to write the poetry collection *Burning City*. Published in 1936, the poems offer a nightmarish vision of a world where technology has turned against humans and society is embroiled in a political and moral crisis.

## PLOT SUMMARY

"By the Waters of Babylon" is set in a post-apocalyptic, post-technological world where people hunt for their food with bows and arrows and their priests scavenge the "Dead Places" for **metal**. John, the protagonist and first-person narrator, belongs to the tribe of the Hill People and is the son of a priest. The Hill People consider themselves culturally superior to the rival tribe of the Forest People, and live by dogmatic laws that, among other things, forbid them from traveling east, crossing the Ou-dis-son river, visiting the Place of the Gods (which was destroyed in "The Great Burning"), and saying the true name of the Place of the Gods.

John's father and the other priests teach John reading, writing, healing, and "magic," and John is fascinated by the stories about the gods. The story follows John on his initiation quest, a journey he undertakes in order to be recognized by his tribe as a man and a priest. John chooses the path of his journey based on visions and his reading of signs in the natural world. John's

desire for new knowledge leads him to break many of the laws of his tribe. He travels to the Place of the Gods, even though he is afraid that he will die there. Instead, he discovers that many of the stories about the Place of the Gods are inaccurate. The island is not filled with magical mists, the ground is not burning with eternal flames, nor is it populated by spirits and demons. Instead, John finds a vast Dead Place, a city of ruined **towers**. As he explores the city and learns more and more, John's sense of fear diminishes.

John explores an abandoned apartment full of items that he believes are "magic" but which are recognizable to the reader as defunct modern appliances—a sink, a stove, and electric lights. John spends the night there and has a vision of the city as it was in the time of the gods. The city was once full of gods, lights, and "magic," and John understands that the gods possessed incredible knowledge and power that they did not always use well. John sees that the city was destroyed by poisoned mist and "fire falling out of the sky" in a terrible war between gods, and understands that this war created the other Dead Places. The next morning John searches the apartment, hoping to find an explanation for the destruction of the city, and he finds the body of the dead god—who he soon realizes is not a god, but a man. John realizes that the gods were in fact humans from an earlier society, and he returns home, fearless and determined to share his new knowledge with his tribe.

Upon John's return, his father recognizes him as a priest and a man. John tells his father that the gods were not gods, and asks him to kill him as punishment for breaking the laws of the tribe. John's father refuses, explaining that the laws change from generation to generation, but advises John not to share his discovery with the people of the tribe, cautioning that it can be dangerous for a society to acquire knowledge too quickly, and theorizing that the society of the "gods" was destroyed because they did so. John agrees, but he and the other priests begin visiting the Dead Places to gather books (and thereby knowledge) as well as metal. In the story's closing lines, John vows that when he becomes the head priest of the tribe, he will lead his people to the Place of the Gods—which he now refers to as "newyork"—and begin to rebuild the city.

## CHARACTERS

**John** – John is the narrator, protagonist, and archetypal, "everyman" hero of the story. A young man about to come of age within his tribe (known as the Hill People), John is the son of a priest and is preparing to become a priest himself. John is fascinated by the myths of the Time of the Gods, and throughout the story, he is motivated by his desire to acquire knew knowledge about the gods and the history of human civilization. As an aspiring priest, John attempts to face the challenges he encounters without fear, and he often remarks on how his fears diminish as he acquires more and more knowledge.

**John's father** – John's father, also named John, is the head priest of the Hill People. Within the archetype of the "hero's journey," John's father could be considered the guardian figure, offering John guidance at the beginning and end of his quest. John's father encourages John to follow his visions and his instincts, but he is more cautious than his son, believing that certain kinds of knowledge can be dangerous.

**The Dead God** – John finds the well-preserved body of the "dead god" seated at a window in one of the **towers** in the Land of the Gods. John soon realizes that the dead god is not a god at all, but a dead man, and that the "gods" were in fact humans. John tells us that the dead god's face looks both wise and sad, and theorizes that though he lost his life, he chose to stay in the city so as not to lose his spirit too.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE

Benét builds the central narrative of "By the Waters of Babylon" around John's coming-of-age and his quest for new knowledge, which takes him east to The Place of the Gods, a mysterious, long-abandoned city that members of his tribe are forbidden from visiting.

Benét presents the desire for knowledge as a key aspect of human nature and the driving force behind the development of human society. Further, Benét presents knowledge as something that feeds on itself, and drives those who seek it ever onward. John's pursuit of knowledge leads him to learn about the Dead Places, travel east to the Ou-dis-san river, enter the Place of the Gods, and discover the dead god in an abandoned apartment building. As John reaches new "levels" of knowledge with each step of his journey, he learns enough to recognize that there is even more to know, which pushes him ever further in his quest.

Benét also shows how knowledge can diminish fear and the power of superstition. John tells us that when he first went with his father (who is a priest) to search for **metal** in the Dead Places, he was afraid. Yet later, when John knows and understands the Dead Places, he no longer fears them. On his journey, John boasts of his certainty and lack of fear, but when he reaches the Place of the Gods, he feels afraid. The knowledge that he has already acquired no longer diminishes his fear because he is now facing a place he knows almost nothing about.

However, Benét's story also makes clear that knowledge is no simple thing. Knowledge offers progress but also, because of the progress it offers, it can lead to both personal and societal dangers. On the personal level, John's father encourages him to heed his visions and make the journey to the Place of the Gods, but also warns John that the dream could "eat him up." The warning implies that the pursuit of knowledge could become an obsession that overwhelms John, or that the knowledge itself could be something that John is unprepared for or unable to face. On the societal level, the story reveals that the Place of the Gods is actually New York, indicating that the society of the "gods" is our own modern society. John realizes that, ultimately, this modern society was destroyed by its own vast knowledge and power.

When John returns from his quest and wants to tell all of his tribe that the "gods" in newyork were in fact humans, his father convinces him not to, telling him, "If you eat too much truth at once, you may die of the truth." John's father theorizes that newyork was destroyed because the gods "ate knowledge too fast"—perhaps a reference to the famous Biblical story of Adam and Eve, who were punished for seeking forbidden knowledge and literally "eating" it in the form of a fruit. Here, then, John's father expands on his earlier warning that "knowledge" could consume John, and argues that knowledge gained too quickly can "eat up" an entire society. Though John believes that he has returned safely to his tribe (that is, without being consumed) and plans to use his knowledge to "rebuild" human civilization, the story leaves it unclear if he, or his society, will have the wisdom to use their growing knowledge in ways that avoid the mistakes of their ancestors. Benét presents knowledge as a double-edged sword, and by refusing to resolve tension between its simultaneous benefits and dangers, his story warns readers, and society, to use their knowledge well.

## THE COMING OF AGE QUEST

The story's narrative centers on the journey that John takes to the Place of the Gods as part of his initiation into manhood and the tribe's priesthood. John's journey is a good example of the "hero's quest," an archetypal story arc that is common in both ancient myths and modern stories. The "coming-of-age" journey of the hero's quest often contains certain archetypal elements, and John's journey has many of these. These elements include time spent in the ordinary, pre-quest world, a call to adventure, a meeting with a mentor, crossing the threshold from ordinary life to the quest, a series of challenges leading to an ultimate ordeal, a reward, and the return home with that reward.

John introduces the readers to his ordinary world in the first paragraphs of the story, explaining his identity as the son of a priest and introducing us to the traditions and laws of his tribe. John's call to adventure appears as a series of signs which he and the other priests interpret. In John's quest, his father plays the role of "mentor," guiding him through the ritual purification that priests undergo before their initiation. When John chooses to travel east, he breaks the laws of his tribe and crosses the threshold from ordinary life and truly begins his quest. During the quest he faces many trials – avoiding the Forest People, successfully hunting food alone, and crossing the river and entering the place of the gods, where he believes he will die. In crossing the river, John demonstrates that he is willing to risk his life in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the city he must escape from feral dogs, and is forced to spend the night in a Dead Place for the first time. There, he has a vision of "newyork" in the time of the "gods" and finds the body of the dead god, who he realizes is a human. By undergoing the ordeal, John gains his reward—knowledge that the Place of the Gods is, in fact, a ruined human civilization, and the understanding that humans are capable of acquiring vast knowledge and power. John's journey has transformed him, made him a man, both in the sense that he has cast off his former innocence/ignorance and in the sense that when he returns to his tribe he is seen as ready to enter the priesthood, and is likely to ascend to head priest.

The concept of coming-of-age then extends beyond John to the way that Benét represents the development of human society as a whole. The story presents three societies and cultures at different stages of technological development: the Forest People, who John describes as "ignorant" and less-advanced than his own Hill People; John's tribe, the Hill People, who keep written records of the past and seem to have some rudimentary technology; and the glorious past society of the "gods," who John eventually learns were humans of a technologically-advanced society. Put another way, like John with his thirst for knowledge, the Hill People exist in a middle place; they are more aware of and interested in science and history and technology than the "innocent" Forest People, but the ancient "wise" humans were so advanced that to the Hill People they seem like gods. Yet also like John, the Hill People seem ready to leave behind their superstitions and to seek the sort of advanced civilization of "newyork."

Upon his return to the village, John reveals his new knowledge to his father and his hope that this knowledge will allow his people to rebuild the civilization that was lost. Though his father warns him against telling the people of the tribe the whole truth too quickly, he does not disapprove of John's choice to break the laws of the tribe, telling him that the laws change over time. In saying so, John's father implies that John has ushered in a new era in which previously transgressive acts are acceptable and even necessary. John's father's reaction shows that John's "hero's journey" and the knowledge he acquires from it has already begun to fundamentally change the way the Hill People live. And yet, his father's warning that sharing too much truth at once can be dangerous, along with the fact that the "advanced" civilization of the "gods" managed

to destroy itself, also suggests that coming-of-age from innocence to knowledge, whether for an individual or a society, is not a simple good. Rather, it is an emergence from a primitive yet relatively safe existence into a world filled with new possibilities for both progress and terrible destruction.

## SUPERSTITION, MAGIC, AND TECHNOLOGY

Benét portrays the Hill People as superstitious by showing John's firm belief in the power of visions and his willingness to follow unexplained traditions, laws and taboos. John's tribe has many traditions and taboos, which John often also calls "laws." Though John implies that there are valid reasons and histories behind these laws, he does not explain them, and it is not clear if he himself knows them. In the opening paragraph of "By the Waters of Babylon," John tells us, "It is forbidden to travel east. It is forbidden to cross the river. It is forbidden to go to the Place of the Gods. All these things are forbidden." John's quest leads him to break all three of these rules, in spite of the fact that he believes in the laws of the tribe. Through John's transgression – which both leads him to revelations about the past and for which his father refuses to punish him after he returns home, on the grounds that laws can change over time – the story suggests that, in order to acquire new knowledge that pushes a society forward, an individual must often break with that society's traditional practices and values.

Yet the story also involves a broader examination of superstitions and magic and connects that to a critique of our own technological society. John uses the word "magic" to describe objects and practices that we might think of as scientific or technological, as well as to describe rituals and beliefs that would be more commonly thought of as magical practices. This mixture of "magic" and technology is further woven into the role of the priests, who collect **metal** from the Dead Places as part of their sacred duties. Further, John tells us that the hunters believe that the priests "do all things by chants and spells," but implies that the priests use other methods to do their work as well. The priests' role is not solely mystical; they are the keepers of technological/scientific and historical knowledge as well.

By using "magic" to describe both mystical and scientific objects, Benét does two things: First, and most obviously, he emphasizes the lack of sophistication of the Hill People as compared to the modern technological society of the "gods." Yet, at the same time, this conflation of magic and technology also subtly questions just how sophisticated that modern society is. Describing the apartment of the dead god, he says, "In the washing-place, a thing said 'Hot' but it was not hot to the touch—another thing said 'Cold' but it was not cold. This must have been a strong magic but the magic was gone." From this description, a modern reader immediately understands that John is looking at a sink where the water has been disconnected. John's misunderstanding of what the hot and cold faucets are or are supposed to do is funny, and yet how many people actually know how hot and cold faucets actually, scientifically function to bring water? John explains things that he does not understand as "magic," but modern people often feel comfortable talking about "technology" even when they don't understand its underlying workings (or dangers). In this way, Benét subtly emphasizes how modern society venerates "technology" in much the same way that "primitive" cultures venerated magic. Further, the story suggests that the technology that we think we control could prove more powerful than we can imagine. Just as magic was conceived as a force that people are not always able to control, the "gods" inadvertently used the technology they had invented to destroy themselves.

## RIVALRY, WAR, AND DESTRUCTION

The rivalry depicted in the story between the Hill People and the Forest People is based on differences that may, at first glance, strike readers as insignificant. Early in the essay, John says, "our women spin wool on the wheel, our priests wear a white robe. We do not eat grubs from the tree, we have not forgotten the old writings." The apparent triviality of these differences has two important, and related, impacts. First, it emphasizes how "tribes"—different groups of people—will always find differences on which to build rivalries, regardless of the trivialities of those differences. Secondly, it becomes clear that the tribes' reasons for rivalry are not very different from reasons – technological differences, religious differences, cultural differences, and educational differences – used to fuel rivalry among different groups *today*. The rivalry between the Hill People and the Forest People in the post-technological world of the story, then, can be seen as both a criticism of the essentially silly and superficial reasons for rivalry between groups of people and, at the same time, a recognition that rivalry between different groups are fundamental and inescapable aspects of human society.

Benét further raises the stakes around rivalry by making it clear that rivalries lead to deadly conflict and war. Throughout the story, John expects that if the Forest People stumble across him during his quest, they will try to kill him. John sees such conflict as natural, matter-of-factly stating that he has seen men die in the skirmishes between the Forest People and the Hill People.

Furthermore, as John continues his quest to the Place of the Gods, he discovers that the "gods" were in fact humans who destroyed themselves through war. As John says: "When gods war with gods, they use weapons we do not know. It was fire falling out of the sky and a mist that poisoned." The "fire falling out of the sky" seems to describe aerial bombings of civilians,

and poisoned mist is likely a reference to mustard gas, a deadly chemical weapon first developed during World War I (1914-1918): the war that erupted in part as nationalist feelings overwhelmed the larger international empires that had held sway in Europe for centuries before. World War I ended just twenty years before "By the Waters of Babylon" was written, and the war itself might be described as an explosion of tribal rivalries. It is worth noting, too, that the story was written just a few years before the outbreak of World War II (1939-1945), which was driven in part by the Nazis' belief in their own racial/tribal superiority. Benét had joined the US military as a civil servant during World War I, and in the 1930s he was deeply worried by rise of fascist political parties in Germany, Italy, and Spain.

Benét feared the impact of the increasingly deadly weapons that had been developed during WWI, and "By the Waters of Babylon" was published a few months after Spain's fascist National faction targeted civilians in the 1939 Bombing of Guernica, sparking international outrage and humanitarian concern. The knowledge that John brings home from his quest carries hope for the future – hope of recapturing a lost technological civilization – but the story is clear that such technology won't necessarily cure people of their tendencies toward rivalry and war, and will only make the impact of any future wars all the more terrible.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### METAL

The **metal** that the priests of John's tribe gather from the Dead Places symbolizes both the tribe's developing understanding of technology and its reliance on superstitions. John never states outright why the tribe gathers metal, but we can assume that they use it to make weapons and tools. Even though the tribe has the skills and knowledge to use the metal that they gather, they also believe that the metal can only be collected by priests, and that touching the metal before it is ritually purified will kill anyone who is not a priest. The tribe's superstition that metal is dangerous underlines Benét's warning about the dangers of acquiring new knowledge; and by associating the metal with both knowledge and superstition, Benét indicates to readers that the boundary between knowledge and superstition may not be as distinct as we often believe.

### TOWERS

**Towers**, which readers will recognize as skyscrapers, are the defining feature of the Place of the Gods, making it remarkably different from any landscape that John has ever seen before. As architectural marvels, the towers represent the power, "magic," and technological prowess of the "gods"—and the pinnacle of human achievements. The ruined towers, then, symbolize the downfall of a past society—a downfall brought about because that society gained too much knowledge too quickly. The destruction of the towers of "newyork" also recalls the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel from the book of Genesis: when people attempted to build a tower tall enough to reach Heaven, they over-stepped the natural boundaries set for them by God. As punishment, God dispersed them across the earth and gave them different languages so that they could no longer work together to build the tower. In much the same way, the few survivors of the Great Burning have dispersed and formed rival tribes (the Hill People and the Forest People) who have lost the knowledge and technological skills that their ancestors once had.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Devil and Daniel Webster and Other Writings* published in 1999.

### By the Waters of Babylon Quotes

"The north and the west and the south are good hunting ground, but it is forbidden to go east. It is forbidden to go to any of the Dead Places except to search for metal [...] These are the rules and the laws; they are well made. It is forbidden to cross the great river and look upon the place that was the Place of the Gods—this is most strictly forbidden. We do not even say its name though we know its name.

**Related Characters:** John (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 203

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage opens the story, situating the reader in the world of the Hill People, which is governed by strict social taboos, while also disorienting us with unfamiliar terms like Dead Places and the Place of the Gods. John does not explain the laws, leading readers to doubt the laws' validity and to question whether John himself knows the reasoning behind the laws or the true name of The Place of the Gods.

Both John's willingness to accept these seemingly arbitrary laws and his insistence that they are "well made" make him appear superstitious. The Hill People's laws seem inflexible, but John does mention one loophole to the ban on visiting Dead Places—it is acceptable to go to these places when searching for metal. The exception implies that metal is important to the tribe—presumably for weaponry and tools—and that metal is scarce, perhaps only found in the Dead Places. We soon learn that, as the son of a priest, John helps his tribe search for metal, and that he is curious about technology and technical knowledge. In this passage, John does not seem like a person interested in the pursuit of knowledge, much less someone who disobeys (or even questions) his society's dogmatic rules—and yet, over the course of the story, he goes on to break every single one of the laws he so piously introduces in the opening paragraph.

> I was taught how to read in the old books and how to make the old writings—it was like a fire in my heart. Most of all, I liked to hear of the Old Days and the stories of the gods. I asked myself many questions that I could not answer, but it was good to ask them. At night, I would lie awake and listen to the wind—it seemed to me that it was the voice of the gods as they flew through the air.

**Related Characters:** John (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 203-204

**Explanation and Analysis**

After the priests discover that John (the son of a priest) can handle metal safely, they take this as a sign that he is meant to become a priest as well and begin to educate him. The priests teach John "magical" and medical skills, and he learns to read and write "the old way." John's fascination with the stories of the gods and his belief that the gods speak to him foreshadow his future journey to the Place of the Gods and his vision of the Great Burning. Furthermore, John is not just fascinated by the gods, but by learning itself. John's desire for new knowledge propels him through the story, motivating him on each step of his coming-of-age quest—and even after its resolution. Throughout the story, John describes his desire for knowledge as a "fire," and this description recalls the traditional association between fire and knowledge. According to Greek mythology, the titan Prometheus created humans, and then stole fire from the gods and gave the knowledge of how to make fire to humans. He was punished harshly by the gods—and like the myth of Prometheus, Benét's story warns that human attainment of god-like knowledge usually results in disaster.

> We are not ignorant like the Forest People—our women spin wool on the wheel, our priests wear a white robe. We do not eat grubs from the tree, we have not forgotten the old writings, though they are hard to understand. Nevertheless, my knowledge and my lack of knowledge burned in me—I wished to know more.

**Related Characters:** John (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 204

**Explanation and Analysis**

As he learns the secrets of the priests and studies the "old writings," John begins to differentiate his own tribe (the Hill People) from the rival Forest People in terms of cultural, religious, and technological differences. Just as the reader likely sees John and his tribe as superstitious and backwards, John sees the Forest People as "ignorant" and therefore inferior to the Hill People. John's measures of ignorance—eating habits and religious garments—seem arbitrary, however, and the lack of logic behind John's judgements emphasizes that the value of any practice is culturally relative. What's more, we can see from our own world that cultural, religious, and technological differences are often sources of conflict between groups of people. By placing such a familiar conflict in an unfamiliar world, Benét suggests that this kind of conflict—like religion and technology themselves—is an intrinsic part of human society.

> "This is a very strong dream," he said. "It may eat you up. [...] It is forbidden to travel east. It is forbidden to cross the river. It is forbidden to go to the Place of the Gods. [...] If your dreams do not eat you up, you may be a great priest. If they eat you, you are still my son. Now go on your journey."

**Related Characters:** John's father (speaker), John

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 204-205

**Explanation and Analysis**

As part of John's initiation as a priest and a man of his tribe, he goes through a ritual led by his father, the head priest. John's father asks him to look into the smoke of a fire and describe what he sees. His vision, the story implies, will guide the journey he will make as an initiate. In the smoke, John sees the Place of the Gods. His father responds by warning that John's dream is potentially dangerous and all-consuming, and he reminds John of the tribe's three taboos banning him from traveling east towards the Place of the Gods; yet he also subtly advises John to go on his journey. Since initiates' journeys are guided by their visions and their own interpretation of "signs,' the directive "go on your journey" seems to mean "go to the Place of the Gods, even though it is forbidden to do so." And this is how John interprets his vision and his father's words. Within the archetypal hero's quest, this ceremony can be seen as the threshold between ordinary life and the quest; in this context, John's father plays the archetypal role of mentor.

❝ If I went to the Place of the Gods, I would surely die, but, if I did not go, I could never be at peace with my spirit again. It is better to lose one's life than one's spirit, if one is a priest and the son of a priest.

**Related Characters:** John (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 206

**Explanation and Analysis**

After traveling east for eight days, John reaches the bank of the Ou-dis-san river. He believes that if he crosses it and enters the Place of the Gods, he will die, and he considers turning around. Yet in spite of his overwhelming sense of fear and the prospect of certain death, John decides that he will continue on his quest. John believes that the spirit and body can be separated from one another, and he makes a distinction between spiritual life and the life of the body. Ultimately, he believes, one's spirit is more important that one's physical body, and John is willing to sacrifice his life in order to pursue spiritual knowledge and remain true to himself. Furthermore, John says, it is a priest's duty to do so. Throughout the story, John describes fearlessness as one of the qualities of a true priest, and here he attempts to face death without fear. Though John has not yet discovered the Dead God, he later applies similar language to describe the Dead God, saying he has lost his life but not his spirit.

❝ There was a cooking-place but no wood, and though there was a machine to cook food, there was no place to put fire in it. Nor were there candles or lamps—there were things that looked like lamps but they had neither oil nor wick. All these things were magic, but I touched them and lived—the magic had gone out of them.

**Related Characters:** John (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 210

**Explanation and Analysis**

Fleeing from the wild dogs who roam the Place of the Gods, John runs into one of the towers and bars the door. Exploring the building, he finds what readers easily recognize as one of many abandoned apartments, virtually untouched since the Time of the Gods. Here, John describes what we come to realize are kitchen appliances and electric lamps in a building where the gas and electricity have been disconnected. As John roams the apartment, we can guess what John will soon know—the Time of the Gods was in fact a past human society, one much like the society the reader lives in. John is living in a post-technological future where electric appliances are unheard of. John describes technology as "magic," and this passage reveals that he sees magic (and perhaps technology, too) as potentially dangerous—something that might kill him.

❝ When gods war with gods, they use weapons we do not know. It was fire falling out of the sky and a mist that poisoned. It was the time of the Great Burning and the Destruction. […] Then the towers began to fall. A few escaped—yes, a few. The legends tell it. But, even after the city had become a Dead Place, for many years the poison was still in the ground. […] It was darkness over the city and I wept.

**Related Characters:** John (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 212

**Explanation and Analysis**

John spends the night in the apartment. He then wakes in the night to find his spirit floating out of his body, and has a vision of the city in the Time of the Gods. This soon becomes a vision of the Great Burning, a terrible war between the gods. "By the Waters of Babylon" was written shortly after WWI, a war which saw the first use of aerial bombings and poison "mustard" gas, and during the Spanish Civil War, which saw strategic aerial bombings of civilians. Benét's first readers would have easily recognized the weapons John describes as the dangerous new military technology that that resulted in enormous casualties during WWI. Though the story was written before the invention of nuclear weapons, John's description of poison that remains in the ground for many years and renders the city a Dead Place seems to prophesize the long-lasting consequences of nuclear radiation. Benét warns the reader that the advanced scientific knowledge and technology of modern society may ultimately destroy it. John's vision shows readers that knowledge may be power, but power is dangerous.

After witnessing the city's destruction, John says, "I wept," an allusion to the first line of the Biblical Psalm 137, which reads, "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion." The psalm recounts the grief of the ancient Hebrews after they were taken prisoner by the king of Babylon and forced out of the holy city of Jerusalem. Like the Hebrews, the "gods" were forced from their city by a terrible war.

❝ He had sat at his window, watching his city die—then he himself had died. But it is better to lose one's life than one's spirit—and you could see from the face that his spirit had not been lost. I knew that, if I touched him, he would fall into dust—and yet, there was something unconquered in the face. That is all of my story, for then I knew he was a man—I knew then that they had been men, neither gods nor demons.

**Related Characters:** John (speaker), The Dead God

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 213

**Explanation and Analysis**

The morning after his vision, John searches the apartment for clues that might further explain the Great Burning, and he enters a room he did not explore the night before. There, he finds the body of the Dead God seated in a chair by the window. John describes the Dead God's face using language that he previously used while recounting his own decision to cross the Ou-dis-san river and enter the Place of the Gods. John continued his journey based on the rationale that "it is better to lose one's life than one's spirit," and he repeats that phrase here. Throughout the story, John has attempted to become truly fearless, but never quite succeeded; always the fear returns, and his fearlessness becomes an act of bravado. Yet the Dead God appears to have faced death and the destruction of his city without fear; his peaceful face is the embodiment of John's notion of fitting "priestly" behavior. In finding the Dead God, then John makes the greatest and final discovery of his quest: the "gods" were humans. Within the archetype of the hero's quest, this knowledge can be described as John's "reward," with which he will return home. Like any "hero," John's quest and the knowledge he acquires during the quest transforms him; on the journey home, he is amazed to find that he fears nothing.

❝ He said, "Truth is a hard deer to hunt. If you eat too much truth at once, you may die of the truth. It was not idly that our father forbade the Dead Places." He was right—it is better the truth should come little by little. I have learned that, being a priest. Perhaps, in the old days, they ate knowledge too fast.

**Related Characters:** John, John's father (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 213

**Explanation and Analysis**

Returning home, John tells his father that he has visited the Place of the Gods and discovered that the "gods" were humans. John wants to share this knowledge with rest of the tribe, but his father uses this argument to persuade him not to. John's father uses the metaphor of a man chasing truth like a hunter chases deer to warn John against the dangers of gaining too much knowledge too quickly. "Eating" truth can nourish people, but consuming too much at once can poison them. John, narrating the story some time after this conversation with his father, theorizes that the "gods"—or rather, the humans who lived in the "old days"—consumed too much truth at once. This glut of knowledge, John implies, may have caused the terrible

destruction of the Great Burning; the technological and scientific knowledge that allowed humans to build the towers, subways, airplanes, and kitchen appliances also led to the invention of devastating weapons. For the reader, who already lives in a world where kitchen appliances and weapons of mass destruction exist, Benét warns that we should use the knowledge we possess cautiously and pursue new knowledge with care.

> And, when I am chief priest we shall go beyond the great river. We shall go to the Place of the Gods—the place newyork—not one man but a company. We shall look for the images of the gods and find the god ASHING and the others—the gods Licoln and Biltmore and Moses. But they were men who built the city, not gods or demons. They were men. I remember the dead man's face. They were men who were here before us. We must build again.

**Related Characters:** John (speaker), The Dead God

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 213

**Explanation and Analysis**

In spite of the fact that John agrees not to tell the Hill People about his journey to the Place of the Gods and his claim to recognize the dangers of "eating" knowledge too quickly, John plans to take the tribe to the Place of the Gods after his father's death. Over the course of the story, John gradually breaks the tribes' many taboos; he travels East, he crosses the river, he looks upon the Place of the Gods, and then enters it. Here, in the story's final paragraph, he breaks the last taboo that was named in the story's first paragraph: he speaks the name of the Place of the Gods. In doing so, he confirms for readers that the Place of the Gods is indeed New York City, or "newyork." More importantly, John leaves the old laws of the tribe and his formerly obedient and "superstitious" self behind. We can infer that the tribe itself is changing too; John's quest has ushered in a new era, and the old laws no longer apply.

Notably, John's realization that the "gods" who built "newyork" were in fact humans has not ended his belief in gods; rather, he is scouring books to find new gods, suggesting that it is human nature to look to a deity or deities to explain the events of our world. We can assume that ASHING is George Washington and "Licoln" is Abraham Lincoln, and we know that neither of these men were gods, nor were Biltmore (a hotel) or Moses (a Biblical prophet who led the Hebrews out of exile in Egypt). John's misreading of the texts he has gathered from the Dead Places suggests he does not know as much as he thinks he does, and he may in fact go on to repeat the mistakes of the past.

# SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

In the story's opening paragraph, the protagonist and first-person narrator, John, recounts the laws of his tribe. It has been forbidden since the beginning of time, he says, to travel east, to cross the great river, or to visit or look at the Place of the Gods, which was destroyed in the Great Burning and is now populated by spirits and demons. Only priests and the sons of priests are allowed to visit the Dead Places, and even then, they only go to collect **metal**. After the metal is removed from the dead places, the priests and the metal must be ritually purified.

*John lists tribal taboos but he does not explain why it is forbidden to visit certain places, why only the priests can collect metal, or what the Dead Places, the Great Burning, or the Place of the Gods are. As a result, readers are immediately intended to see these laws as superstitious, and are likely to view John and his society as culturally "primitive" and perhaps pre-modern.*

John tells us about the first time his father, a priest (and also named John), took him to collect **metal** from the Dead Places. John tells us that they went into an abandoned house where there were bones in a corner, and that though he felt afraid, John tried to hide his fear and act the way the son of a priest is supposed to act. John discovered that he could handle the metal without being harmed, and his father took this as a sign that John would become a priest one day.

*Though the tribe's beliefs about metal are superstitious, collecting the metal represents John's first steps towards adulthood and priesthood. Whether or not the metal poses a real danger to most people, John's choice to face his fear foreshadows his future choices to do things that frighten him in order to gain practical and spiritual knowledge.*

John continued to visit the Dead Places and learned more about them, and eventually, he was no longer afraid of them.

*John discovers that knowledge of a once-frightening thing can diminish his fear of that thing.*

The priests teach John chants, spells, and other secrets. He learns how to read and write in the "old way," and how to heal wounds. John explains that though much of what the priests do is not really magic, his father says it's all right to let other people believe that their work is magic. John is fascinated by all his new knowledge, and he is hungry to learn more about the gods and their past civilization.

*John learns that people sometimes superstitiously mistake technology for magic, but he still believes in and is fascinated by magic. The priests' lessons only increase John's powerful desire for new knowledge, and his ambition drives the story forward.*

John is proud of his tribe, The Hill People, and he mocks their rival tribe, The Forest People, for their ignorance. He laughs at how the Forest People eat grubs, and boasts that the Hill People spin wool into yarn and preserve old writings, and that their priests dress in white robes (all these qualities differentiating them from the Forest people). Yet he expresses a desire to learn even more than the priests of his tribe can teach him.

*John's comments remind readers that while religion and technology are markers of human culture, religious and technological differences are frequently a source of conflict between societies. John's hunger for knowledge continues to grow and will soon lead him on his journey to the Place of the Gods.*

When John is no longer a boy, he tells his father that he is ready to go on his journey, a quest that will mark his initiation as a man and a priest within the tribe. John first undergoes a purification ritual. As part of the ritual, his father asks him about his dreams, and John describes a vision of the Place of the Gods. John tells the reader that he has always seen this vision.

*The purification ritual symbolically transforms John from unclean to clean; the quest will transform John from boy to man and from layman to priest. The quest is ritual but also personal, guided by John's "dreams"—both his visions and his ambition for knowledge.*

John's father warns John that this is a "strong" and dangerous dream, and reminds him that it is forbidden to travel east, cross the river, or go to the Place of the Gods. John affirms that he understands the laws, but adds to the reader, "it was my voice that spoke and not my spirit." John's father tells John that he will always be his son, even if he does not become a priest, and he sends John on his journey.

*John's father's warning is ambiguous. John's father warns him that it is forbidden to go to the Place of the Gods, but he does not* tell *him not to go there. He also tells John to make his journey, which implies that John should follow his vision and go to the Place of the Gods, even if doing so is dangerous or forbidden.*

John leaves the village and waits for a sign. Just after dawn, he sees an eagle flying east. John knows that signs can be sent by bad spirits, so he decides to wait for another sign. Just before sunset, he sees three deer and a white fawn going east—this is a strong sign, so he follows them, even though traveling east is forbidden. When a panther attacks the fawn, John kills the panther with a single arrow. He takes this as a sign that he is meant to travel east on his journey.

*John does not explain to the reader what the signs he sees mean, or why they are trustworthy or untrustworthy. It seems John may be interpreting the signs without any particular method and is instead following his instincts or looking for "signs" to justify his own desires and ambitions.*

John travels east for eight days, first along the god-roads and then through the forest, avoiding hunting parties of the Forest People. One night, when he camps near a Dead Place, he finds a knife in a dead house. Eventually, he reaches the sacred Ou-dis-san river, which no one in his tribe has ever seen before.

*The peripheral presence of the Forest People is a reminder that that John is not entirely safe. The "god-roads" John walks along appear to be abandoned highways, and the Ou-dis-san river may be the Hudson River in New York.*

John prays before the river, then looks south and sees the Place of the Gods, an island filled with "mighty and ruined" **towers** "too big to be houses." Afraid that the gods will see him, he returns to the edge of the forest and spends the night there.

*Coupled with John's description of the Ou-dis-san (Hudson) river, this view of the island is the reader's first clue that the Place of the Gods may be a ruined, post-apocalyptic New York City.*

John knows that he will die if he enters the Place of the Gods, but he also knows that if he turns back without fully satisfying his desire for new knowledge about the gods, he will never be content or at peace with himself. Though he is afraid to cross the river, he decides that he will do it anyway.

*The Ou-dis-san recalls the River Styx, which separates the worlds of the living and dead in Greek mythology. John continues to pursue knowledge in spite of his fear and the laws of the tribe, showing he values knowledge over life or society.*

John weeps as he builds the raft he will use to cross the river to the Place of the Gods, paints his body for death, and says funerary prayers. He feels cold and clammy, but his ambition and desire for knowledge burns like a fire within him.

*The death rituals reveal to us the depth of John's fears, but also emphasize the duality between body and spirit. John is prepared to face bodily death in order to satisfy his spirit's desire for knowledge.*

As he crosses the river, John sings his death song, in which he proclaims his courage and enumerates the challenges he has overcome during his journey. Yet, at this moment, John does not feel brave. For the first time on his journey he feels truly alone, and he realizes that the knowledge that he so prides himself on is not enough to prepare him for whatever lies ahead.

*The contrast between the boastful tone of John's song and the fear that he feels shows the limited power of John's present knowledge. Here, John is stripped of the fearlessness he sees as central to his identity as a future priest. Crossing the river marks the quest's point of no return.*

John has trouble steering the raft across the river. Just before he reaches the shores of the Place of the Gods, the raft overturns, but John manages to save his weapons, including the knife he found in the dead house, and his bow and arrows.

*John's near death is a reminder that the forces of the natural world (and perhaps the spirit world) are stronger than John's technical knowledge; alone, he is at their mercy.*

As he enters the Place of the Gods, John is amazed to discover that many of the things he had been told about it are false: the ground does not burn anyone who steps on it, and while it is true that the Place of the Gods is an island, it is not inhabited by evil spirits, and the air is not filled with enchanted fog. Instead, John sees ruined **towers** and "god-roads." What is more, there do not seem to be any gods on the island.

*Both John and the reader begin to gather new knowledge. John confirms that the priests' myths are not entirely accurate. John's descriptions also confirm to the reader that the island is an abandoned New York City, locating John's story in the reader's future.*

Exploring the island further, John finds broken stone pillars and a ruined edifice carved with the letters UBTREAS. Nearby, he sees a ruined marble statue of a man or a god who as long hair pulled back into a ponytail. A cracked plinth says that the figure's name is ASHING. Though John is not sure who ASHING is, he decides, out of caution and respect, to pray to the figure.

*We can conjecture that the marble ruins were once neo-classical government buildings; UBTREAS once read "Subtreasury," while ASHING is likely a statue of George Washington. Benét implies that Washington and wealth were the "gods" of American society.*

The Place of the Gods has very few trees: its landscape is almost entirely made from **metal** and stone **towers**, and John describes how many buildings are carved with words and numbers that he believes have magical properties. However, John sees many animals: a fish-hawk, butterflies, pigeons, wild cats, and eventually, wild dogs.

*Repeatedly John associates "magic" with forms of human technology. The city's landscape is entirely man-made and unnatural, but the animals (many of them once-domesticated species) show that the city is being gradually overtaken by nature.*

John explains that the gods did not hunt; instead, they ate food from magical jars. As a child, John once found some of this food in one of the Dead Places and tried it, but his father punished him, warning that the gods' food can be poisonous to humans. Now, John decides that he will look for this kind of food rather than hunt since he has already done many things that were forbidden and come to no harm. Eventually, he finds fruits and an alcoholic drink that have been preserved glass jars, and after eating, he falls asleep.

*Readers may begin to suspect that the gods were in fact humans; the "magic" food is likely canned or otherwise preserved and pre-prepared, and is another example of John's conflation of "magic" and technology. We can also see the logic of the tribe's ban on consuming such food: even preserved food does eventually go bad, so eating it likely poses a health risk (echoing many ancient religions' bans on certain foods).*

When John wakes up, a large, wolf-like dog is watching him. He throws a stone in an attempt to frighten the dog away, but it does not seem to fear him. The dog follows John as he walks further along the god-roads, and John soon realizes not only that he is being followed by a whole pack of wild dogs, but that *they* are hunting *him*.

*The greatest and most unexpected threat to John's safety during his "hero's journey" comes from wild dogs—creatures without "magic," language, or weapons. In the face of animal hunger and brute power, John's knowledge is nearly useless.*

Just as the dogs begin to rush him, John finds a door into one of the **towers** (John also calls them "god-houses") that opens. He slams the door behind him, shutting the dogs outside.

*John's human-ness (in the form of his ability to open doors) saves him from the dogs and leads him into the "god-houses."*

The building itself is strange and fascinating. John describes a narrow room with bronze doors without handles and, apparently, no way of being opened. After climbing many flights of stairs, he finds a door that he can open (the lock has been broken). It leads into an apartment. Before he explores the rooms, John stands in the "anteroom" by the entrance and tells the spirits who he believes live in this place that he is not a robber.

*Readers can recognize the "god-house" as an apartment building; the "narrow room" is a hallway or lobby, and the mysterious doors are elevator doors. The "anteroom" where John prays is the entryway of the apartment. All of these spaces, though recognizable to the contemporary reader, are completely unfamiliar to John.*

The rooms are dusty and stuffy, but appear untouched since the Time of the Gods. John describes the soft furniture and carpeting, and the paintings on the walls. He seems particularly struck by painting of flowers that appears blurry and abstract when viewed up close, but looks realistic when viewed from far away. The rooms are also full of books, and John takes this as a sign that the apartment was once inhabited by a wise god.

*The paintings seem to be examples of Impressionism or Pointillism. John's awe at seeing books highlights that signs of social prestige are relative to culture. For us, rare paintings are often a sign of wealth, but for John, the books indicate the homeowner's knowledge (and, thereby, prestige).*

John also describes objects that he believes were once imbued with magic: a sink without water, and with things marked "hot" and "cold" that do not feel hot or cold to the touch; a stove without wood or a place to light a fire; another mysterious "machine" for cooking; and lamps without a wick or oil. John wishes he understood the magic that once made these things function.

*John's descriptions of electric appliances as "magic" cement the reader's potential sense of superiority to John's society. But then again, Benét seems to ask, how many of us know exactly how our oven works? It's also possible that John simply uses "magic" to mean what we mean when we say "technology."*

John soon realizes that he will have to spend the night in the apartment. He is afraid to sleep in a Dead Place, but if he sleeps outside, he risks being attacked by the dogs. It gets dark, and though John has not yet explored all of the rooms, he decides to make a fire in the fireplace of a large room with windows overlooking the city. Weary, he soon falls asleep.

*John's choice to spend the night in the apartment is motivated by fear as much as it is by his desire for knowledge. The fire he builds recalls the symbolic association between fire and knowledge, rooted in the Greek myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods to give to humanity.*

John wakes in the middle of the night. The fire has gone out and he thinks he hears voices and whispers. He tells us that though some may think that what happened next was a dream, he believes that the experience was the work of "strong magic." John closes his eyes to try to go back to sleep, but soon he feels his spirit being drawn out of his body. John insists that he is not lying—as a priest and the son of a priest, he does not lie, and he believes that the spirits in the Dead Place wanted to speak to him. John tells us again that he felt his spirit being drawn out of his body, adding that he could look down and see his body lying in the room below.

*John has distinguished spirit and body before, but now his spirit is physically separated from his body. Whether or not gods or spirits are communicating with John, Benét seems to differentiate between the "magic" metal, kitchen appliances, or preserved food, and this "strong magic," which cannot be explained as a form of technology that John does not understand. Benét intends for us to believe that John's out-of-body experience is truly a prophetic vision.*

Looking out through the windows, John is amazed to see that the City of the Gods is not dark, even though it is night. There are so many lights in the city—some of them blurred by motion—that John can barely see the stars. John is terrified and overwhelmed by the brightness of the lights, and by a strange roaring sound. Looking out on the city, John realizes that through some kind of powerful magic, he is seeing the city as it was in the Time of the Gods. John tells us that, if his spirit had been in his body when he had this vision, he believes that he would have died of shock. John watches as the gods and their chariots fill the streets, and he is amazed to see that they travel in every direction, even to the other side of the earth, building roads and tunnels—even flying!

*Readers understand that John is witnessing New York city lit up at night by electric light—an astounding sight for a person from a society without electricity. The ocean-like "roar" is the sound of traffic; the "chariots" are cars, and the "gods," we understand, must be humans, who fly around the world in planes and ride trains and subways that travel underground. Though John does not fully understand what he sees, readers understand that modern humans possess powers that once were only ascribed to gods.*

The gods, John tells us, were restless, powerful, marvelous, and terrible, and they possessed vast knowledge and wisdom. John describes himself as child in comparison to the gods and says that if they had possessed any more knowledge, they would have been able to pull the moon out of the sky. Yet John knows, too, that the gods did not always use their knowledge well.

*John's description of the "gods" leads us to reflect on how modern people choose to use technology. The gods' near-ability to pull the moon out of the sky suggests that knowledge gives humans power that is god-like: both miraculous and the potential source of a cosmic disaster.*

In his vision, John sees the gods' "fate come upon them" in the shape of a terrible war. John emphasizes that this war was not like the skirmishes between the Hill People and the Forest People; while men die in those fights, the gods' war brought devastating destruction on a scale that John finds difficult to describe. Fire fell out of the sky onto the people in the streets and toppled the **towers,** he tells us. The island was covered in a poisoned mist, and the gods ran through the streets in terror. Only a few of the gods escaped, and city became a Dead Place. The poison from the gods' weapons remained in the ground for years. As John watches the gods dying before him, he weeps, and the city grows dark.

*John's vision shows how increasingly advanced weapons results in increasingly destructive warfare. The "fire falling out of the sky" and "poison mist" likely reference civilian bombings and the use of poison gas—military technology first introduced during WWI, which took place just a few years before the story was written. Though nuclear weapons had not yet been invented, the poison in the ground seems to foresee the consequences of radiation poisoning.*

When John wakes the next morning, he attempts to make sense of his vision. He now understands that a war among the gods created the Dead Places, but he still does not understand what caused such terrible war and destruction. John looks through the apartment, hoping to find an answer, but the house itself puzzles him. John seems puzzled by his own puzzlement, too—even though he is a priest and the son of a priest, he finds he cannot completely understand his vision or the things in the apartment.

*John's vision has given him horrifying, but incredible, knowledge of the Great Burning, yet he finds once again that acquiring knew knowledge simply raises more questions and makes him hungry to learn more. Once again, the story is pushed forward by his pursuit of knowledge.*

As he explores the apartment, John finds the dead god sitting in a chair by the window, as if he is looking out over the city. At first John is afraid to draw close to the body, but when he does, he studies the god's face closely. He can't tell the god's age, but he sees from his expression that he was wise, sad, and brave. John realizes that god chose to stay in the city, watching the city die with the knowledge that he himself would die, too. In doing so, John says, the god stayed true to himself: he lost his life, but did not lose his spirit. Though the body is surprisingly well-preserved, John believes that if he touches him, the body will crumble into dust. And, as John studies the body, he realizes the god is in fact a man—that the city was built and inhabited by humans, not by gods or demons.

*John's discovery of the dead god marks the end of the "ordeal" stage of his hero's quest. Finding the body then leads him to his "reward"—the realization that the gods were truly humans. At the same time, this human is god-like in many ways—he seems ageless, and though he is dead, his mummified body remains miraculously life-like. His face shows no fear. John again distinguishes between body and soul, saying that this man did not lose his spirit. John believes that being fearless in the face of death is a holy quality and the mark of a true priest.*

After he learns that the gods were, in fact, human, John tells us that he lost all of his fear. He returns home unafraid, fighting off the wild dogs and Forest People. After John is ritually purified once again, his father recognizes him as a man and a priest. John explains to his father that he went to the Place of the Gods and learned that the gods were humans, then asks his father to kill him for breaking the laws of the tribe. John's father tells him that the laws change from generation to generation. It seems that, in making his journey, John has re-written the laws of the tribe.

*John's new fearlessness shows that he believes he now possesses the ultimate knowledge. John fully comes of age, and his declaration to his father shows that he, like the dead god (presumably), no longer fears death. John's father's reply suggests the reader that the tribe's laws are not as dogmatic as John earlier implied; in fact, the priests adjust the laws in response to new knowledge. Whether the people obeying the laws recognize this, however, is left more unclear.*

John wants to share the knowledge he has acquired with the whole tribe, but his father convinces him not to, explaining that "if you eat too much truth at once, you may die of the truth." John's father suggests that, perhaps, the "gods" learned too much too quickly, and by doing so, they brought about their own destruction. John tells us that his experience as a priest has since shown him that his father was right.

*John's father's advice suggests that knowledge is neither inherently good nor bad, but it is powerful. When we learn too much too quickly or apply our knowledge too rashly, our power may have unintended consequences. John's father also implies that knowledge should be protected by those who can use it wisely (in this case, the priests)—a controversial idea.*

Still, John tells us, he has ambitions to learn more about the "gods," what they knew, and how they lived. Now, the priests go to the Dead Places to gather books as well as metal, and to study the "magic tools" in the houses from the "Time of the Gods." John vows that when he replaces his father as head priest (presumably, after his father's death) he will lead his tribe to the Place of the Gods. Saying so, John calls the Place of the Gods by its name for the first and only time in the story—"newyork." There, John says, his tribe will learn more about the gods ASHING, Licoln, Biltmore, and Moses, and they will rebuild the city.

*John confirms what readers have now long suspected—that the Place of the Gods is New York City. Yet by saying so, John breaks the final taboo of the tribe (he has already traveled east, crossed the river, and visited the Place of the Gods), symbolically moving into a new era. John seems confident that he will replicate the technologically advanced society of the "gods," but his confidence in his own knowledge feels like a repetition of history, suggesting that human society may rebuild itself only to face yet another disaster.*

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