Ishmael

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DANIEL QUINN

Daniel Quinn was born in Omaha, Nebraska, and was raised Catholic. He later studied at a variety of universities, including Saint Louis University, where he earned a B.A. in English. Afterwards, he studied at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Bardstown, Kentucky, in the hopes of becoming a monk. Quinn fell out with his mentors at the abbey—a falling out that contributed to his abandonment of Catholicism altogether in the mid-1960s. Following his departure from Kentucky, Quinn moved to New York and worked in publishing for many years. He didn't write a novel of his own until 1988—this novel, *Dreamer*, was a work of science fiction, and while it earned fairly positive reviews, it didn't sell well. Quinn's breakthrough came in 1991, when he wrote his best-known novel, the philosophical dialogue *Ishmael*. *Ishmael* won Quinn the prestigious Turner Award, organized by the media billionaire Ted Turner. Following the success of *Ishmael*, Quinn wrote two other philosophical novels about anthropology and the environment: *The Story of B* (1996), and *My Ishmael* (1997). Since 2000, he's been involved in a great number of rallies, conferences, and forums regarding issues of anarchism, environmentalism, and pacifism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most important historical era to which *Ishmael* reacts is the radical movement of the 1960s. During this decade, millions of people throughout the world used their education and the free press to organize populist movements that fought for human rights. These movements were especially common in the United States, in part because, following World War II, the country had a large, well-educated middle class that cared deeply about social and political issues. Notable achievements of the 1960s include the Civil Rights Movement, led by figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr.; the Civil Rights Act, which protected and reinforced the rights of African-Americans to vote under fair circumstances; protests against the Vietnam War; and the feminist movement, which fought for equality for women in business, politics, and the public sphere. In many ways, *Ishmael* is a reaction to (and a critique of) the 1960s. To Quinn, the radicalism of this era was highly admirable, but it didn't go far enough in attacking the root cause of injustice in the world: the myths of "Taker" culture. *Ishmael* can also be situated in the "Malthusian renaissance" of the 1970s—a time when many of the world's prominent economists and statisticians began to argue, with renewed conviction, that the world faced an inevitable hunger crisis. Many of their arguments—arguments that show up in *Ishmael*—originated with the 19th century English thinker Thomas Malthus. Malthus argued that the world's population grows geometrically—in other words, it grows by a set factor in a given amount of time (for example, it doubles every ten years). The world's food supply, by contrast, grows arithmetically—by a set *amount* in a given period of time (for example, it increases to 10,000 bushels every ten years). Because this is the case, Malthus (and later, Quinn) argued that the average amount of food per person is always decreasing, meaning that in the end, the world's population will go hungry. Malthus's ideas, and their later interpretations in the works of thinkers of the 1970s, play a major role in shaping Quinn's view of the world.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The structure and content of *Ishmael* alludes to many different literary modes and tropes. One of the most important is that of the philosophical dialogue. The philosophical dialogue is one of the oldest literary genres in Western history, stretching all the way back to the dialogues of Plato. In these works, such as *The Republic* and *Phaedrus*, the author, Plato, appears as a character in his own text, discussing matters of morality, science, and ethics with his teacher, Socrates. Like Ishmael, Socrates does not merely tell Plato what to believe—on the contrary, he asks Plato questions (albeit leading questions), thus allowing him to make up his own mind through the answers. It's important to note that Socrates ultimately dies in Plato's dialogues—much like Ishmael, Socrates becomes a martyr for philosophy and wisdom, whose memory must be passed on through literature and education. Another important story that *Ishmael* alludes to is the Adam/Eve story. In this Biblical story—one of the most famous in the world—Adam and Eve are punished for eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and condemned by God to live a life of pain and uncertainty. All of humanity—their descendants—then shares in their curse as well.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit*
- **Where Written:** St. Louis, Vienna, New York City
- **When Published:** February 1992
- **Literary Period:** Environmentalist fiction, New Age philosophy
- **Genre:** Moral dialogue, Philosophical novel, *Bildungsroman*
- **Setting:** Unnamed American city, late 20th century
- **Climax:** The narrator discovers why the Takers abandoned the Leavers
- **Antagonist:** Taker civilization

- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Thanks, Ted. Daniel Quinn's Turner Award enabled him to focus on his writing full-time—and looking at the size of the prize, it's no wonder. The Turner Award, which has only been given out once, consists of 500,000 dollars, and was, at the time, the single largest award ever given for a single book.

Imagine a world without Morgan Freeman's voice... *Ishmael* has been hugely popular with millions of readers, inspiring albums, environmentalist movements, and dozens of other books. One of the most surprising legacies of the novel is its influence on the career of the actor Morgan Freeman. Freeman is a longtime fan of Quinn's novels, and has said that his interest in *Ishmael* inspired him to get involved in nature documentaries like *March of the Penguins* and *Born to Be Wild*. That's right—if it weren't for Daniel Quinn, we all would have missed out on Morgan Freeman's trademark narration.

PLOT SUMMARY

An unnamed narrator, a writer, notices an ad in his newspaper: "Teacher seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world." Although the narrator is initially dismissive of this ad, he goes to the office building mentioned in the ad, and is surprised to find that he is the only person who's bothered to come. Inside, the narrator finds a fully-grown gorilla, sitting behind a **glass window**. In the room he also notices a poster, which says, "WITH MAN GONE, WILL THERE BE HOPE FOR GORILLA?"

To the narrator's surprise, he can communicate with the gorilla simply by making eye contact with him. The gorilla says that he was born in Africa in the 1930s, kidnapped by humans, and taken to a circus. At the circus, a man named Mr. Sokolow purchased him. Sokolow gave him his name, Ishmael, taught him how to communicate telepathically, and gave him books to study. Eventually, Ishmael's intelligence and knowledge far outstripped Sokolow's. When this became obvious, Sokolow asked Ishmael to tutor his daughter, Rachel. Although Ishmael did so for many years, he reports that she never learned his most important lessons—lessons which he'll try to pass on to the narrator now. Ishmael concludes his life story by explaining that after Mr. Sokolow died, his widow, Mrs. Sokolow, fought to keep Ishmael away from her home. As a result, Ishmael has ended up living in this building, supported with money from Rachel.

Ishmael asks the narrator if he feels like a prisoner, and the narrator answers that he does, but that he can't put into words where this feeling comes from. Ishmael explains that the narrator is part of a culture, and as a result, he has been taught certain "stories"—explanations of the relationship between man, the world, and the gods—which are so pervasive that they're invisible to him. Ishmael says that he will try to help the narrator understand these stories, and recognize why they're false and misleading. As a basic lesson plan, Ishmael says that his project will be to show the narrator that human history is the history of two groups, the Takers and the Leavers, who enact two radically different stories about man, the world, and the gods. Takers, according to Ishmael, are the humans who developed agriculture and civilization—the humans who dominate the Earth to this day. Leavers (the Navajo, Bushmen, etc.), by contrast, are those who never adopt agricultural practices and ignore the supposed benefits of civilization.

During his first lesson, Ishmael asks the narrator to explain the one defining story of his culture. The narrator is unable to do so, and becomes impatient with Ishmael for forcing him to try. Eventually, using a tape recorder, he records himself talking about the history of the universe, the dawn of man, and the Agricultural Revolution. Ishmael shows the narrator that this version of the history of the world is a fiction: it favors the human race in an absurdly unrealistic way. The narrator realizes that Ishmael is right, but can't get excited over this fact. Ishmael is disappointed with the narrator's lack of enthusiasm.

In the second lesson, Ishmael and the narrator discuss the "middle" and "end" of the story of the Takers, as the Takers themselves see it. Takers believe that their inventions—agriculture, technology, etc.—have brought them great happiness and contentment, but they also believe that they must continue exploring new worlds in order to find new food and resources. At the same time, Takers believe that their technology and exploration inevitably cause death and destruction—furthermore, they believe that this is the case because human beings themselves are fundamentally flawed. This is a misinterpretation of the facts, Ishmael argues: while Taker culture and the enactment of Taker stories *does* lead to death and depression, human beings themselves are not inherently evil or sinful.

In subsequent lessons, Ishmael asks the narrator to explain the other stories that Taker culture believes. With much prompting, the narrator realizes that his culture—understood as Western culture, or industrialized culture—believes in its right to dominate the entire world. Humans, he argues, think of their exploration as a conquest—they're literally waging war against the Earth. This, Ishmael argues, violates the one law of life: species should never wage war on one another. The inevitable result of humans' violations of the laws of life, Ishmael concludes, is that the human species will go extinct. Though humans have tried to delay this from happening by producing more food, these measures are never fully successful: more productivity results in a larger population, canceling out any progress.

When he arrives for his next lesson, the narrator is surprised to find Ishmael sitting in the room, no longer behind the glass

window. Ishmael talks to the narrator about the Hebrew Bible, arguing that it is actually a coded history of the human race, told from the perspective of the Leavers. When Adam eats from the tree of knowledge, Ishmael theorizes, he gains the knowledge of how to manipulate his environment and use agriculture to wage war on the Earth. The fact that this process is described as a "Fall" proves that the story was originally told by Leavers, long before it entered the Hebrew Bible. Ishmael goes on to also interpret the story of Cain and Abel as being about Takers and Leavers.

The narrator gets a visit from his uncle, falls behind on his deadlines, and gets a tooth removed. As a result, he abandons Ishmael for a week. When he returns, he's surprised to find that Ishmael has left his building. The narrator does some research and learns that Mrs. Sokolow, whose name is Grace, has died, meaning that Ishmael no longer has a source of income to protect him from captivity. The narrator tracks Ishmael down to his new home: a traveling carnival. There, he finds Ishmael lying in a cage, from which he could easily escape if he wanted to. Ishmael ignores the narrator and eventually tells him to go away.

The next day, the narrator returns, and Ishmael reluctantly continues his lessons. A strange quality of Taker society, he explains, is that Takers both embrace history and reject history. Because they don't have much "evidence" for how to behave, they're always turning to prophets for advice—Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, etc. Leavers, on the other hand, conduct themselves just as their ancestors three million years ago did, and so they have learned how to act based on trial and error. By ignoring the Leavers, Takers foolishly ignore the best evidence humanity has accumulated for how to act.

During the next lesson, the narrator bribes a carnival worker—the bribee—to speak with Ishmael after dark. Ishmael asks the narrator why he's so interested in the ways of the Leavers, and the narrator answers that he thinks that the radical movements of the 1960s failed because although people know that Taker culture was wrong, they couldn't see what "story" to replace it with. Satisfied with this answer, Ishmael conducts a complicated exercise with the narrator, in which he plays a Leaver, and the narrator plays a Taker. After this exercise, the narrator makes a breakthrough and realizes why Takers *want* to be Takers: they want to take control over their own destinies, rather than being at the mercy of the gods and the elements. There is no practical reason for being a Taker—only an abstract desire to be in control and to be different from the other animals of the Earth.

After this lesson, the narrator finds the man who runs the carnival, whose name is Art Owens. The narrator discusses buying Ishmael and agrees with Owens on a price, but then says that he'll think about it. In the next lesson, the narrator asks Ishmael for advice about how to be a Leaver. Ishmael gives the narrator some goals: convince as many people as possible to abandon the ways of the Takers, and reject the idea that man's role is to dominate the planet. Ishmael also makes the important point that the Leavers need not abandon agriculture altogether. Agriculture itself is a harmless enterprise—it's only when agriculture becomes the way of the world, and when it's used to wage war on the planet, that it breaks the laws of life. In general, Ishmael says, Leavers like the narrator must experiment with new methods for survival, "inventing" where they see fit.

The narrator leaves Ishmael to repair his car. While doing so, he decides to buy Ishmael and drive away, though he's unsure where he'd go. When he returns to the carnival, he finds that Ishmael has died of pneumonia—the narrator hadn't noticed that Ishmael had been getting sick. The bribee gives the narrator Ishmael's possessions, including the poster the narrator saw when he first visited Ishmael. The narrator drives back to his home and studies the poster. He's surprised to find that there's another message on the back: "WITH GORILLA GONE, WILL THERE BE HOPE FOR MAN?"

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ishmael – The titular character, an old, experienced, and intelligent gorilla who teaches the narrator about civilization, the environment, and history. Ishmael is a mysterious presence in the novel, whose motive for spending time with human beings is never made explicitly clear. Kidnapped from his home in Africa as a baby, Ishmael grew up in captivity, and eventually learned how to read, think, and communicate with the help of his owner, Mr. Sokolow. Ishmael is deeply saddened by the devastation that the Takers—the dominant branch of the human race—have wrought on the Earth, and he is often pessimistic about the possibility of change. At times, his sadness is so immense that he takes out his feelings on the narrator. Nevertheless, he is a talented teacher who uses the Socratic method with his pupils, encouraging them to ask questions and teasing out their thoughts slowly and carefully. At the time when the novel begins, Ishmael has never has a successful pupil, since his lessons are so challenging. Quinn leaves it up to the reader to decide whether Ishmael has finally found a successful pupil in the narrator.

Narrator – The narrator of *Ishmael* is a middle-aged, deeply cynical man. Though he came of age during the 1960s, a time when millions of people fought to change the world, he's largely given up on the possibility than any genuine change is possible—and as a result, he goes through life with a vague yet profound sense of dissatisfaction and loneliness. Nevertheless, the narrator still feels a desire to change the world, and this motivates his decision to find Ishmael and participate in his lessons on humanity and the environment. At times, Quinn

shows the narrator to be stubborn and selfish, but it's implied that these qualities are the result of his uneasiness with Taker society—an uneasiness that sometimes inspires him to **drink** heavily. In all, the narrator is a stand-in for the reader: an intelligent, open-minded person who wants to change the world and yet feels deeply cynical about the possibility of any real change. Just as it's unclear whether the narrator has truly absorbed Ishmael's lessons about change or not, it's left up to us to decide whether or not to embrace *Ishmael* the novel.

Walter Sokolow – A Jewish man who travels to the United States in the 1930s, loses his entire family to the Holocaust, and purchases Ishmael to serve as a strange, surrogate family. Mr. Sokolow is the first to give Ishmael his name, setting in motion Ishmael's discovery of language and communication. Sokolow teaches Ishmael to speak, and, when Ishmael's intellect begins to outstrip his own, becomes his research assistant. Mr. Sokolow is Rachel's father and Grace Sokolow's husband.

Grace Sokolow – The wife of Mr. Sokolow, at least twenty years his junior, Grace Sokolow is a jealous, narrow-minded woman who's never told that Ishmael and Mr. Sokolow are good friends, and capable of communicating with each other. As a result, she comes to resent Ishmael, especially after he begins spending time with Rachel, her daughter. After Mr. Sokolow's death, Mrs. Sokolow tries to reduce the amount of money left to Ishmael in Mr. Sokolow's will. After she succeeds in doing so, Ishmael is forcibly moved to a carnival, setting in motion the events of the second half of the novel.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Rachel Sokolow – The daughter of Mr. Sokolow and the first pupil of Ishmael, Rachel becomes very fond of Ishmael, but fails to grasp his lessons and become fully enlightened about Takers and Leavers.

Mr. Partridge – A butler who works at the Sokolow estate even after Mr. Sokolow dies, Mr. Partridge seems not to understand that Ishmael is vastly intelligent and capable of human communication. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, it's implied that Mr. Partridge *is*, in fact, aware of this.

Art Owens – The organizer of the carnival where Ishmael and the narrator conduct their lessons in the second half of the book. The narrator says that he likes Owens, and respects his intelligence and brisk manner.

The bribee – The carnival worker whom the narrator bribes so he can visit Ishmael after hours

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.

EDUCATION, TEACHING, AND PROPHETS

In the first paragraph of *Ishmael*, the narrator sees a newspaper ad asking for a student, immediately establishing the novel's focus on education and the teacher-student relationship. And yet what also quickly becomes clear is that the novel is not just focusing on the importance of education, but rather critiquing how education is practiced in the modern world. After all, Ishmael is not a typical teacher. For one thing, he's a super-intelligent ape. For another, he explicitly disagrees with the very notion of teaching—at least as we usually think of it.

Ishmael argues that society, which he calls the society of Takers (those who take the world's resources and claim ownership over the planet) has become what it is in part because it too completely relies on prophets and sages: people who claim to have "master knowledge" of how to live, and spend their lives passing on this knowledge to their disciples. In contrast, Ishmael never passes on information to the narrator without also asking the narrator to weigh it carefully. Indeed, Ishmael rarely "passes on" information at all: instead he uses the "Socratic method" to conduct an open-ended conversation with the narrator. Under the terms of this conversation, the narrator is free to make up his own mind about Ishmael's ideas.

In another sense, Ishmael's teaching differs from that of a prophet's insofar as he encourages the narrator to rely on his—the narrator's—own wisdom, instinct, and knowledge. At many points in *Ishmael*, Ishmael asks the narrator a complicated question and the narrator realizes with amazement that he knows the answer already, but had been so trained to ignore his instincts that he at first *assumes* that he doesn't know the answer. Ishmael's goal, then, isn't to pass on *new* wisdom to his disciples, but instead to remind his students of basic, common-sense knowledge of the way the world works—knowledge that, as he puts it, even a child knows.

Ishmael's goal, then, isn't to educate the narrator at all. Rather, he's trying to get the narrator to "unlearn" the myths and stories with which his society has filled his head. At the end of the novel, it seems that the narrator has finally rejected Taker dogma, and is ready to live as a Leaver. Significantly, Ishmael isn't present to guide the narrator in this quest: the narrator is on his own, free to pursue any course of action he pleases. In the end, *Ishmael* suggests, the best teachers aim to "push" their students to the point where the students don't need – or can't have – a teacher at all, and are ready to face the world for themselves. Echoing that philosophy, it is left up to *us* to decide whether the narrator—or we, the readers—have reached this

point by the end of the novel.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator is a self-described misanthrope. He seems to have no close friends, and the only family member he mentions (very briefly) is an uncle, for whom he seems to have no affection whatsoever. He lives his life "cut off" from other people. The narrator's education under Ishmael changes his outlook. At the same time that the narrator learns about man, the gods, and nature from Ishmael, he comes also to learn the importance of interconnectedness—the reliance on, loyalty to, and love for human beings and other forms of life. The narrator's gradual acceptance of the interconnectedness of all life constitutes a crucial part of his intellectual and spiritual education.

From the beginning it's made clear to us that Ishmael lives based on the principle that the best and most meaningful life is a life based on interconnectedness. From the time that he was a young ape in the jungle, Ishmael's life has been structured around other beings—mostly human beings. Humans are his friends, his teachers, and his providers of shelter and food. Ishmael spends his entire adult life looking for pupils—in the simplest terms, looking for people with whom to connect. When Rachel, his first pupil, moves him to a building "outside human society," Ishmael becomes discontent almost immediately—his passion for interconnectedness—conversation, education, and respect for others—is so great that he demands to be moved back to a human city. Ironically, this results in Ishmael agreeing to be held in a **glass cage**, with the understanding that students will visit him and talk to him. Ishmael would rather be in prison and have one student to talk to than be "free" and have no one to talk to.

As *Ishmael* goes on, it becomes clear that interconnectedness is more than just the rule by which Ishmael lives his life: it is the fundamental law of all life. All beings, Ishmael and the narrator agree, depend on one another. Humans—or, more properly speaking, the Takers (which is the vast majority of all "civilized" humans)—are the only creatures who deny nature's laws of interconnectedness. Takers recklessly purge their planet of all beings with whom they compete for resources, destroying entire ecosystems in the process. Taker communities grow bigger and bigger, confident that they'll have enough food and shelter to survive, when in actuality (Ishmael argues), Taker communities will inevitably grow so large that there won't be enough food to go around, and the entire human race will starve to death.

As he learns about the value of interconnectedness from Ishmael, the narrator gradually begins to live his own life according to this principle. After Ishmael is moved to a traveling carnival, the narrator spends days trying to track him down. Later, when he notices that Ishmael is cold, the narrator brings him blankets. Despite the fact that Ishmael is an ape, the narrator has begun to respect Ishmael and consider him a friend: he's living his life according to the laws of interconnectedness.

At the end of the novel, Ishmael dies, very suddenly, of pneumonia. The narrator, ashamed, realizes that he has been so focused on achieving enlightenment with Ishmael's help that he didn't notice that his friend was cold and wet. By showing us the narrator's obliviousness and Ishmael's subsequent death, *Ishmael* reminds us that it isn't enough to recognize the *laws* of interconnectedness: one must incorporate these laws into one's everyday life through love and concern for others.

Ishmael ends by suggesting that the narrator will reject his old misanthropic ways and throw himself into the task of connecting with other people, whether as a teacher or as a friend. Indeed, *Ishmael* itself—the book we've been reading, supposedly written by the narrator—is a testament to the narrator's embrace of interconnectedness as the fundamental rule of life. In a sense, the narrator has *become* Ishmael, devoting his life to interconnectedness by passing on his wisdom to as many people as possible.

FICTION, STORYTELLING, AND TRUTH

Ishmael uses a fictional plot and characters to put forth philosophical ideas more commonly found in a work of nonfiction. This brings up an important question: why does the author of the novel, Daniel Quinn, use fiction to communicate his message? (Why didn't he write a philosophy book instead?) What's the relationship between fiction, storytelling, and truth?

In an early chapter of *Ishmael*, Ishmael argues that human beings feel an irrepressible need to tell stories that explain and justify their place in the universe. A story, as Ishmael defines it, is a relationship between the gods, the world, and mankind. Ishmael believes that there is a story at the "center" of every culture. This story is repeated so often that the members of that culture lose sight of it. In Taker culture, for instance, Takers are no more conscious of the "story" of their society—according to which, the world was made for mankind to dominate—than a fish is conscious of water. Put another way: the Takers' story of humanity's power is so pervasive that they don't even realize how they are influenced by it. And yet no one story is completely "true" or "false"—even the story that Ishmael tells, about the Takers and the Leavers, isn't, literally speaking, the truth. Like *Ishmael* itself, it's a necessary fiction, a deliberate simplification of human history that helps the narrator wrap his head around Ishmael's complicated lessons.

It's worth asking why Ishmael doesn't simply tell the narrator the truth about Taker society on the first day—if Ishmael knows what's wrong with the Takers' story, why couldn't he spell this out for the narrator and save them both a lot of time? The

answer is that it's not enough to explain why a story is wrong. The stories of Taker society are so powerful that one can't simply "disprove them"— it's impossible to replace a story with the truth. Rather, one can only replace a story with a different story. Thus, as the novel draws to a close, Ishmael leaves the narrator with a difficult assignment: tell a new story about the Leavers to replace the flawed, harmful story that's told by the Takers. What this story will be—or whether it gets told at all—is largely left up to the reader to decide.

CYNICISM, MISANTHROPY, AND THE FAILURE OF THE 1960S

On the first page of *Ishmael*, a newspaper ad asks the narrator to come to a mysterious building in order to "save the world." When the narrator arrives at this building, he is amazed to find that no one else is there. Throughout *Ishmael*, it's suggested that people have already tried to save the world, failed, and given up altogether. The narrator argues that the last great attempt to save the world occurred in the 1960s, and ever since, people have lived in the cynical certainty that the world is beyond saving. One might say that the "ghost" of the 1960s hangs over every page of *Ishmael*—so it's important to understand what Quinn is talking about when he refers to the radicalism of the 1960s, why he thinks these radicals failed, and what errors of theirs he hopes to fix in *Ishmael*.

During the 1960s, millions of people throughout the world organized populist movements that fought for freedom, equality, and human rights. Notable examples of 60s radicalism, to which Quinn implicitly alludes, include the American Civil Rights Movement, feminist movements, and anti-war movements, including the radical protests of 1968, when people across the world demonstrated against their governments in support of peace and equality. (See Background Information.)

Quinn's principle criticism of the radicalism and political movements of the 1960s, expressed largely through the narrator, is that they didn't go far enough in their aims. While the Civil Rights Movement and the feminist movement could identify *specific* problems with American society, they couldn't address the root causes of injustice and unhappiness—in Quinn's view, the fallacies and contradictions of the Taker story of the world. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. fought for equal rights for black Americans, but he was unable to change the fundamental spirit of acquisitiveness, domination, and aggression that characterizes Taker society. As Ishmael puts it, 60s radicals lived in a vast Taker prison—they tried to make their lives in the prison better, but they didn't know how to get rid of the prison itself.

The failures of 60s radicalism are enormously relevant to *Ishmael*—indeed, the atmosphere of cynicism and misanthropy that pervades the early chapters of the novel represents the narrator's direct reaction to what Quinn perceives as the failures of the 1960s. Quinn wants the same things that earlier civil rights and feminist leaders wanted: peace, love, and equality. However, he believes that the only way to truly achieve these things is to dig to the root cause of war, hate, and inequality, and he attempts to do exactly this throughout *Ishmael*.

IMPRISONMENT

From the moment that the narrator sees Ishmael in his room, he becomes aware that Ishmael is in prison. It's only later that he realizes that this prison is self-imposed. Ishmael is sitting behind a **glass window** because he chooses to do so—his friend and former pupil, Rachel, is paying for the building where he's being "kept." Even later, when Ishmael is moved to a more literal prison—a cage at a carnival—the narrator recognizes that Ishmael could break from this cage at any time, but chooses not to.

It's also clear from early on in *Ishmael* that Ishmael is by no means the only character who's imprisoned—indeed, every character in the novel is in a kind of prison. The narrator, as a member of Taker society, is caught up in an endless web of obligations to his family and his employers, and often can depend only on **alcohol** and other substances for escape and happiness.

As the novel goes on, Quinn makes it clear that Taker life itself is a prison. By living in a society that breaks the fundamental laws of life, Takers are caught in an unresolvable contradiction, according to which they must continuously expand and increase their productivity. Some Takers are wealthier and more powerful than other Takers, but they're equally enslaved to the doctrines of wealth, conquest, and domination. As Ishmael puts it, the guards of the Taker prison are no freer than the prisoners.

One of the reasons that the Taker prison is so dangerous is that it's invisible. A wealthy industrialist, for example, might think that he's "free" because he has material wealth, but he only believes this because he can't see how thoroughly he bases his life around conquest, or how heavily he depends on drugs or material pleasures. Ishmael thus confines himself to literal prisons in order to remind himself of the less obvious, more metaphorical prison in which he—and the narrator—is trapped. And because he never loses sight of the contradictions and fallacies of Taker society, Ishmael manages to gain some measure of freedom from them—for instance, he seems utterly indifferent to money, drugs, or ambition. This implies a more general point: while the most dangerous "prisons" are psychological and abstract in nature, these prisons are also usually self-imposed—so it's possible to escape them simply by changing one's thinking. In this sense, Quinn tries to "free" his

readers from Taker dogma through the book *Ishmael* itself.

HUMANS, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND EXTINCTION

Following World War II, the world population exploded. Across the planet, especially in the Third World, populations were larger than they'd ever been—and were growing at a faster rate than they'd ever grown before. At the time when *Ishmael* was published, in 1981, many sociologists worried that the rise in world population would eventually cause a global food crisis, and perhaps even the extinction of the human race. It's worth looking at this notion more closely, since the possibility of such a global extinction lurks underneath every one of Ishmael and the narrator's conversations. (Interestingly, in the years following *Ishmael*'s publication, the emphasis of population studies has largely shifted to population *shortages*, since in many developed nations the labor force is too small, not too large.)

As the narrator acknowledges, the theory that population growth will inevitably lead to food shortages dates back to the 17th-century English thinker Thomas Malthus. Malthus observed that human populations grow exponentially—in other words, the population grows by a given factor over a given time (in the United States, for example, the population doubles approximately every forty years). By contrast, food supplies, and most resources in general—tend to grow arithmetically—increasing by a given *amount* over a given time (for example: 5, 10, 15, 20, 25—in other words, at a much slower rate). The result is that the amount of food (and other resources) available per person is always shrinking, and eventually it will approach zero.

It's remarkable, Ishmael notes, that Malthus's argument has been well known for hundreds of years, and yet no one seems to pay attention to it. One reason that this is the case is that most humans think that they can "work around" the laws of exponential growth by using science and technology. For instance, during the 1960s and 70s, there was a worldwide "Green Revolution" that allowed crops to be farmed much more efficiently, thereby allowing a far greater number of people to be well-nourished than would ever have been thought possible. Nevertheless, Ishmael argues, no amount of human technology will ever be able to entirely counteract Malthus's laws, so long as the population continues to grow exponentially.

In effect, *Ishmael* is an attempt to answer the question, "Why don't humans recognize that they're headed for extinction, when the truth is right in front of their faces?" Ishmael believes that humans don't realize this because one group of humans, the Takers, have constructed an all-pervasive "story" about how the Earth is their property—and they can do whatever they like with their property. Because Takers—who, at this point in history, constitute the vast majority of the human race's population—have had this story drummed into their heads since childhood, no amount of logic or research can make them change their behavior—behavior which will lead to human extinction.

It's important to understand Malthus's arguments about population while reading *Ishmael*, since food shortages and human extinction are the "stakes" of the novel. In order to prevent extinction, Ishmael tries to draw the narrator's attention to the artificiality and irrationality of the Taker story. In this way, he hopes that the narrator will convince Takers to change their ways, relinquish their "ownership" of their environment, curb their population growth, and ensure the survival of their species.

SYMBOLS

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

GLASS

At the beginning of *Ishmael*, the narrator and Ishmael speak to one another with a glass window in between them. It's only much later, when Ishmael sits on the same side of the glass as the narrator, that the narrator realizes how profoundly this glass window has influenced his relationship with Ishmael. The glass window symbolizes distance: not only the distance between Ishmael and the narrator, but between the narrator's desire to change the world and his pessimistic habits. During his first lessons with Ishmael, the narrator has a difficult time showing enthusiasm for the complicated conclusions and daring theories that Ishmael proposes. Thanks to the glass separating them, every word Ishmael speaks is accompanied by a kind of asterisk. Even if he can't disagree with Ishmael, the narrator can't muster the energy to take Ishmael seriously and agree with him whole-heartedly—in the back of his mind, he's thinking, "True, but you're just a gorilla." As the narrator grows closer with Ishmael, he stops seeing Ishmael as a lurid spectacle and begins to accept him as a friend and a teacher. Thus, the glass window between them disappears.

ALCOHOL AND PAINKILLERS

At several points in *Ishmael*, Ishmael points out that Taker culture is self-contradictory and self-annihilating. One consequence of this is that Takers feel the need to forget about their contradictions. One strategy that Takers use to forget is to escape into drugs and intoxication. We see evidence of this first-hand in *Ishmael*: when the narrator is overcome by the complexity of his lessons with Ishmael, he often turns to bourbon or other alcoholic

beverages for relaxation. (He even turns to painkillers after getting a tooth removed.) Alcohol and painkillers symbolize the hedonism and sensuality to which Takers—indeed, most humans—turn in the vain hope of fighting their depression and anxiety.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bantam edition of *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit* published in 1995.

Chapter 1 Quotes

TEACHER seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world. Apply in person.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Ishmael

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator of *Ishmael* reads these words in the newspaper, he's at first dismissive, then thoughtful, then a little inspired. The narrator finds the notion of "saving the world" ridiculous—surely only children and crazy hippies would ever commit to something as silly as saving the world. And yet the narrator begins to see that his own contemptuousness is what's shallow and silly; rather, it's the people who try to save the world who are most earnest and admirable in their earnestness.

It's also important to notice that the teacher (later revealed to be Ishmael) is requesting a student—not the other way around. The reversal in student-teacher roles (i.e., the fact that for once, a student is asking to be taught) tells us a lot about the way that the narrator will go about learning from Ishmael. The hypothetical student mentioned in the newspaper ad could never ask a teacher for his services, because he could never know what he's supposed to be learning. By the same token, the narrator, as we'll see, cannot simply be *told* the information Ishmael has acquired over a lifetime; instead, the narrator must grasp the information step-by-step, lesson-by-lesson.

Then one day when I was in my mid-teens I woke up and realized that the new era was never going to begin. The revolt hadn't been put down, it had just dwindled away into a fashion statement. Can I have been the only person in the world who was disillusioned by this?

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator explains his history and how he sees the world. In the 1960s, he was young and idealistic, and like many people of the time he felt that the sincere, earnest people could heal the world of its fundamental problems, such as poverty, war, and racism. Over the next few decades, however, this idealism waned and the "revolution" just never happened. Now, the narrator argues, the desire to make the world a better place is a mere affectation; in other words, the people who claim this desire for themselves aren't really concerned with helping others—they just want to seem "hip."

This quotation outlines a basic problem (the decline of radicalism and earnestness in society) to which *Ishmael* reacts. As Ishmael will argue, the radicalism and politicization of the 1960s failed because it didn't address the root cause of society's problems. Every measure the hippies of the 1960s proposed was just another form of "lipstick on a pig"—i.e., a superficial change that ignored the real problem with the world. (What this "real problem" is won't be made clear for hundreds of pages.)

WITH MAN GONE, WILL THERE BE HOPE FOR GORILLA?

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Ishmael

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator goes to visit Ishmael for the first time, he sees a sign bearing this rhetorical question. The narrator interprets the question as a kind of Zen koan—a cryptic sentence designed to provoke thought and meditation, rather than any clear-cut answer.In the spirit of a Zen koan, here are some possible interpretations of the question:

1) The question is designed to satirize mankind's arrogance. According to the way human beings see the world, man is the dominant species, and all other animals (not just gorillas) are humans' servants, enemies, or pets. The question takes an overbearing, paternalistic tone, as if mankind were an elder brother or father, and gorillas were the younger sibling or child.

2) By the same token, the question is meant to provoke our thoughts of the end of the human species. The notion of man being "gone" was inconceivable even 100 years before the book was written; only in recent years have the rise of nuclear war, environmental awareness, etc. challenged the notion that human beings will always walk the Earth.

3) The question is meant to suggest that gorillas are humans' natural successors on the evolutionary tree. According to one (incorrect) interpretation of the theory of evolution, gorillas and other primates are early "descendants" of human beings, from whom our species evolved. The question seems to assume that humans will go extinct, like the majority of all animals on Earth, and gorillas will evolve to become the new "rulers" of the planet. The question further asks if gorillas will learn from humans' mistakes, or if they, too, will pollute, wage war, etc. The question might also be asking if humans themselves can learn from their own mistakes.

❝ "On the basis of my history, what subject would you say I was best qualified to teach?"

I blinked and told him I didn't know.

"Of course you do. My subject is *captivity*."

Related Characters: Narrator, Ishmael (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael, the enormous ape who acts as a teacher to the Narrator, claims to be teaching his pupil about captivity. At first, it appears that Ishmael is making a very literal point: he's spent most of his life imprisoned behind glass or in cages, and therefore, he's qualified to talk about these experiences. But as the novel goes on, it becomes clear that Ishmael is making a deeper, more abstract point. As the Narrator comes to realize, almost all human beings are "captives" of a system of belief. This system of belief, that of the Taker culture, imprisons people by feeding them lies, such as the lie that humans are "made" to inherit the Earth; that their resources will never run out, etc. The greatest strength of the Takers' form of imprisonment is its invisibility: the Takers don't even realize that they're slaves.

Ironically, Ishmael's literal captivity allows him to see through the abstract captivity of Taker mythology. Because he surrounded by glass and metal, he can never forget that the human race is imprisoned by invisible but equally powerful forces.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ As I say, there were many in Germany who recognized this story as rank mythology. They were nevertheless held captive by it simply because the vast majority around them thought it sounded wonderful and were willing to give up their lives to make it a reality.

Related Characters: Ishmael (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael and the Narrator discuss an old problem of philosophy: can people be made to believe anything, simply because their peers believe the same? For the Narrator, the ultimate example of this principle is Fascist Germany. Millions of educated people were convinced that Jews and other minorities are the enemy of a "pure" human race.

The history of Germany under the Nazis illustrates the idea that humans are constantly being influenced by stories and myths. These myths are so powerful and pervasive that people often don't notice that they exist at all. And there are even some human beings who recognize the myths as fictions, but continue to go through the motions of believing the myths anyway.

The fact that it's possible for people to *know* that something is a myth and yet continue to *act* like it's the truth reminds us of why Ishmael's lessons for the Narrator take such a strange form. It is not enough for Ishmael to tell the Narrator the truth about humanity, the environment, and economics—the information itself probably wouldn't sway the Narrator at all. Instead, Ishmael wants the Narrator to piece through history and economics slowly and carefully, so that he understands and even embodies the ideas that Ishmael is trying to pass on.

And when we're finished, you'll have an entirely new perception of the world and of all that's happened here. And it won't matter in the least whether you remember how that perception was assembled. The journey itself is going to change you, so you don't have to worry about memorizing the route we took to accomplish that change.

Related Characters: Ishmael (speaker), Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

There's an old cliche that "the journey is more important than the destination." As far as Ishmael is concerned, this idea is the guiding law of education. Ishmael has summoned the Narrator to his cage because he wants the Narrator to understand some basic truths about the world. The Narrator has no idea what these truths might be—he's motivated by a desire to learn and to "save the world" but nothing more specific. In short, Ishmael is going to teach the Narrator about a subject so strange and new that there's no name for it.The passage also reminds us that the Narrator isn't a character so much as a stand-in for readers. While it's true that the Narrator has some recognizable qualities (his love for drinking, for example), his purpose in the novel is to model the process of education that Ishmael describes in this quotation. In other words, the Narrator is meant to be an ideal reader; someone who carefully moves through each chapter of the book, until he's arrived at the truth the author/teacher is trying to express.

Chapter 4 Quotes

You didn't believe me when I said that this is ambient in your culture. Now you see what I mean. The mythology of your culture hums in your ears so constantly that no one pays the slightest bit of attention to it. Of course man is conquering space and the atom and the deserts and the ocean and the elements. According to your mythology, this is what he was born to do.

Related Characters: Ishmael (speaker), Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Ishmael tries to explain the guiding "myths" of human culture. For Ishmael, one feature of a myth is its invisibility, or ambience. The great myth of human civilization—so pervasive that it's undetectable, just as water is undetectable to a fish—is that humans were "made" to rule the planet. From the time they're children, humans are conditioned to believe that the world is their property: they can do whatever they choose with whatever parts of it they have access to. The first step in freeing the Narrator from the myths of his culture, then, is to identify these myths. By discussing the mythology of his civilization with Ishmael, the Narrator continuously reminds himself of these myths, until they slowly cease to influence him. As George Orwell wrote, "It is a constant act of strength to see what is right in front of your nose."

Chapter 5 Quotes

"It's because there's something fundamentally wrong with humans. Something that definitely works against paradise. Something that makes people stupid and destructive and greedy and shortsighted."

"Of course. Everyone in your culture knows this. Man was born to turn the world into a paradise, but tragically he was born flawed."

Related Characters: Ishmael, Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Ishmael and the Narrator clarify the mythology of human civilization. While it's true that humans are indoctrinated to believe that they will "inherit the Earth"—i.e., that the world is their property—this isn't the whole story. Humans are told that they were meant to bring paradise to the world. But when they look around, they see misery instead: pollution, war, crime, etc. So almost by definition, the myth of human civilization has two parts: first, that man was created to rule the world; second, that man was born deeply flawed, and can't help destroying the world because of his flaws. (Oswald Spengler called this the "Faustian archetype.") Paradoxically, then, Ishmael is offering the Narrator a much more modest and yet much more ambitious view of humanity. On one hand, Ishmael rejects the bombastic idea that humans rule the world; but on the other, he insists that there's nothing fundamentally wrong with us at all—or at least nothing that we can't change.

One of the most striking features of Taker culture is its passionate and unwavering dependence on prophets. The influence of people like Moses, Gautama Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammed in Taker history is simply enormous.

Related Characters: Ishmael (speaker), Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael points out some of the basic qualities of the Takers: i.e., the human beings who believe in the myth that they were created to own and dominate the planet. One of the most basic qualities of the Takers is that they like being told what to do: they choose to worship figures like Jesus who promise them enlightenment in return for worship or belief. As Ishmael sees it, the reason for Takers' unabashed worship of prophets is their fervent belief in their own imperfection. Takers believe—have no choice but to believe—that they've squandered their inheritance as rulers of the Earth. As a result, they turn to religious figures who can forgive them for their sins and restore them to glory. One important question this passage raises then, is what's the difference between Ishmael and the prophets he just named? A partial answer would be that Ishmael isn't offering anything to the Narrator for free. Where Jesus or Buddha offered their followers clear, proverbial versions of the truth, Ishmael wants the Narrator to work to discover his own truth. Ishmael's job isn't to tell the Narrator what to think; it's to guide him on a more personal, individual path to enlightenment. Because he refuses to actually lead the Narrator, Ishmael is very different from a prophet.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Though the Takers don't know it yet, the gods did not exempt man from the law that governs the lives of grubs and ticks and shrimps and rabbits and mollusks and deer and lions and jellyfish. They did not exempt him from this law any more than they exempted him from the law of gravity.

Related Characters: Ishmael (speaker), Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

Although human civilization claims to be governed by a myth—the myth of human dominance—Ishmael claims that human civilization is governed by the laws of nature. Naturally, humans reject the idea that they're the same as other animals—it's inconceivable that they'd have to obey the same laws as other life forms.

Arguably the most important word in this entire quotation is "yet." The basic law of nature that Ishmael is referring to here is that, in the end, human beings will go extinct because of their abuses of the environment—no species can survive while consuming its own resources exponentially. So it's inevitable that, at some point in the future, the human race will have to face the consequences of its behavior: it just hasn't done so "yet."

But your craft isn't going to save you. Quite the contrary, it's your craft that's carrying to toward the catastrophe. Five billion of people pedaling away—or ten billion or twenty billions—can't make it fly. It's been in free fall from the beginning and that fall is about to end.

Related Characters: Ishmael (speaker), Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael explains the future of human civilization to the Narrator by making an analogy: civilization is like a failed flying machine. As billions of human beings try to operate the flying machine, they have the exhilarating feeling that they're defying the laws of gravity. The crux of Ishmael's analogy is that falling and flying feel exactly the same: in other words, civilization has been declining for thousands of years, even while human beings think that civilization is solving all their problems.

The passage is a good example of the way that Ishmael teaches the Narrator. Again and again, he relies on analogies and elaborate metaphors (at various points, he compares civilization to a flying machine, a waterfall, a concert, etc.). Because the concepts Ishmael teaches are so complicated, he must clarify them by comparing them to objects and situations with which the Narrator is already familiar. The passage also shows Ishmael at his most prophetic—for all the differences between Ishmael and Buddha or Jesus, he's making a grim prediction of mankind's future, and this is the very definition of a prophet.

Chapter 7 Quotes

The gazelle and the lion are enemies only in the minds of the Takers. The lion that comes across a herd of gazelles doesn't massacre them, as an enemy would. It kills one, not to satisfy its hatred of gazelles but to satisfy its hunger, and once it has made its kill the gazelles are perfectly content to go on grazing with the lion right in their midst.

Related Characters: Ishmael (speaker), Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael tries to teach the Narrator about the interconnectedness of the natural world. In order to do so, Ishmael must free the Narrator from the constraints of "right" and "wrong," or at least as humans understand these concepts. For animals, as distinct from humans, there is no "wrong" in killing to survive—as Ishmael points out, gazelles will continue grazing even after a lion kills and eats one of them. On the contrary, the animals of the natural world have evolved to coexist with one another. Whether or not they're consciously aware of it, the creatures of the natural world fully accept that they're going to have to play by nature's rules; in short, that other animals are going to eat them. The quotation thus points out an irony in the way humans view the world. Humans seem to have no problem destroying entire species, and yet they can also find it "savage" for one lion to kill and eat one gazelle. It's as if a mass murderer got offended by a petty crime.

There was more to it than this, however, because I still felt depressed. A second bourbon helped me to it: I was making progress. That's right. This was the source of my feeling of depression.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation shows the Narrator grappling with anxiety and depression. He's deeply conflicted about the lessons he's been learning from Ishmael—he believes that they're true, and yet he also struggles to live by them. In other words, the Narrator finds it easy to recognize that Taker culture is based on lies, but he hesitates to abandon Taker culture, with all its luxuries and conveniences, altogether. In his depression, the Narrator turns to alcohol and painkillers to feel better—but of course, these substances only make him feel worse in the long run. Interestingly, the Narrator's behavior in this scene is also meant to suggest the broader failure of his society's idealism since the 1960s. The Narrator recognizes that in the 60s there were millions of people struggling to solve the world's problems and reform society. But most of these people's efforts were in vain, because they could never get to the root cause of society's problems. In their frustration, the hippies and reformers of the 60s turned to alcohol, drugs, and other substances, just as the Narrator does in this quotation.

I had to face it: I didn't just want a teacher—I wanted a teacher for life.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Ishmael

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

At the midway point of the book, the Narrator faces some difficult truths about his relationship with Ishmael. Ishmael has taught the Narrator a lot of important information about human civilization, and the Narrator, for his part, has been receptive to this information. He's done his homework when Ishmael gives him a deep problem to contemplate, and he's done his best to see Ishmael as much as possible. But in spite of the Narrator's abilities as a student, he struggles with Ishmael's most basic lesson of all: independence. Ishmael doesn't just want to give the Narrator knowledge of Takers and Leavers; he also wants the Narrator to discover this knowledge for himself, and incorporate it into his everyday life. At this point in the novel, the Narrator isn't ready to do this; he continues to depend on Ishmael to tell him what to believe—basically he wants Ishmael to act like a prophet for him. In short, the Narrator still has a long way to go before he's truly mastered what Ishmael is trying to teach him.

Chapter 8 Quotes

The more competitors you destroy, the more humans you can bring into the world, and that makes it just about the holiest work there is. Once you exempt yourself from the law of limited competition, everything in the world except your food and the food of your food becomes an enemy to be exterminated.

Related Characters: Ishmael (speaker), Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Ishmael shows the Narrator how the one basic premise of human civilization—the premise that man controls the world and can do with it whatever he wishes—determines how people view the world's plants and animals. The job of a farmer, for example, is to supply the maximum amount of food to the maximum amount of people—as Ishmael says, this is "holy work." But in order to maximize production, farmers must exterminate creatures that compete with humans for food—carnivores, pests, etc. Because humans believes that the only true "good" is humanity itself, then they must also conclude that any life that challenges humans' supply of food is "evil." Ishmael wants the Narrator—and us, the readers—to notice the narrow-mindedness of human civilizations' assumptions. Common sense dictates that animals aren't our enemies simply because they need to eat to survive; and yet human civilization pressures human beings to believe that animals absolutely *are* our "enemies to be exterminated." We're so conditioned to think in civilization's terms that we don't see how bizarre and brutal civilization can be in the larger scheme of things.

If you go among the various peoples of your culture—if you go to China and Japan and Russia and England and India—each people will give you a completely different account of themselves, but they are nonetheless enacting a single basic story, which is the story of the Takers. The same is true of the Leavers. The Bushmen of Africa, the Alawa of Australia, the Kreen-Akrore of Brazil, and the Navajo of the United States would each give you a different account of themselves but they too are all enacting one basic story, which is the story of the Leavers.

Related Characters: Ishmael (speaker), Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is an important qualifier for Ishmael's lesson to the Narrator. Ishmael wants to analyze humanity by dividing humans into two groups, Takers (those who subscribe to the premise that the Earth belongs to humanity) and Leavers (those who subscribe to the premise that humans are just one of the millions of lifeforms on the Earth). Admittedly, Ishmael's division is a little simplistic—on the surface, it seems strange to say that (for example) the Chinese, the Russians, and the English are all members of the same "culture." But the point isn't that Russian and Chinese people are exactly the same. Instead, Ishmael is trying to convince the Narrator that the vast differences between their two cultures are less important than the one, big similarity between them; namely, that both cultures believe that the planet exists "for" humanity.

Ishmael's division between Takers and Leavers reminds us that Ishmael is a storyteller: he creates a convenient, easily digestible lesson by simplifying human history into its most basic, important points. Ishmael could give a more complicated version of history, but by reducing everything to two characters, Takers and Leavers, he tells a better, more memorable story, and therefore does a better job of educating the Narrator.

Chapter 9 Quotes

When I arrived the next day, I found that a new plan was in effect: Ishmael was no longer on the other side of the glass, he was on my side of it, sprawled on some cushions a few feet from my chair. I hadn't realized how important that sheet of glass had become to our relationship: to be honest, I felt a flutter of alarm in my stomach.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Ishmael

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

In this important quotation, the Narrator takes an important step forward with his education by meeting Ishmael face-to-face. The most important element of this scene is the glass that once separated the Narrator from his

teacher. It's only now that the glass is gone that the Narrator realizes just how much this barrier had affected his relationship with Ishmael all along.

To begin with, the glass that separated the Narrator from Ishmael allowed the Narrator to distance himself from Ishmael. Even though the Narrator agreed with most of Ishmael's points and found himself looking forward to their lessons, he still couldn't help thinking of Ishmael as somehow a stranger and an alien. In other words, even when the Narrator agreed with Ishmael, he couldn't quite take Ishmael seriously—Ishmael was still just a weird, talking gorilla. The "flutter of alarm" in the Narrator's stomach signals that the Narrator is about to take Ishmael more seriously—he's going to agree with Ishmael *and* change his life.

The glass that distances Ishmael and the Narrator is a good example of an "ambient myth," of the kind Ishmael described previously. In much the same way that the myths of Taker culture influence human behavior while remaining invisible, the glass prevented the Narrator from really embracing Ishmael's teachings, in spite of the fact that the Narrator hadn't noticed this fact until now, when the glass is taken away.

"But it makes *sense* this way," I insisted. "The mark was given to Cain as a warning to others: 'Leave this man alone. This is a dangerous man, one who exacts sevenfold vengeance.' Certainly a lot of people over the world have learned that it doesn't pay to mess with people with white faces."

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Ishmael

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Quinn ventures into racial politics for one of the few times in his novel. Ishmael and the Narrator are trying to interpret the Biblical story of Cain, the first murderer in the world. Cain, in Ishmael's historical interpretation of the Bible, is meant to be a symbol of the Caucasian societies of the Middle East. The Caucasians were some of the first people on the planet to practice Taker culture; in other words, to hoard food and resources instead of living in harmony with nature. Interpreted in this way, the Cain and Abel story is an allegory of the dangers of Caucasian culture, and of the Takers in general. As the Narrator sees it, the Cain and Abel story is also a warning about the danger of white people. Historically, people who identify as white—mostly in Europe and the Americas—have definitely been responsible for some serious bloodshed and misery: imperialism, two World Wars, slavery, the Holocaust, etc.

It's important to note that the Narrator, not Ishmael, offers a racial interpretation of the Bible. As he makes clear later on, Ishmael doesn't believe that it's useful to blame specific racial groups for the world's problems (in fact, he implies, blaming specific racial groups was one of the reasons that the radicals of the 1960s failed to achieve their goals). Instead, Ishmael wants all races and peoples of the world to unite against Taker culture. Even so, the fact that the Narrator brings up a racial interpretation of Taker culture means that Quinn thinks the interpretation is at least worth considering, even if he doesn't wholeheartedly endorse it.

Chapter 10 Quotes

FRIENDS OF ISHMAEL: another friend has lost contact. Please call and tell me where he is.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Ishmael, Rachel Sokolow

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

The Narrator is surprised and shocked to learn that Ishmael has been moved out of the warehouse where he was being kept—he may have been sold to another owner. In order to track down Ishmael, continue his lessons, and potentially free him, the Narrator now places an ad in the newspaper, asking anyone who's met Ishmael to help the Narrator find him.

The Narrator's newspaper ad suggests a couple things. First, the fact that the Narrator is placing an ad in the newspaper at all means that he's finally beginning to *live* Ishmael's lessons instead of merely nodding his head at them; in other words, he's freeing himself from apathy, making a concerted effort to help his friend and continue learning about Leavers and Takers. Second, the newspaper ad is meant to remind us of the ad that the Narrator came across at the beginning of the book. The ad reminds us that the Narrator began as just another ignorant Taker, but is now a "friend of Ishmael"—someone who sees through his own society's hypocrisy.

Incredible as it may seem to you, I would rather live this way than on anyone's largess, even yours.

Related Characters: Ishmael (speaker), Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

As the Narrator spends more time with Ishmael, their relationship becomes more complicated. After the Narrator tries to track down Ishmael, he's shaken to find that Ishmael is living at a carnival. Even more strangely, Ishmael claims that he doesn't want the Narrator to buy him and free him—he prefers living in a cage to living on someone else's dime.

Ishmael's quotation could be interpreted as irritable and stubborn, and it is. Ishmael is annoyed with the Narrator for neglecting his lessons for multiple weeks, especially because it was during this time that Ishmael was sold and moved. Ishmael's claim is inconsistent with everything he's taught—as Ishmael has already shown, *everyone* lives on everyone else's "largess," as all life forms are dependent on one another for food and shelter. Even so, it's worth taking Ishmael's remarks seriously, because they remind us why he chooses to live in a cage in the first place. Ishmael could probably escape from captivity; he's smart and strong enough to do so. Instead, Ishmael chooses to live behind glass and metal so that he can study the world more clearly. Unlike the Narrator, who's been blinded to the realities of his life by technology, alcohol, and TV, Ishmael has no trouble breaking down human civilization into its most basic myths and stories. Ishmael is like a monk, who chooses to live in an isolated, frugal way so that he can understand life's basic truths more clearly.

"All the same, Bwana, what are we to do with this food if we don't need it?"

"You *save* it! You save it to thwart the gods when they decide it's your turn to go hungry. You save it so that when they send a drought, you can say, 'Not me, goddamn it I'm not going hungry, and there's nothing you can do about it, because my life is in my own hands now!'"

Related Characters: Narrator, Ishmael (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

In the dramatic (and intellectual) climax of the novel, the Narrator realizes why the Takers choose to live their lives the way they do. As Ishmael goads him, the Narrator begins to see that the Takers' goal is to "thwart the gods," which are understood as nature, nature's laws, natural disasters, etc. In order to prove that they're strong and self-sufficient, the Takers choose to hoard food, water, and supplies, so that they can survive any disaster nature throws their way. In doing so, the Takers distinguish themselves from all other forms of life. As we've already seen, other animals don't hoard resources; instead, they live and die with the elements, never taking more than they need in the short term.

The quotation is a good example of Ishmael's novel teaching strategy. Instead of telling the Narrator the truth about the Takers, Ishmael pushes, pressures, and even teases "Bwana" (the Narrator) into realizing the truth himself. In this section, the Narrator doesn't say anything that he and Ishmael hadn't already discussed earlier in the novel: the Narrator already *knew* that Takers tried to evade nature's laws by accumulating goods (the very name "Takers" assumes this behavior). But even if he's not learning new information, the Narrator's epiphany shows that Ishmael's teaching methods have paid off. The Narrator is genuinely excited about the lesson he's just learned: because he arrived at the conclusion on his own, he'll remember it for the rest of his life.

Chapter 12 Quotes

"The premise of the Taker story is that *the world belongs to man.*" I thought for a couple of minutes, then I laughed. "It's almost too neat. The premise of the Leaver story is *man belongs to the world.*"

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Ishmael

Related Themes:

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

In this interesting quotation, the Narrator reduces everything he's learned about human civilization in the last 200 pages to a single, symmetrical sentence ("The premise of the Taker story ..."). As simple as it seems, a huge amount of knowledge and wisdom is crammed into this sentence. As Ishmael has shown, the Takers—really, most human

civilization—accumulate the planet's resources in the delusion that these resources are limitless. Leavers, on the other hand, try to live in harmony with nature, knowing that this is the only way to survive.

The fact that the Narrator can sum up his knowledge so clearly and concisely proves how far he's come during the course of the book. In the first chapter, the Narrator was puzzling over a cryptic sentence (With man gone ..."). Now, he's *writing* sentences with similarly cryptic elegance, a sign that he's become wiser and more perceptive. The Narrator has become more like Ishmael himself—someone who can see, with total clarity, the flaws and contradictions of human culture.

❝ "All along, I've been saying to myself, 'Yes, this is all very interesting, but what good is it? This isn't going to change anything!"
"And now?"
"*This* is what we need. Not just *stopping* things, Not just *less* of things. People need something positive to work for. They need a vision of something that ... I don't know. Something that..."
"I think what you're groping for is that people need more than to be scolded, more than to be made to feel stupid and guilty. They need more than a vision of doom. They need a vision of the world and of themselves that inspires them."

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Ishmael

Related Themes:

Page Number: 243-244

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Ishmael and the Narrator lay out their vision for the future of the human race. At the same time, they're basically summarizing the structure of *Ishmael* itself. The novel began with, one could say, Ishmael scolding humanity for its problems—its greed, its cynicism, its reliance on drugs and other substances. Over the course of the book, however, the Narrator has learned how to study mankind's fundamental problems. But much more importantly, he's learned a true *alternative* to civilization: the way of the Leavers. Instead of selfishly claiming that mankind will dominate the planet, the Leavers accept that they're only one of millions of animals on Earth, and try to live in harmony with their surroundings.

The way of the Leavers, as described by Ishmael and the Narrator, reminds us that the Narrator (like human beings in general) needs a story to live his life to the fullest. The book *Ishmael*, which is now almost at its end, is precisely the "vision" of the future that Ishmael and the Narrator are discussing. By writing his novel, Quinn hopes to inspire millions of people to leave Taker society behind and live honestly and simply, without any delusions of superiority.

❝ I shook my head. "I'm afraid it's a cause to which almost all of humanity will subscribe. White or colored, male or female, what the people of this culture want is to have as much wealth and power in the Taker prison as they can get. They don't give a damn that it's a prison and they don't give a damn that it's destroying the world."
Ishmael shrugged. "As always, you're a pessimist. Perhaps you're right. I hope you're wrong."
"I hope so too, believe me."

Related Characters: Ishmael, Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael and the Narrator discuss the future of radicalism in human civilization. The Narrator's conclusions are heavily pessimistic. He believes that there will always be people who want to make the world a better place—and yet these people, in spite of their good intentions, aren't really getting to the "root cause" of society's problems. The Narrator's remarks tie in with his thoughts about the failures of radicalism in the 1960s.

As the Narrator sees it, political revolutionaries like Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Harvey Milk, Gloria Steinem, etc., wanted to give a certain group of people (African Americans, homosexuals, women) the same rights and luxuries as everyone else, without ever questioning whether these rights and luxuries were good in themselves. The rights to own property, to have enough food to last a lifetime, etc., might seem like good things, but as Ishmael has shown, they also reflect the Takers' arrogance and hypocrisy. In short, the Narrator believes that so-called radicals demand a fair "piece of the pie" but don't question whether pie is really worth eating.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ WITH GORILLA GONE, WILL THERE BE HOPE FOR MAN?

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Ishmael

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

After Ishmael's tragic death, The Narrator sorts through Ishmael's possessions and posters, and comes across a poster featuring yet anothercryptic question: "with gorilla gone, will there be hope for man?"In order to understand this question fully, it's important to compare it with the question posed earlier in the novel: "with man gone, will there be hope for gorilla?" As with that earlier question, it's best to interpret the quote in multiple ways, recognizing that no one interpretation is the whole story:

1) By itself, the question is incomplete: we should combine it with the previous question ("With man gone, will there be hope for gorilla?"). Combining the two questions reminds us that neither man nor gorilla is the "whole story" in such an interconnected world—only by working together (just as Ishmael and the Narrator worked together) can both survive.

2) Literally, the quote reminds us of the novel's plot. The gorilla, Ishmael, is gone. The question then becomes, what will the Narrator do with the wisdom Ishmael has passed on to him? It's strongly suggested that the Narrator intends to share his new wisdom with other people. Indeed, it's implied that the Narrator converts Ishmael's wisdom into a best-selling book: the book we've just finished reading. In this way, the Narrator aims to achieve Ishmael's goal, convincing the Takers to abandon their destructive culture and live a healthier, more honest life.

3) On a more historical level, the question wonders what will happen to the human race when all other animals, gorillas included, go extinct. Throughout the novel, Ishmael has shown how Takers eliminate all rivals to their food supply—in other words, wipe out entire species—because they think that doing so will ensure them permanent control of the planet. The tragedy, Ishmael argues, is that by eliminating other forms of life, humans are also ensuring their own destruction. Human beings should be living in harmony with nature—in other words, they should be living like gorillas. When gorillas inevitably go extinct, humans will have no "model" for how else they might survive. With no Leavers left to emulate, the Takers' victory—and ultimate collapse—will be inevitable.

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.

CHAPTER 1

The novel begins with a description of a newspaper ad. The narrator, who is never named, is drinking coffee and eating breakfast one morning when he sees an advertisement in the paper: "TEACHER seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world. Apply in person." Although the narrator is initially so offended by this ad that he throws it in the trash, he later removes it and looks at it again. Wanting to save the world, he thinks, is a childish impulse—no doubt there are hundreds of fools responding to the ad right now.

Ishmael *is essentially a philosophical novel, meaning that the ideas presented are more important than the characters or plot—thus the narrator and protagonist aren't even given a name. Quinn begins with an interesting tension between the narrator's disdain for the ad and his secret fascination with it. The notion of "saving the world" seems childish to the narrator, but we also sense that he isn't as cynical as he'd like to be.*

The narrator remembers his own experiences searching for a teacher—experiences which contributed to his hatred of earnest people who want to save the world. As a "child revolutionary" during the 1960s and 70s, he was old enough to understand the hippies and revolutionaries, and young enough to believe that they might succeed. He saw hippies as marching to liberate the world from slavery and injustice, and when they inevitably failed, the narrator was deeply troubled. He wanted a guru, a teacher, or a wise man to tell him why this had happened.

Here Quinn situates his novel in recent history. The radicalism of the 60s and 70s accomplished a great deal (see Background Information), but it's also often considered an overall failure. After all, within twenty years of the "revolution" of the 1960s, America turned to Ronald Reagan, a self-described representative of "traditional American values," for leadership. We know very little about the narrator so far—his one defining trait seems to be that he desires a philosophical kind of education.

Because the narrator had wanted to change the world, he spent years trying to find the proper teacher, and yet he ultimately failed. This is precisely why he's so irritated to see an ad in the paper asking for a student. After years of searching tirelessly for a teacher, the narrator is frustrated to see this teacher suddenly placing an ad in his local paper. The narrator admits that this teacher is probably a charlatan, though.

Before we know anything else about the narrator, we know that he's desperate for a teacher. It's not clear to us why this is, however—why, for instance, he couldn't teach himself about how to change the world by reading books or going to school. This implies that there's something unique about the experience of meeting with a teacher face-to-face, and it also sets up the plot of the book.

The narrator goes to visit the teacher, confident that he must be running a scam. When he arrives at the proper building, he is surprised to see an ordinary office building. Inside, he finds an empty room. There are no fools or hippies inside: it would seem that no one at all has responded to the ad.

Quinn had tricked us into expecting a long line of idealistic fools and aging hippies answering the ad. The lack of people speaks volumes about the state of radicalism and optimism in the world: there just aren't that many people anymore who still have the hope or motivation to "save the world."

Just as he is about to leave, the narrator notices a **glass window** at the far end of the room. Peering into the window, he is surprised to see an enormous, fully grown gorilla. The gorilla does nothing—it only stares back at the narrator. The narrator turns and sees a poster hanging on the wall opposite the glass window. The poster says, "WITH MAN GONE, WILL THERE BE HOPE FOR GORILLA?" The narrator is a writer himself, but he's astounded by the poster—it seems to suggest that gorillas depend upon either the prosperity or the extinction of the human race. He realizes that it is a kind of Zen koan, designed to be an unsolvable puzzle.

Notably, we're made aware of the window between Ishmael and the narrator before we're made aware of Ishmael himself (or told his name). A Zen koan (like "what is the sound of one hand clapping?") has no single interpretation, but rather is intended to cause the listener/reader to meditate and ponder complex things. This is an early sign that the narrator won't simply "receive" the truth from Ishmael—on the contrary, he'll have to ponder what is true and what isn't, using his own intuition and intelligence.

The narrator feels an inexplicable desire to sit in the room a little longer. Turning to look at the gorilla once again, he is amazed to find that the gorilla can communicate with him telepathically—simply by looking into the gorilla's eyes, the narrator hears a message in his head. The gorilla tells the narrator that he should listen to his story. The narrator replies that he would be happy to do so, but first asks the gorilla to tell him his name. In response, the gorilla says that he was kidnapped from Africa during the 1930s—hunters killed his mother and took him to a circus. The narrator is instantly sympathetic to this tragedy.

Quinn's story is a kind of fable—we're not meant to probe the details of his communications with the gorilla too deeply. Rather, we're supposed to accept that a man can speak to a gorilla, and move on from there. With this in mind, Quinn gets the fantastic elements of his novel "out of the way" as soon as possible. He's following the advice of Aristotle, who said that "probable impossibilities" were acceptable in literature, as long as they were established early on.

The gorilla continues with his story. Animals living in captivity, he explains, are always more thoughtful than their counterparts in the wild, because they have to cope mentally with the obvious fact that something is very wrong with their lives. A tiger in a cage, for example, is constantly asking itself, "Why?" Long ago, the gorilla began to ask itself the same question. The gorilla realized what the problem was: it had been kidnapped from utopia and placed in prison. In Africa, the gorilla explains, life is good: there is food and shelter everywhere.

In this section, the gorilla gives us a glimpse of one potential "solution" to the discontents of human civilization: the wild jungle, which he describes like a utopia. This isn't just a reminder of how flawed human society is, it's also a reminder that the gorilla, the narrator's potential teacher, is every bit as miserable and "trapped" as the narrator—right now in a literal way, as he is seemingly kept behind glass.

The gorilla explains to the narrator that as a young ape, he was sold to a traveling fair. Where before he had been displayed at a circus, alongside many other gorillas, he was now displayed on his own. To his surprise, the gorilla found that the humans who visited him were behaving differently. Where before they seemed to be talking to one another, they now seemed to be talking to him. This must have been because he was now on his own, he realized. Next, the gorilla realized that the humans kept using the same sound to talk to him—"Goliath." From this, he deduced that Goliath must have been his name. From this point onward, the gorilla was "born as a person."

In this section, Quinn gives a remarkably concise theory of how language determines growth and development. Two centuries of thinkers—from Hegel to Kojève to Lacan to Piaget—have believed that learning language is the crucial part of a child's growth. In a way, language represents how a child becomes a human being. In much the same way, the gorilla only becomes self-conscious—in other words, aware that he exists and is distinct from the world around him—when he's given a name.

Over the following years, the gorilla learned language, and the basic divisions of language. For instance, he came to understand the meaning of the word "animal," as distinct from "human." The gorilla also became conscious of his owners—humans who walked around the fair. The gorilla never hated his owners—indeed, he thought that they were as imprisoned by the format of the fair as he was. In other words, the gorilla never felt that he had been robbed of some natural right to be free.

The famous philosopher and philologist Ferdinand de Saussure believed that all language is structured as a series of opposites or "binaries." Thus, when one learns a language, one learns sets of opposites—happy and sad, fat and thin, day and night, up and down, etc. The gorilla's development seems to take a similar path. It's also interesting that the gorilla doesn't claim any "right" to be free—instead, it tries to understand why *it isn't free.*

A major turning point in the gorilla's life occurred a few years after he'd been given the name Goliath. At night, an old man came to visit his cage. The man looked into the gorilla's eyes and said, "You are not Goliath," and walked away. The gorilla was shocked by this exchange—but unlike a human being, he didn't ask, "If I'm not Goliath, then who am I?" Instead he simply assumed that he was nobody at all.

In his book The Phenomenology of Spirit, *the philosophy George Hegel described how self-consciousness arises from the interplay between an idea and its opposite, or synthesis and antithesis. At this stage, the gorilla has moved from synthesis—awareness of his name—to antithesis—the knowledge that he has no name, and thus is nobody. Out of the interplay between these two extremes, the gorilla will find an identity for himself.*

Knowing that he was not Goliath, the gorilla fell into depression. He was tired every day, even when visitors yelled "Goliath." One day, he was given a powerful sedative, and woke up in a new place—a strange, cylindrical cage. When he awoke, he saw the same old man standing outside his cage. The old man said, "You are not Goliath. You are Ishmael," and walked away. The gorilla—now calling himself Ishmael—considered the old man a god, even though he had no information whatsoever about him. The old man had addressed him as a person and an individual.

As Ishmael struggles to find an identity for himself, he continues to depend on other people for knowledge. This old man, whose name he does not know, has the power to give Ishmael his name. Simply by saying a few words, he changes Ishmael's world forever. While Ishmael is to be the narrator's teacher, it's interesting that Ishmael begins with the story of how he *was taught. This sets the two on more equal ground, instead of one lecturing the other as a kind of "prophet."*

Ishmael later discovered that the old man's name was Walter Sokolow. Sokolow was a wealthy Jewish man who had lost his entire family to the Holocaust in Europe. One day, he visited Ishmael's fair after seeing a sign that depicted a gorilla called Goliath, holding an African native in its paw. Sokolow wanted to see Goliath, because he considered the gorilla a symbol for the Nazi regime—which, after all, was trying to wipe out the race of David (from the Biblical story of David and Goliath). Upon seeing Ishmael, however, Sokolow found that the sight of seeing "Goliath" imprisoned gave him no satisfaction. He decided to buy the gorilla from the fair—viewing him as a poignant substitute for the family he'd failed to save from Europe.

Sokolow's situation is immensely poignant, but at the same time it seems strange and insubstantial for Sokolow to purchase a gorilla to "replace" his family. It's also important to understand the real reason that Sokolow gave Ishmael his name—Sokolow isn't a "god," bestowing personhood and identity upon others (though he briefly takes on this role for Ishmael), but just a lonely old man looking for friendship and companionship.

After only a few weeks, it became clear to Sokolow that Ishmael was highly intelligent. Sokolow was talking to himself, mourning the loss of his family, when Ishmael showed his sympathy by running his paw against Sokolow's hand. Sokolow quickly realized that Ishmael could communicate with him. Inspired by his discovery, Sokolow taught Ishmael everything he knew about the world, and eventually, he become Ishmael's research assistant, bringing him books on every topic. By the 1960s, Ishmael had become a highly educated, intelligent gorilla.

It's important that Sokolow first realizes that Ishmael is intelligent because Ishmael shows him sympathy. One necessary precondition for communication and true sentience, it would seem, is love and sympathy—a sign of Ishmael's future as a teacher. All of Ishmael's subsequent intellectual leaps are made possible because of this first, sincere gesture.

It was during the 1960s that Sokolow fell in love with a woman twenty years his junior. Eventually, Sokolow resolved to marry this woman, but he decided not to tell her about his communication with Ishmael. Thus, the woman couldn't understand why Sokolow spent so much time visiting Ishmael. She frequently asked him to send Ishmael away—a request that Sokolow naturally ignored. With his new wife, Sokolow had a child—a girl named Rachel.

It's made clear that Sokolow isn't a saint or a genius by any means. His need for love and companionship may be the source of his friendship with Ishmael, but it also compels him to seek love from people like Mrs. Sokolow, who seems not to love him in return, or at the very least doesn't share his interest in Ishmael.

After Rachel was born, Sokolow proposed that Ishmael be her mentor and tutor. Ishmael was delighted with this proposal, and began to spend long periods of time talking to Rachel. He was an excellent tutor, with the result that Rachel gained a master's degree in Biology by the time she was twenty. Unfortunately, Sokolow's wife continued to resent Ishmael for "stealing" Rachel from her.

Ishmael proves himself to be an excellent teacher, one who has rapidly outstripped Sokolow's level of intelligence through careful study and contemplation. This section of the book is a kind of "C.V." for Ishmael—an explanation of what qualifies him to teach the narrator about saving the world.

When Sokolow died in 1985, Rachel became Ishmael's benefactor. She moved Ishmael to a "retreat," where Ishmael was very comfortable, but not content. He wanted to be at the center of human civilization, teaching humans about their own culture. Ultimately, under pressure from Mrs. Sokolow, Ishmael moved to the city where he currently resides.

Although Ishmael has waxed nostalgic about the jungle, it's made clear that he has no intention of returning there. From the beginning, his identity was based on his interactions with humans, and now he is understandably reluctant to turn his back on them altogether. This shows how he values the "life law" of interconnectedness over personal comforts or safety.

The narrator, who has been listening all this time, asks Ishmael if he has taught many pupils. Ishmael replies that he has had four pupils, all of whom have been failures. He adds that he teaches the subject he knows best: captivity. He asks the narrator if he feels like a captive, and the narrator replies that he does—he just hasn't been able to identify where this feeling comes from. Ishmael nods and points out that in the 1960s, millions of people had the same feeling, but were unable to identify the source of their captivity—and as a result, their movement for "freedom" failed.

Ishmael now gives the narrator another version of the story he's just told. We must begin by asking "why," he argues—we must analyze the nature of the prison in which we find ourselves. If we don't do so, then all our efforts to save the world won't truly accomplish anything—like the radicals of the 1960s, we'll try to cure the symptoms without ever getting to the root cause of the problem.

Ishmael next asks the narrator to explain what has brought him to Ishmael. The narrator thinks, and then brings up a short story he wrote years ago. In his short story, the Nazis win World War II and wipe out all non-Aryan races, obliterating non-Aryan history, culture, art, and philosophy. One day, two Aryan men are talking to one another. The first man tells his friend that he can't shake the feeling that "there is some small thing that we're being *lied* to about."

From the beginning of the book, the narrator and Ishmael interact with one another through storytelling. Thus, the narrator can't explain literally why he's come to Ishmael—he has to use art and literature to explain himself in more metaphorical, oblique terms. This means that it's harder to grasp what the narrator means, but it also trains both the narrator and Ishmael to use their critical faculties at all times. Enlightenment is a struggle, not a passive listening process, Quinn argues.

Ishmael asks the narrator if he feels like the Aryan in his story—if he thinks he's being lied to. The narrator answers that he still feels this way, but not as frequently as he once did. This is because, practically speaking, it makes no difference whether humans are being lied to or not: it doesn't affect their day-to-day lives at all. With this, Ishmael holds up a hand and tells the narrator to come back the next day.

In this section, Ishmael and the narrator spell out the basic problem that they're going to confront: a problem that has no name, and which cannot be put into words easily. The implication here is that to define the problem is, by itself, already a partial solution to the problem.

The narrator leaves the building and thinks about everything he's witnessed that day. Everyone in his life thinks that he's sad and misanthropic—and they're probably right, he concedes.

We're given another side effect of the problem that the narrator has with the world—because he can't wrap his mind around it, he becomes depressed and grows to hate humanity.

The next day, the narrator wakes up and wonders if his visit to Ishmael's cage has been a dream. He travels back to the building, and finds Ishmael waiting for him. Ishmael begins his lesson without any preamble.

Even after the narrator comes to see Ishmael, there remains the distinct possibility that he won't come back. This reminds us that the path to enlightenment is always a struggle, and requires personal motivation and effort.

CHAPTER 2

Ishmael proceeds with his first lesson for the narrator. He points out that the narrator, like Ishmael himself, is obsessed with the history of Nazi Germany. How could it be, he asks the narrator, that millions of Germans accepted Hitler's proposal to murder the Jews? His answer is that Hitler told a story: the story of how Aryan people everywhere would rise up to inherit the world. Every German became "swept up" in this story, even if they didn't believe it to be literally true. Ishmael proposes that the modern world is "swept up" in another story, one that holds them captive. When the narrator points out that he can't think of any comparable story, Ishmael says that this is proof of the story's power: the story of civilization is as invisible to the citizen as water is to the fish.

Ishmael begins by establishing some commonalities between himself and the narrator. This is important, because the teacher-student relationship hinges upon trust and connection—the narrator won't listen to Ishmael if he considers him utterly alien. It's here that Ishmael establishes one of his most important ideas, the "water/fish" analogy. The most powerful lies, he suggests, are those, which we can't identify as lies—or can't identify at all. There's a famous quote that reinforces this idea: "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."

Ishmael brings up an important concept: Mother Culture. Mother Culture is the voice in the narrator's head, telling the narrator that all is well, and that the *status quo* is the "way things should be." There is almost no way for the narrator to escape Mother Culture altogether, because culture is everywhere. The narrator's only option is to understand the "story" that culture secretly tells—when this happens, he'll never be seduced by it again.

Ishmael uses personification to illustrate his point: there's a things called culture, which at times seems to be self-consciously keeping the narrator in a state of ignorance. Again, this point isn't literally *true—it's just a convenient fiction, useful for the narrator's education.*

Ishmael goes through some terminology before he gets any further into his teaching. Ishmael will divide the human world into two groups: the "Takers" and the "Leavers." These two groups correspond to the "civilized" and the "primitive" peoples of the world. The narrator objects that it's too facile to divide the world into only two categories, but Ishmael points out that civilization itself does so: everyone on Earth is either considered civilized—usually a member of Western civilization—or primitive—a member of some residual tribe or Stone Age culture.

This section reinforces an important point that Quinn has already alluded to—in order to gain wisdom and get anything done, it's necessary to reduce life to its simplest factors—in short, to tell fictional stories about it. An example of this is Ishmael *itself—a fable that aims to condense a lifetime of wisdom into only 13 chapters. Thus, while it's not, strictly speaking, "correct" to simplify the world into Takers and Leavers, it's necessary to do so for the purposes of the lesson.*

Ishmael next tells the narrator that the journey of education will be more important than the destination. In other words, Ishmael could tell the narrator the basic "lesson" he's going to teach, but it wouldn't mean anything to the narrator. Instead, Ishmael outlines the basic "lesson plan" he'll be using. Ishmael will aim to prove to the narrator that culture consists of a vast, fictional story that's repeated millions of times every day. People like the narrator have absorbed this story in many different forms—art, religion, family, etc. Ishmael will show that this story is a fiction, and replace the story with a new "perception of the world." The narrator accepts all of this.

For the narrator to learn properly, he must actively participate in his own education—he can't just sit and absorb what Ishmael tells him. The narrator must struggle and "work through" his own feelings and prejudices about culture, in order to arrive at a conclusion that 1) he recognizes to be the truth and 2) he can't forget about or dismiss. Ishmael's teaching strategy of asking leading questions is called the "Socratic method." This places the novel in a similar genre to philosophical "dialogues" of Ancient Greece—like those of Socrates.

Ishmael next defines some of his terms. A "story" is a scenario about god, man, and the world. "To enact" means to convert a story into a reality—thus, Hitler was trying to "enact" the story of the Aryan people's supremacy. A "culture" is a group of people enacting a story.

In this brief expository section, Quinn outlines some necessary terms that he'll use throughout the rest of the novel. This is another example of simplifying and reducing complex realities in the search of an overarching truth.

Ishmael outlines the basic story of the narrator's culture. History begins with the Leavers, a highly unsuccessful group of people who died out. Humans only became successful because of the emergence of the Takers—the humans who founded agriculture and developed civilization. Ishmael proposes instead that history is not the history of the Leavers, followed by that of the Takers, but rather the simultaneous history of the Leavers and the Takers, and the way these two groups enacted two different stories.

Ishmael's project is to show that history isn't teleological—it doesn't have an "end" or ultimate purpose. History isn't just the story of some old, weak people (Leavers), followed by the rise of new, intelligent people (Takers). Instead, the Takers and the Leavers have two different conceptions of how to live, and they "enact" these simultaneously. Ishmael leaves it to the narrator to judge for himself which worldview is better.

Ishmael tells the narrator that the lesson is essentially over for the day. He says that the narrator should spend the rest of his day thinking about what the one defining story of his culture is. The narrator isn't sure what this story could be: surely there's no one story that everyone in civilization believes. Ishmael insists that there is such a story, and the story is used to explain away every bad thing that culture causes: pollution, war, etc. This story is, naturally, very difficult to think of. Just as an ancient Greek would never have been able to answer the question, "What are your myths?", so the narrator can't think of his own culture's myth.

Ishmael gives the narrator his first "homework" assignment. It is a difficult one, and in fact, it seems to be the crux of Ishmael's lesson itself. In other words, Ishmael is asking the narrator to identify the central myth of Taker culture—the very thing that Ishmael has promised to reveal to the narrator. This reminds us that the narrator isn't here to listen to Ishmael lecture—he's here to work hard, challenge himself, and "re-wire" his brain through reasoning and dialogue.

Ishmael insists that the narrator's culture has a story, and moreover, a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning of this story is the culture's "creation myth." In response, the narrator can only say that his culture has no creation myth whatsoever.

Here we see the extent of the challenge the narrator faces—he's so conditioned to see the world in Taker terms that he can't step back and see the limits of his own ideology.

CHAPTER 3

The next day, when the narrator arrives at Ishmael's room, he sees an object sitting in his chair: a tape recorder. Ishmael instructs the narrator to record the story of his culture. The narrator continues to insist that his culture has no creation myth—his culture may have some idea where it comes from, but this is hardly a "story"—it is the truth. Ishmael points out that all cultures believe in their own myths, and tells the narrator to record the story of his culture.

The tape recorder serves much the same purpose as the Zen koan. The recorder by itself doesn't give any new information or wisdom to its user, but instead it acts as a kind of "neutral space" that allows the speaker to analyze his own feelings. By listening to his own voice on tape, the narrator will be better able to step back and perceive his "truths" as stories.

The narrator reluctantly begins talking into the tape recorder. The universe, he says, began either with the Big Bang or the Steady State. About seven billion years ago, the sun formed, followed by planet Earth. On Earth, about four billion years ago, life began. Life evolved in the oceans: fish, then reptiles, then mammals. About three million years ago, men evolved from apes. With this, the narrator falls silent—this, he insists is the story his culture believes: the truth.

The narrator's version of history is "true" in a sense, but, as Ishmael will show, it arranges facts in a fictional manner, creating a misleading, mythological narrative—a story that culminates with the evolution of humanity.

In response to the story the narrator has told, Ishmael looks amused. This story is clearly a fiction: to illustrate this, Ishmael tells the narrator to play the recording back again. The narrator does so, but doesn't hear anything that sounds fictional. Ishmael insists that the story the narrator has told is full of facts, but adds that the facts haven't been arranged in a true manner. To illustrate this, Ishmael tells a story of his own.

There are many different ways for a story to be fictional. The story can contain facts that are objectively wrong—saying that the Empire State Building is in Paris, for example, would be objectively false. On the other hand, a story can be fictional in the sense that it links together many truths in a misleading way. Ishmael will clarify what this means in his upcoming example.

Ismael tells a story about an anthropologist who goes to talk with a blob living in the ocean. The anthropologist asks the blob to tell him about the myths of the blob's culture. The blob is indignant: "We have no myths in our culture!", it insists. It goes on to tell the anthropologist the story of its culture: there was a Big Bang, the sun and planets formed, life appeared in the oceans, and then, after thousands of years, jellyfish appeared.

Ishmael's parable shows how arbitrary the narrator's "arrangement" of history was. The history of the universe doesn't "build up" to the emergence of humankind—on the contrary, humankind is just another minor phenomenon in the vast history of the universe. This misinterpretation of science was once very common in Darwinism—even trained scientists believed that evolution "progressed" and culminated in the emergence of the human species.

The narrator sees what Ishmael is getting at with his story: his culture sees the emergence of humanity as the signature event in the history of the universe. Everything beforehand was only leading up to the emergence to the human race. The truth, Ishmael points out, is that evolution doesn't start and stop because of humankind: evolution and change goes on. The narrator is forced to admit that the story he's been taught to believe is a myth.

Evolution isn't a process in which progress matters. A dinosaur is no more or less developed than a human being—both creatures have merely adapted to their environments in various ways. Thus, it's wrong to believe that humans are somehow superior to other animals, living or extinct, in any way. Humans are merely another small part of the history of life on Earth.

Ishmael tells the narrator that everyone in the world—whether religious or atheistic—believes in at least this shared premise: the world was made for humans. People have believed this premise for thousands of years, and it is utter mythology. The narrator is amazed by this observation, but can't disagree with it in the slightest.

It seems hard to dispute the fact that humans believe the world was made for them. Almost every religion "begins" with the creation of mankind—think of the Adam/Eve story, for example.

The lesson concludes with a discussion of blame. Ishmael points out that the notion that the world was made for humans is a way of diverting the blame for all the evil things that humans do. The narrator sees Ishmael's point: people can blame all their evil on the fact that the world "was made" for them, reasoning that, if the world had been made for jellyfish, they wouldn't have done anything bad. Having arrived at the beginning of the story of culture, Ishmael tells the narrator to return the next day with the middle of this story.

The notion that the world was made for humanity is both a testament to mankind's sense of power and responsibility and a sneaky way for humanity to avoid any real responsibility. It's as if humans have been given the "noble burden" of running the planet, a burden that causes them to occasionally make (forgivable) mistakes.

CHAPTER 4

The next day, Ishmael and the narrator meet to discuss the rest of the story of culture. The narrator is confident that he knows how the middle and end of the story go, and he begins to speak into the tape recorder.

The narrator seems to be catching on quickly as he spends more time with Ishmael, but whether he's really understood Ishmael's lessons, or only thinks that he has, remains to be seen.

The narrator begins his story of culture by observing that for thousands of years, man didn't *know* that the world was made for him. He lived at the mercy of his environment, no different from the animals. Then, eventually, he discovered the solution: he had to live in the same place, rather than wandering through the world. Thus, man could no longer be a hunter-gatherer—he had to become an agriculturist. When man discovered how to manipulate the environment enough to farm on it, everything else came easily: agriculture led to settlement, division of labor, class, trade, science, art, etc. This is the middle of the story of culture, the narrator concludes.

Quinn will return to this story many times in the course of the novel, each time telling it in a slightly different way. Here the narrator introduces a key event in history: the Agricultural Revolution. This is a society's transition from hunting and gathering its food, to cultivating and growing its food. In reality there were many "agricultural revolutions" at different times and in different parts of the world, but again Ishmael simplifies things in search of a basic truth. In many ways, the remainder of the novel consists of the narrator trying to perceive all the ramifications of the Agricultural Revolution.

Ishmael is impressed with the narrator's work: he agrees that agriculture represented the beginning of the narrator's culture. The premise of the story of the culture is that the world is a machine built to be used by the Takers: those who are clever enough to use agriculture to shape their environment. Ishmael asks the narrator what the purpose of the Earth is: in other words, what is man's destiny? The narrator is unsure how to answer.

Ishmael's style of teaching is effective but frequently frustrating. He compliments the narrator for his work, then immediately pushes him to go further, working out the conclusions of what he's just discovered. This style is convenient for Quinn's purposes, since he seeks to explain so much in less than 300 pages.

To answer his own question, Ishmael asks the narrator to imagine life without man. The narrator does so, and finds that he's visualizing a savage jungle, full of dangerous animals. From this image, Ishmael makes a provocative point: the world exists for man, and man's destiny is to rule the world—that is, to make it tame, safe, and controlled. This is the second part of the myth of the narrator's culture. Ishmael is surprised and saddened that the narrator isn't more amazed by what he's saying. In response, the narrator compares himself to an iceberg: he's capable of recognizing the error of his thinking, but he can't force himself to be excited by this new information.

Ishmael is essentially asking the narrator to describe the Taker "stereotypes" of Leaver society. The narrator has no real idea about what Leaver life consists of, and so he's forced to fall back on his preconceptions—preconceptions that have been passed down to him through stories of Taker culture. We also see the extent to which the narrator must overcome his apathy. He's been so desensitized and worn out by Taker culture that he can't muster any enthusiasm for his education.

Ishmael goes on with the lesson. Mankind didn't immediately develop agriculture: on the contrary, there were thousands of years where humans had to contend with other animals, and the elements, in order to survive. Thus, in order to prosper, humans had to "conquer" the world. The narrator is amazed when he realizes how pervasive this idea is in his society: he's always hearing about humans "conquering" the skies, the seas, space, etc. Ishmael seems pleased with the narrator's amazement and excitement at this idea.

The notion of the Takers conquering the world is hidden in plain view: it's so common that everyone takes it for granted. This is the first of many examples of Quinn's theory that to identify a problem is, in a sense, to solve the problem. When one notices how pervasive the rhetoric of "conquering" is to Taker culture, one can no longer be seduced by it.

As the lesson draws to a close, Ishmael brings up the concept of a bargain or a contract. The myth that mankind was made to conquer the world, much like the myth of the world being made for man, is designed to rationalize injustice, pain, and evil. In other words, people believe that pollution, war, poverty, etc., are in some sense justified because they're necessary byproducts of having a civilization: of having "air conditioning and automobiles and all the rest." But on the contrary, Ishmael concludes, the evils of the world aren't caused by human nature: they're the result of enacting the specific story that the narrator's culture believes.

Many of the greatest Western philosophers (or Taker philosophers, as Ishmael would say) believe that man is inherently evil or imperfect—we see this idea in Christianity, Romanticism, deconstructionism, etc. Ishmael disagrees strenuously with this idea—it's not that mankind *is flawed; it's that Taker culture is inherently wrong. We wrongly conflate human nature with Taker culture, because the Takers have come to dominate the world.*

CHAPTER 5

The next day, Ishmael begins the lesson with a summary of the narrator's progress so far: he's identified the beginning and the middle of the story. It's time to discuss the end.

As with a Zen koan, it's important that the narrator keep repeating himself—every time he does so, he looks at his thoughts with clearer eyes, unaltered by the influence of Taker culture.

The narrator uses the tape recorder to record his idea of the end of the story of culture. After conquering and world through agriculture and civilization, man is confronted with a problem: the Earth is a finite thing. Thus, mankind can't keep consuming the world's resources unapologetically: sooner or later, water and food will run out. The solution to this problem, the narrator concludes, is to keep conquering: thus, mankind will continue researching science, thereby finding ways to curb pollution and increase food productivity. Similarly, he will continue exploring the universe, searching for new worlds to conquer, and new resources to consume.

Quinn is writing Ishmael *at the end of the Cold War—a time when much of the world was united in optimism for the future. To name only one example, the distinguished political philosopher Francis Fukayama opined that the entire world was moving toward the "End of History"—a period in which there would be peace, democracy, and continuous progress. Quinn is highly skeptical of this new optimism, however. He thinks of it as a smokescreen for the fundamental contradiction in Taker culture.*

Ishmael is pleased with the narrator's work: the narrator, he says, has identified the "end" of the story of culture. However, he points out, this end would have been inconceivable only half a century ago. Previously, humans had believed that there was no end to their domination of the Earth, and no limit on the world's resources.

Ishmael (and Quinn) acknowledges that Taker culture has experienced a monumental change in the last half a century. Issues of environmentalism and pollution have come into the public sphere very quickly, thanks largely to the work of radicals in the 60s and 70s.

Ishmael asks the narrator to identify the reason that mankind's conquest of the Earth never results in utopia. This reason has been common knowledge for thousands of years, long before humans were aware of the concepts of pollution and finite resources. After some thought, the narrator proposes that humans' conquest never results in happiness because humans themselves are deeply flawed: they're greedy, destructive, etc. Ishmael nods that he's correct: right or wrong, this is part of the story of culture.

Almost all of Taker culture—literature, art, etc.—suggests that mankind is inherently flawed. One can look to the doctrine of Original Sin—a cornerstone of Christian thinking, and thus of Western culture—for a good example of this principle. Christianity maintains that man is born in a state of sin, which he can never entirely escape. This idea echoes through Western society to this day.

Ishmael clarifies his point—there is nothing fundamentally good or evil about human beings. Humans have long believed that their species is flawed and evil, but this is only because they're looking at a small "sample size." Human history stretches back three million years, but until recently, humans thought their history began only a few thousand years ago. Thus, they based their assessments of "humanity" on the behavior of one destructive, greedy civilization. Humanity itself is not evil—rather, the story of the Takers is a story of destruction and conquering.

To conclude that humans are evil is to ignore the vast majority of human history—a period during which humans did nothing evil, or had no conception of evil whatsoever. While Taker society may be flawed, the Takers certainly have no monopoly on humanity—they represent nothing more than a small, albeit influential, strain of the species. Ishmael's project is to illustrate how arbitrary and contradictory Taker culture is, pushing the narrator away from its dogmas.

Ishmael points out a peculiar quality of the Takers: their dependence on prophets. All Taker culture subscribes to a prophet figure, like Jesus, Buddha, or Mohammed. Leavers, on the other hand, don't worship prophets to remotely the same extent. Ishmael wants to discuss the importance of prophets in Taker culture.

This passage raises an interesting point—if prophets are fixtures of Taker society, then what is Ishmael? Why isn't he just another prophet, telling the narrator what to do and how to think? One potential answer to this question is that Ishmael wants the narrator to keep an open mind—to discover the truth for himself, through questioning and self-interrogation. In many ways, then, he's the opposite of a prophet.

Ishmael suggests that the prominence of prophets in Taker culture points to an acknowledgment that the Takers aren't capable of answering certain question for themselves. They're capable of great scientific and technological achievements, but the price they pay for this knowledge is ignorance of "how to live"—how to be happy, how to be peaceful, etc. For this reason, Takers turn to other people—prophets—for answers to these questions. In sum, Ishmael points out, Takers believe that human beings are fundamentally flawed, and that they'll never know how to live correctly. The narrator points out that these two points are one and the same. The fundamental flaw with humans, according to Taker culture, is that they don't know what will make them happy.

This chapter may seem repetitive to readers—at least four times, Ishmael and the narrator reiterate the theory that Takers are wrong to view humanity as fundamentally flawed. But this is part of Ishmael's strategy. Simply stating this idea once wouldn't accomplish anything. Like a Zen koan, it's necessary for the narrator to repeat the truth, each time seeing it in a slightly different light. Only through this process of repetition and analysis can the narrator truly abandon the influence of Taker culture.

Ishmael reviews what he and the narrator have discussed. Takers have created a depressing mythology for themselves: mankind is flawed, and there is no way to fight these flaws. As a result, people turn to crime, **drugs**, and many other things to fight their depression about this mythology. Ishmael suggests that there is another story to be told, however, one, which paints a different picture of mankind.

One implication of Ishmael's observations about Taker culture is that there's an irreconcilable contradiction at its center: Takers are supposed to be optimistic about their conquests, and yet they're hopelessly pessimistic about the virtues of the human species. Because there is no rational way to resolve this contradiction, Takers turn to self-destructive distractions.

Ishmael tells the narrator that tomorrow they'll investigate if there are other models of how to live, besides the one put forward by the Takers. He assures the narrator that there are, indeed, other ways to live, ones that exist outside the scope of the narrator's culture.

Ishmael keeps alluding to an alternate story of history: the story of the Leavers. Before he can tell the narrator about this story, however, he and the narrator must grasp what, fundamentally, is wrong with the Taker story.

CHAPTER 6

The narrator arrives at Ishmael's building the next day. Ishmael seems amused with the narrator, who is feeling nervous about venturing outside culture to look for answers.

At times, Ishmael uses humor and mockery to distance the narrator from his own fears and anxieties. The narrator is going through a complete and potentially painful shift of worldview, so it's important that he keep a sense of levity as well.

Ishmael begins by proposing that humans don't need prophets to live, contrary to the beliefs of the Takers. He compares the dilemma of the Leaver to that of the pilot, 100 years ago. Before the Wright Brothers, there was no certain information about how to fly: many scientists had theories about how human beings could be able to fly, but nothing was certain. The only way to discover human flight was to proceed by trial and error. In much the same way, the only way to discover "how to live" is to proceed by trial and error, trying things in one's own life and seeing if they work. Ishmael suggests that what humans needed, in the case of human flight and in the case of how to live, is a *law*—that is, a piece of information about how things *always* are, not merely how they are in one particular situation. Ishmael promises to give the narrator some universal, unbreakable laws about how to live.

Ishmael depends upon analogies to clarify his point. Here, he makes an important analogy about the laws of the universe. The advantage of laws, Ishmael argues, is that they're always true—they're universal. Thus, if one knows the laws of life, one can use them to build a better life for oneself, regardless of one's culture, where one lives, or what one does.

Ishmael suggests that humans must look for the laws of how to live by studying life itself. The narrator interprets this to mean that humans should study only human life—an interpretation that Ishmael sarcastically shoots down, much to the narrator's annoyance. Ishmael stresses that humans should study the behavior of all living things, not only human beings, even if Mother Culture says that humans have nothing to learn from animals.

Even after the narrator recognizes how foolish human beings are to think of themselves as the "center" of the universe, he continues to reflexively think of humanity in exactly these terms. This shows how influential Taker dogma has been—the narrator has to break himself of his bad habits, and this will take some time.

Ishmael makes an analogy between the laws of gravity and the laws of how to live. Newton's great achievement, he argues, wasn't to identify that gravity existed—it was to show that gravity always worked in the same way, and that these rules held everywhere in the universe. Similarly, nothing Ishmael says will be surprising to the narrator—the value of the lesson will be in illustrating that there are laws of how to live that never change. The laws of how to live can be applied both to civilization and to "the wild"—they are truly universal.

This section clarifies an important difference between Ishmael and the prophets he's discussed in earlier chapters. Where the prophets of Taker culture think that they're imparting impressive "new" information, Ishmael is much more modest in his aims—he's going to go over some basic truths. To make an analogy: he's not going to reinvent the wheel—he's going to "remind" the narrator how the wheel works.

Ishmael details three "humiliations" that mankind has endured. The first humiliation was the discovery that the Earth isn't the center of the universe. The second humiliation was the discovery that humans are descended from the same ancestors as other animals. The third humiliation, which the Takers haven't discovered yet, is that humans aren't exempt from the laws of life, just as they're not exempt from the laws of gravity. Ishmael will go on to explain what these laws are, analogizing them to the laws of gravity or thermodynamics in the process.

Ishmael's theory alludes to a famous essay by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, in which he discussed the "three humiliations" of modern mankind: the Copernican revolution (the earth isn't the center of the universe), the Darwinian revolution (that man is another animal, subject to the laws of evolution), and the Freudian revolution (that man has a subconscious). Ishmael's three humiliations are slightly different, but they amount to the same point: in the grand scheme of things, man simply isn't that special or important.

Ishmael makes another analogy between Takers and pilots of the past. If a pilot were to build a flying machine that didn't work, he might test it by jumping out of a building. When he jumped, he wouldn't immediately realize that his machine was failing—the feeling of free fall would resemble flight to the point where he might think his machine was a total success. Nevertheless, this pilot would eventually hit the ground and die. This is the position of the Takers: they think that they've defied the laws of gravity with agriculture and civilization, when in fact, they've only *delayed* the natural laws of life. Except for a few realists like Thomas Malthus, Takers are blissfully unaware that their civilizations are ultimately going to go extinct. On this note, the chapter ends.

One of the most important challenges to Taker culture is that there hasn't been any evidence that it's failing—because Takers have only been dominant for a few thousand years, they believe that their model of world domination is working perfectly. But this is only because they don't have much evidence to work with. In the grand scheme of things, Ishmael maintains, their scheme is failing abysmally. The goal, then, is to change the Takers' minds about conquest before it becomes too late and most of the life on the Earth goes extinct.

CHAPTER 7

Ishmael poses a thought experiment to the narrator: there is a society that appears perfect in every way. The people are happy and well educated, everyone is very friendly, etc. However, the people in this community eat other people: they refer to this other group as "B people." In turn, the B people eat a third group, the "C people," and the C people complete the cycle by eating the original group, the "A people." Ishmael asks the narrator what the one, fundamental law of this place is. The narrator has a difficult time answering this question. There seems to be some unbreakable law to this place, but he can't identify it.

Ishmael's latest story is, like a Zen koan, designed to provoke thought and debate by being deliberately obscure. Even if the narrator can't "solve" the meaning of this parable, it's important that he try to do so anyway. By trying to understand it, he practices stepping back and reducing things to their simplest truths, and also reminds himself that Taker culture has obscured the real meaning of many things.

Ishmael reveals to the narrator that the thought experiment he outlined isn't an experiment at all: it's the structure of life on Earth. Predators eat herbivores, who eat plants, which consume the dead bodies of predators. The key point is that there is no true animosity in this arrangement. Lions and gazelles, for instance, aren't "enemies" at all.

Ishmael's interpretation of his own parable underscores a point: Taker culture obscures many basic truths. In other words, the narrator was unable to grasp the meaning of Ishmael's story because he's not used to thinking about communities in this way.

Ishmael finishes his point: for millions of years, all life on Earth obeyed the cyclical laws of consumption that Ishmael has just outlined. Then, a few thousand years ago, one small group of humans, the Takers, decided to disobey the cyclical laws. In a short time, the Takers succeeded in causing great harm and devastation to the planet. The Taker story—that is, the explanation for how this happened—is that humans are fundamentally flawed. This is clearly nonsense, however. Humans destroyed the Earth because they broke a law of life, not because they are themselves inherently evil.

This could well be Ishmael's "thesis statement" for the entire chapter: the universal law of life is that all organisms depend on one another in a cyclical fashion. Therefore, the Takers are wrong to violate this law, and in the end, they will pay the penalty for doing so. Even though this is a perfectly clear point, it's not enough for Ishmael to simply state it for the narrator—the narrator must understand it for himself, and so the chapter must go on.

Ishmael dismisses the narrator, telling him to return when he's discovered the fundamental laws that govern the community of life. The narrator leaves, feeling so distressed by what he's learned about humanity that he decides to go have a **drink**. As he drinks, he thinks that Ishmael's latest assignment seems impossible, or at least tremendously depressing. He also wonders what he'll do when he finishes with Ishmael's lessons. He realizes that he doesn't only want a teacher for a few weeks: he wants someone to guide him for the rest of his life.

Even though Ishmael has made it clear that the emphasis on prophets and revelation is only a flaw of Taker society, the narrator can't free himself from his desire for a prophet of his own. This shows that the narrator still has a long way to go before he frees himself from Taker dogma. It also reminds us that Ishmael's project as a teacher is to bring the narrator to the point where he doesn't need *a teacher at all.*

CHAPTER 8

The narrator takes four days to find the law of the community of life. He walks into Ishmael's building, rehearsing what he's going to tell Ishmael. He also notes that it was important that he find the law by himself.

The narrator is now beginning to grasp the importance of Ishmael's teaching methods—he sees how important it is to do his own thinking, instead of passively relying on others to think for him.

In Ishmael's room the narrator dives into explaining the law of life. As an outline, he proposes that Takers do four things that no other life forms do. The first such thing is to exterminate competitors. Whereas animals never hunt each other to extinction—only killing what they need to survive—Takers will often kill simply to kill. Ishmael agrees with this, and adds that some animals *do* kill in self-defense. Nevertheless, animals never aim to exterminate rival communities: the goal is only ever to feed or protect themselves.

The narrator's first observation about humanity is that it's unnecessarily violent. Humans often take pleasure or satisfaction in killing for no practical purpose whatsoever. This is precisely why humans wiped out the American buffalo, to name only one example.

The narrator goes on. The second thing that only Takers do is systematically destroy rivals' food in order to make room for their own. For example, they might clear a field to make way for a restaurant, reasoning that the field is their property. In the "wild," animals only ever take what they need for themselves. The third thing Takers do, the narrator continues, is deny their competitors access to food. Takers claim the entire world as their property, the result being that animals no longer have access to the food they need to survive. Ishmael nods in agreement.

Ishmael reduces everything to the most basic instinct: the need for food. He then shows flaws in Taker culture by showing that Takers systematically wipe out other animals' sources of food. In part, this is merely a byproduct of their haphazard desire to destroy and control. Takers might not be consciously aiming to render predators extinct by killing too many of their prey, but this is the result nonetheless.

The fourth thing Takers do, the narrator concludes, is to store food. For example, if a lion kills a gazelle today, it doesn't kill a second gazelle for tomorrow—humans, on the other hand, store up food for the future. Ishmael disagrees with this notion: he points out that animals *do* store food: they store it in their bodies. Moreover, other animals store food for each other. Plants "store" food and energy for herbivores, just as herbivores store food and energy for carnivores, and so on.

This point will become very important toward the end of the novel—so much so that it's surprising that Ishmael doesn't go over it in more detail now. While it's certainly true that animals store food and energy in their bodies, humans certainly store more *food and energy outside their own bodies. Indeed, the philosopher John Locke believed that the defining event in human history was the invention of complicated ways to store food and energy—the invention of money being the most important of these.*

Ishmael sums up the narrator's observations into one remark: "You may compete, but you may not wage war." He and the narrator agree that if all life forms did, in fact, wage war on one another, then there would be no diversity: there would only be one kind of life form in each species. This would be a major problem, because diversity is nature's best survival mechanism. If there were only a few species on the planet, one or more of them could easily die out due to changing environmental conditions. The narrator realizes that the Takers are literally and deliberately "at war" with the world.

The conclusion in this section—that Takers are deliberately at war with nature—needs some clarification. It's not literally true that all Takers are consciously fighting nature—most human-caused extinctions are the result of an attempt to maximize profits, not a desire for mass murder. Nevertheless, for the purposes of the story Ishmael is telling, it's convenient to think that the Takers are "deliberately" fighting nature in an attempt to control every aspect of it.

Ishmael asks the narrator what happens when one species breaks the law of life. The narrator realizes what would happen: the Takers would begin by dominating all the animals they can eat. They would next try to dominate all the animals and plants that their own prey eats. Next, they would try to control the energy sources that feed the animal and plant life consumed by their prey, and so on—the goal for Takers is to reshape the entire food chain so as to favor their own sources of food. In other words, the domination of any one species of Takers has the effect of reducing diversity among all species.

In this expository section, the narrator arrives at an important conclusion about the Takers. They inhabit a position of such power that they influence the biology and ecology of the entire world, to an extent that would have been inconceivable before the Agricultural Revolution.

The narrator thinks of something else—agriculture breaks the laws of life by waging war on rival life forms. Ishmael objects, however, saying that this is only the narrow Taker definition of agriculture. It is perfectly possibly to manipulate one's environment without going to war with nature—in fact, all life forms change their environment in some way. Agriculture as Takers have practiced it doesn't only consist of settlement—it consists of constant, limitless expansion. In short, he concludes, human civilization isn't against the laws of competition, it's subject to the laws of competition.

This is an important section because it shows that Ishmael doesn't have a problem with agriculture itself. By itself, agriculture is no different than any of the other ways that life forms alter their environments—even animals practice basic forms of environmental manipulation. The problem, for Ishmael, begins when agriculture becomes the defining tool of human civilization—when it becomes a weapon used to wage war on the Earth.

Ishmael asks the narrator to sum up what they've discussed so far. The narrator realizes that any species that tries to wage war on its environment will end up destroying the world. There is no fundamental "human" flaw that makes this the case—in other words, humans aren't inherently wicked for destroying the world.

Ishmael has made this point several times, but it's important for him to reiterate it, because it's so easy to fall into the bad habit of blaming everything on "human nature."

The narrator raises an objection to the laws of nature that he and Ishmael have been discussing—he says it's possible to be a Taker and also limit expansion. Ishmael points out the obvious Malthusian truth, however. Any increase in food production inevitably results in an increase in population, necessitating still more food production. At any given time, Takers are producing more food than they need. When there were five billion people on the planet, many of whom were starving, the Takers were producing six billion people's worth of food. When eventually the population grew to six billion, the Takers produced seven billion people's worth. Increased production never results in a stable population—it only fuels more population growth, a phenomenon that must, Ishmael concludes, be stopped.

Ishmael alludes to the work of Thomas Malthus here (see Background Information). Malthus maintained that increases in food productivity would always result in a bigger population, thereby negating the effectiveness of the increases. Although Malthus's ideas have been around for 250 years, it was only during the 1960s and 70s that they began to show up in economics, statistics, and ethnography. The rapid growth of the Third World—Africa, the Middle East, Asia, etc.—triggered a great interest in sustainable development.

The narrator suggests that birth control might be used to fight the problem of population growth. Ishmael points out that birth control has never resulted in successful population control—it's always being discussed as an option for the future, but never actually being used in the present. This is because Takers don't want to limit their numbers—they want to expand limitlessly.

At the time when Ishmael *was published, birth control had only been widely available for a few decades. Perhaps Ishmael is too hasty in deciding that birth control will* never *be an effective deterrent for population growth—but the reader and the narrator must make up their own minds about this.*

Ishmael points to a book lying on a desk behind the narrator: *The American Heritage Book of Indians*. The narrator opens the book and reads it for a few minutes, amazed that there are so many native tribes in his country. Ishmael suggests how population growth has been controlled for thousands of years. In modern-day New York, the population is poor and overcrowded. In response, people move to other, less crowded areas—Arizona, New Mexico, etc.—but the Hopi community, centuries ago, had no such option. They couldn't just leave their society and join the Navajo, because of the immense cultural differences between tribes. Thus, the Hopi had no choice but to limit their populations.

One effective deterrent of population growth is culture. This reminds us that Ishmael's project isn't to "strip away" the myths of culture and replace them with scientific truth. On the contrary, he's trying to replace a flawed culture with a better one. Neither culture—that of the Leavers or that of the Takers—is objectively "true," but one results in sustainability, peace, and stability, while the other results in violence, environmental disaster, and extinction.

Ishmael returns to the subject of laws. A week ago, he reminds the narrator, the narrator believed that there were no laws governing how people must live. The one law he and the narrator have arrived at is that species that wage war on their environments will ultimately go extinct. This law says nothing specific about how people should live their lives, just as the laws of aerodynamics say nothing specific about how to build a plane. Nevertheless, the law proves what Takers refuse to believe: humans are not special, but subject to the same scientific rules as all other life forms.

Ishmael clarifies the relationship between laws and stories. A law is a scientific fact about the way the world works, while a story is a reaction to a law: an interpretation of how to live in a world where such a law is true. The Takers choose to tell a story that ignores the law of life. The Leavers, by contrast, choose to tell a story which recognizes that the law of life is the truth. Notably, Ishmael doesn't yet explain exactly what this second story is.

Ishmael goes on to describe the flaws in Taker culture. Takers believe that humans are special and exempt from the world's laws, but also that they "pay" for their specialness with depression, madness, suicide, etc. Leavers, by contrast, have very low rates of these problems. According to Takers, this is because Leavers are too "primitive" to suffer from such things. There is also another theory of why the Leavers seem so much happier than the Takers, the "Noble Savage" theory. According to this notion, primitive people are happier because they live closer to nature, and their lives are easier and simpler. Ishmael doesn't subscribe to this theory at all, he explains. On the contrary, he maintains that both Takers and Leavers are enacting different stories—there's nothing more or less innocent about the Leavers or the Takers.

The Noble Savage theory is as old as civilization itself—people who live in cities are nostalgic for a simpler, more peaceful way of life, and thus they fetishize people who seem to live outside of civilization. One notable proponent of the Noble Savage theory was Jean Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher who lived during the 18th century. Rousseau praised "savages" in exactly the terms that the narrator outlines: he admired their proximity to nature and the ease of their lifestyle. The problem with Rousseau's ideas, Ishmael maintains, is that they treat Leavers as children—Leavers are no simpler or more innocent than Takers, just different.

There is nothing inherently better about the Leavers than the Takers, Ishmael concludes. African Bushmen, Native American Navajo, Brazilian Kreen-Akrore, and other Leaver cultures are happier and better off than most Takers, but certainly not because they live closer to nature. Rather, Leavers are happier because they live their lives according to the laws of life, rather than trying to break those laws. Just as the Takers have their own cultural story, the Leavers have one, too. Ishmael promises to tell the narrator this story during their next lesson.

In the end, Takers and Leavers are both human beings. Its irresponsible, Ishmael argues, to confuse Taker culture with human nature. In reality, "human nature" as we understand it is only a story that the Takers have been telling for a few thousand years. In order to get in touch with the laws of life—and the essence of human nature—people need to rethink Taker culture.

CHAPTER 9

When the narrator returns the next day, he's surprised to see Ishmael waiting for him on the other side of the **glass window** (the narrator's side now), sitting on some cushions. This sight makes the narrator realize how important the glass between them had been. As he sits down near Ishmael, the narrator feels a little wary, but he notices that Ishmael seems to look at him in exactly the same way as before.

As the narrator proceeds with his education, he gets closer and closer to Ishmael, both literally and metaphorically. Ishmael is no longer behind glass, disconnected from his student—now he's sitting alongside the narrator, trying to solve the same problems of life and the environment. Thus Ishmael isn't, properly speaking, a prophet—instead he's trying to lead the narrator to make up his own mind about the world. We are also reminded that Ishmael, the teacher, is still a potentially dangerous animal—a fully-grown gorilla—so his physical proximity to the narrator adds a new element to an otherwise cerebral, philosophical novel.

Ishmael begins the lessons by drawing a simple diagram. The diagram shows the timeline of human history, beginning three million years ago. For the Leavers, life is virtually the same now as it was in the past. For the Takers, however, the Agricultural Revolution, which occurred approximately 10,000 years ago, changed the quality of life enormously. There is no specific end to the Agricultural Revolution, Ishmael concludes. It's still spreading all over the world.

Ishmael believes that the Agricultural Revolution is constantly being enacted throughout the world. This suggests a kind of stasis in the world of the Takers—no true progress is being made, but only a continuous repetition of the same major breakthrough.

Ishmael moves on with the lesson. About 2,000 years ago, he says, the Takers began to believe in a story. This story had been told by the Leavers for many thousands of years beforehand—in fact, the original purpose of the story was to explain *why* the Takers left the Leavers behind. The narrator says he can't imagine what Ishmael is talking about. Ishmael seems annoyed, and says that he will tell the narrator a different story until the point is clear.

At times there's tension between Ishmael and the narrator, especially when Ishmael thinks the narrator has said or done something stupid. It remains to be seen what the result of this tension will be. For the time being, however, it's mildly humorous to see Ishmael annoyed with his human student.

Ishmael explains that Takers believe that they have a special knowledge of how to rule the world. They also believe that the Leavers do not have this knowledge—this is precisely why they *don't* rule the world. The story that the Takers tell themselves unites Takers, Leavers, and, most importantly of all, gods.

One important aspect of the Takers' culture is that they have their own theory about the Leavers. This makes sense: in order to understand themselves, the Takers need to convince themselves that those who don't share their philosophy are wrong.

Ishmael tells a story about man and the gods. The gods created a vast, complicated world, full of diverse species. One day, the gods were surveying their work, when they noticed a fox hunting for food. Some of the gods wanted to send a quail in the fox's path, feeding the fox. Others wanted to save the quail from death. The gods began to argue among one another. They realized that no matter what they did to manage the vast world they'd created, some animals would live and some animals would die. There was no way to please everyone.

It's impossible to tell where Ishmael is going with this story, but it's a "story" in the sense that he's already explained: it unites man, the world, and the gods. The dilemma that Ishmael explains in this story is the dilemma of life. It's impossible to please everyone, because life is a competition between the species—life for one species depends on death for another.

Eventually, Ishmael continues, the gods found a way to rule their world. They found a Tree of Knowledge, containing a special fruit. When the gods ate the fruit, they gained the knowledge necessary to run the garden: the knowledge of who lives and who dies. The next day, they sent a quail to be eaten by the fox, but as the quail died, they told it to be calm—the gods were looking out for it. The day after, they sent no quail to the fox, and the fox went hungry—nevertheless, the gods consoled the fox and told it to continue believing in their power. In this way, the gods ruled the world, pleasing some species one day and other species the next day.

The story Ishmael is telling bears a deliberate resemblance to the Adam and Eve story found in the Biblical Book of Genesis. Unlike the Adam and Eve story, however, in reality there can be no "terrestrial paradise" in which everything lives in perfect harmony. On the contrary, the "harmony" that the "gods" create is a compromise: sometimes animals die, and sometimes they live. Because nature is inherently a place of competition, it's impossible for all life forms to live together—everything must eventually die in order to feed something else.

Ishmael continues with his story. One day, a creature named Adam was born in the gods' world. The gods weren't sure what to do with Adam. Some feared that Adam, too, would eat from the Tree of Knowledge. If Adam were to do so, he wouldn't gain any real knowledge of who lives and who dies—worse, he would falsely *believe* that he had this knowledge. As a result, he would conquer the entire world the gods had created, killing off other animals. With this in mind, they decided to tell Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

Ishmael argues that the Tree of Knowledge is a kind of placebo—by eating from it, Adam thinks *he has gained wisdom, when in reality, the tree gives no wisdom of its own, but only the illusion of wisdom.*

The narrator has been listening to Ishmael's story, fascinated. He notices a Bible sitting on a shelf behind him, and opens the Bible to Genesis. He points out to Ishmael that the Bible says nothing about *why* the Tree of Knowledge was forbidden to Adam. Ishmael says that this isn't surprising: Takers have never been able to figure out why knowledge of who lives and who dies is anything but beneficial to them. The Adam and Eve story was originally written from the point of view of the Leavers—those who realized why it was wrong for mankind to decide who lives and who dies. If the Takers had written the story, they would have called the Fall the Ascent or the Liberation.

Ishmael's analysis of the Bible makes an important point: there's no convincing reason in Christianity that explains why it was evil for Adam to eat from the Tree. All the explanations of this "sin" are unconvincing, hinging on an arbitrary association of knowledge with evil. Ishmael's conclusion is that Christians themselves don't understand the true meaning of their own ideology. In reality, the Adam/Eve story is a coded history of the environment, and mankind's relationship with it.

Ishmael makes an important clarification: the Takers don't have a monopoly on agriculture. There were, and always have been, Leavers who practice agriculture. The Agricultural Revolution did not merely consist of the *discovery* of agriculture, but rather the Takers' insistence that everyone of the planet must also practice agriculture. There was a Native American tribe, the Hohokam, who once practiced advanced agriculture, but eventually gave it up. Such an action is essentially forbidden among the Takers. For them, everyone must practice aggressive agriculture, now and forever.

Ishmael has made this point once before, but because he seems to be attacking agriculture, it's important that he remind us. Agriculture, it should be remembered, isn't inherently bad—that is, it isn't inherently a violation of the laws of life. On the contrary, agriculture is just another way of altering the environment. It's only when agriculture becomes dogma, to be spread around the world, that it becomes dangerous.

Ishmael asks the narrator where the story of the Fall comes from. While the authors of the story might appear to be Hebrew, Ishmael insists that the story of the Fall was already well known long before the Hebrews wrote it down. The narrator says that he has no idea who wrote the story. In response, Ishmael dismissively tells him that it was the Semites, the ancient ancestors of the Hebrews, and the narrator feels a flash of annoyance.

Here there's another brief conflict between Ishmael and the narrator. It's as if Ishmael has been thinking about these issues for so many years that he expects everyone else to follow along with him as quickly as they can. Quinn's book is a work of fiction, but also a partial re-interpretation of Biblical history.

Ishmael draws the narrator a map, showing the Arabian Peninsula at the dawn of the Agricultural Revolution. In the Fertile Crescent, there were agriculturalists (the Takers), while surrounding this area there were nonagricultural peoples (the Leavers). Ishmael then draws a second map, showing the same area a few thousand years later. By this time, agriculture had spread throughout the continent. Nevertheless, it had not yet spread to the south of the Arabian Peninsula, where the Semites, the ancestors of the Hebrews, lived as herders.

The conflict between the Takers and the Leavers is often understood in metaphorical terms. Here, however, Ishmael suggests that at one point in history, it was a literal, violent conflict—a full-fledged war between hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists.

Ishmael makes his point: the Biblical story of Cain and Abel is a thinly veiled metaphor for the first clash between Takers and Leavers: the agriculturalist Caucasians and the Semitic herders, respectively. In the Cain and Abel story, Cain, a farmer, made God an offering of agricultural products, while Abel, a herder, offered livestock, animal pelts, and other objects common to the herder lifestyle. Because God preferred Abel's offering, Cain was jealous. Thus, he killed Abel, his own brother. As punishment, God made Cain wander the Earth. The fact that God chose Abel's offering over Cain's, Ishmael argues, suggests that the Cain and Abel story was originally a piece of Semitic war propaganda, designed to show that the gods favored herders over agriculturalists.

The story of Cain and Abel begins when Cain and Abel make two different kinds of sacrifice in an attempt to please and honor God. Ishmael's point is that God's preference for Abel the herder's sacrifice signifies the Semites' preference for a simple herder lifestyle, in contrast to an agricultural lifestyle.

The narrator suggests that the "mark of Cain" refers to the white, pale faces of the victorious Caucasians. Just as Cain was forced to wander the Earth, so the Caucasians, since defeating the Semites, have spread across the globe. Ishmael seems strangely indifferent to this information. He concludes that the Semites' story of Cain and Abel was passed down to their descendants, the Hebrews, who recorded it without fully understanding it. Thus, a Leaver story became a fixture of Taker society.

It's important that the narrator, not Ishmael himself, makes racial arguments about the meaning of the "mark of Cain." This suggests that Ishmael isn't interested in placing the "blame" for Taker dominance on any one racial group. Also (as we'll see toward the end of the book), Ishmael doesn't believe that racial politics are the best course of action for radicals looking to alter the status quo. On the contrary, altering Taker mythology would be a more effective route of tackling the roots of inequality.

Ishmael goes on to explain how the Takers took up the Leavers' version of history. In the story of the Fall, the acceptance of agriculture isn't presented as a free choice, but rather as a horrible curse: God expels Adam and Eve from the garden of terrestrial paradise, forcing them to turn to farming and agriculture to survive.

Ismael's explanation of the Adam/Eve story suggests that the Takers would never write a story that describes Taker culture in in such negative terms. Therefore the story must have come from a non-Taker culture.

The narrator asks Ishmael where Eve figures in to the story of the Fall. Ishmael replies that Eve's name means "life." In general, he goes on, men and woman have markedly differently roles in population growth. This suggests that Eve is a symbol of the temptation that challenges all Leaver cultures. In a nomadic tribe for example, the population is always in danger of growing too large, to the point where it won't be able to support itself. In a Taker culture, on the other hand, it's supposedly feasible to have a large family with many children, because advanced agriculture and aggressive expansion provide the necessary resources for such an undertaking. In this way, the narrator realizes, Eve symbolizes the temptation of life itself. When Adam eats from the Tree of Knowledge, he gives in to the temptation to have many children, certain that his knowledge will make his decision possible.

Ishmael's explanation of Eve's role in the Fall represents one of the first times in the novel that he discusses women and femininity in such specific terms. It's also in this section that Quinn illustrates the inherent "bargain" that constitutes human culture. For instance, Adam has to choose between having a large family and surviving. The danger, Ishmael suggests, arises when Takers believe themselves to be exempt from the bargain—when they believe that they can, in fact, have their cake and eat it too.

Together, Ishmael and the narrator sum up what they've found. The Adam and Eve story, quite simply, does not make sense: the Christian explanation is that Adam was in a state of blissful ignorance before he ate from the Tree of Knowledge, and afterwards, it was knowledge itself that made him miserable. Neither the narrator nor Ishmael finds this convincing. The truth about the story of the Fall, they agree, is that it was written by Leavers, *about* Takers. From the perspective of the Leavers, the Takers sacrificed stability and peace because they believed that their knowledge of agriculture and technology would allow them to break the laws of life.

Quinn plays on the contradictions and ambiguities in the Book of Genesis, and regardless of whether one believes that his scholarship is accurate or "true," it's important to keep in mind that this reinterpretation of the Bible is merely an illustration *of Ishmael's theory of Takers and Leavers, not an end in itself. In other words, it wouldn't weaken Quinn's argument at all if a Biblical scholar disagreed with his interpretation—this chapter is simply a reshaping of one story into another.*

CHAPTER 10

After this lesson, the narrator gets an unexpected visitor. His uncle is in town, and he ends up staying with him for two days, though the entire time the narrator wants him to leave. After the uncle departs, the narrator finds that he has work to do, and so he doesn't see Ishmael for another two days. As the narrator works, he feels a sense of dread that he can't put into words.

One of the major disadvantages of Taker life as Ishmael portrays it is that it's always busy. Thus, the narrator gets distracted in the middle of his enlightenment, delayed by the most banal of things—an obligation to entertain a family member who is in town.

In the middle of his work, the narrator realizes that he has a sore tooth. He goes to a dentist, and ends up having one his molars removed. The dentist prescribes **painkillers**, which the narrator consumes along with bourbon. As a result of his dentist appointment, the narrator misses another day of his lessons with Ishmael.

When the narrator is away from Ishmael's lessons, he ends up right back in the self-destructive cycle of Taker culture—drinking and taking painkillers.

The narrator returns to Ishmael's building after nearly a week away, and is surprised to find workers clearing out the room. He asks one of these workers what happened to the old tenant. The worker guesses that "the old lady" wasn't paying rent.

We're reminded that even Ishmael isn't above Taker society—he still has to play by its rules, and this means paying rent.

Determined to find Ishmael, the narrator looks through the phone book for the last name "Sokolow." He finds the address for a Grace Sokolow, which he traces to a magnificent mansion outside of the city. There, the narrator speaks to a butler, who informs him that Grace Sokolow died three months ago. The narrator presses the butler, whose name is Partridge, for details about Ishmael, but Partridge is reluctant to tell the narrator anything. In the end, he tells the narrator that it's none of his business how Mrs. Sokolow died, where Rachel lives, or what happened to Ishmael.

Even as the narrator learns more, his path to enlightenment doesn't seem to be getting any easier. This reinforces the idea that the narrator isn't a passive receptacle for Ishmael's theories—he constantly has to be deciding whether or not it's worth it to continue listening (or in this case, to go about finding his teacher). We're also reminded that Ishmael, for his part, isn't some divine voice of reason, but is a physical being who is essentially powerless in human society.

In order to find Ishmael, the narrator places an ad in the paper, appealing to "friends of Ishmael." No one answers this ad, so the narrator decides to search circuses and fairs for new gorillas. Eventually, he finds a carnival, the Darryl Hicks Carnival, which has acquired a new gorilla named "Gargantua." With this in mind, the narrator drives two hours to the carnival, where he finds Ishmael displayed in a cage. As he approaches the cage, he overhears two men talking. The first man says that the gorilla could easily rip away the bars of his cage. The second man agrees, but notes, laughing, that the gorilla doesn't know this. The narrator is infuriated by this conversation.

The narrator's anger at the men's conversation suggests that he's become loyal to Ishmael after only a few lessons with him. We're also reminded that imprisonment is an important theme of the text. We might ask why Ishmael doesn't free himself from his prison, but it would seem that Ishmael recognizes that there's more than one kind of prison. Even if he were to break away from the circus, he'd still be trapped by Taker society. His only option is to teach others, reminding himself that he's not truly free at all.

The narrator approaches Ishmael, who merely looks at him in silence. The narrator asks Ishmael why he didn't try to avoid his eviction notice—Ishmael must have been forewarned of Mrs. Sokolow's death. Ishmael says nothing. The narrator asks Ishmael if Ishmael is angry. Ishmael tells the narrator not to patronize him. He adds that he and the narrator can go on with their lessons—there's no need for the narrator to become "failure number five."

It's not immediately clear why Ishmael is angry with the narrator, but it seems to be because the narrator has abandoned Ishmael for nearly a week. Ishmael wishes that the narrator would step away from his petty obligations to Taker society and focus exclusively on his lessons. This is an unrealistic expectation, of course, and shows that Ishmael, too, is subject to emotion and error.

The narrator, relieved to be talking to Ishmael once again, asks Ishmael how they'll communicate from now on. Even as he says this, a family approaches the gorilla, and sees the narrator seemingly talking to a mute animal. Ishmael tells the narrator to stop talking and leave him alone. The narrator insists that there must be some way to free Ishmael from his cage, but Ishmael says that he'd rather live in captivity than depend on other people for food and shelter. He tells the narrator to go away, and the narrator reluctantly does so.

Ishmael reveals that he's willing to endure captivity just so he won't have to depend on other people. This seems unusual, as Ishmael has depended on other people for as long as he's been self-aware. He depended on Sokolow for education and friendship, on Rachel for financial support, and on his students for satisfaction and happiness. This change in Ishmael's mood suggests that he too struggles with apathy and cynicism, and it hints at physical troubles to come.

The narrator has dinner and a **drink** at a nearby restaurant. He returns to the carnival around 9 pm. He bribes a carnival worker to let him talk to the gorilla for a few hours. The "bribee" sneers, but accepts the bribe, and leads the narrator to Ishmael.

The narrator continues to turn to alcohol and other substances when he's in pain confused.

The narrator asks Ishmael, point-blank, what the next lesson will be. In response, Ishmael asks the narrator to define "culture." The narrator defines culture as the sum of all recorded knowledge among a people. Ishmael agrees, and points out that Leavers have a culture, just as Takers do. Leaver culture stretches back millions of years. Taker culture, by contrast, begins only 10,000 years ago, with the founding of agriculture. In general, the Taker attitude is to reject as much of the past as possible. Until very recently, in fact, Takers believed that human life and human culture began at the same time.

The flaw in Taker society, Ishmael now argues, is that it thinks culture began only a few thousand years ago. In reality, culture stretches back many millions of years, to the time of the first humans. It's the height of arrogance for Takers to disregard these millions of years, simply because the Leavers didn't use agriculture.

Ishmael points out a strange contradiction in Taker society. Takers want to look forward to the future and reject history as "bunk"—for instance, politicians and other prophets are always encouraging their followers to be optimistic and think only of things to come. At the same time, Takers also place tremendous value in tradition, the past, and history. The British monarchy, for instance is founded on a sense of tradition that stretches back many centuries. The Leavers, by contrast, don't accept this contradiction. They are the carriers of a vast tradition, based on obeying the laws of life, which stretches back millions of years to the beginning of the human species.

The life of the Taker is full of contradiction. For instance, the Taker simultaneously believes that he is the center of the universe and that he is the source of all the universe's problems. Similarly, the Taker must believe that history is of the utmost importance, and also that it's "bunk" (a quote often attributed to the legendary industrialist Henry Ford—arguably the archetypal Taker of modern times.) It's no wonder that Takers turn to drugs and drink—there's no other way to accept such contradictions.

The narrator has a thought that he finds difficult to put into words. The Leavers, he now sees, have based their behavior on three million years of trial and error. The Takers, on the other hand, reject almost all of those three million years—everything before conquest and agriculture is nonsense. The Takers thus have to deal with a conspicuous absence of "evidence" for how to live—at best, they only have a few thousand years of practice. One result of this that the Takers feel the need to turn to prophets and lawmakers—Draco, Solon, Moses, Jesus, Hitler—for new, entirely arbitrary theories of how to live. The arrogant message behind each one of these theories is that each proclaims that it, and it alone, is the right way to live.

The narrator seems to be catching on to Ishmael's arguments. Leavers' lives may seem dogmatic and rigid to Takers, but this is only an illusion. In reality, Leavers aren't dogmatic at all: they only believe that things are "right" because they've worked in the past, while it's Takers who characterize their lifestyles in terms of "good" and "evil." Dogma itself is a Taker invention—this is why Takers place so much emphasis on immutable truth, as expressed by prophets. The idea of immutability itself is designed to disguise the fragility of the Taker way of life.

Ishmael agrees with the distinction the narrator is trying to make. Leaver societies, he suggests, rely on millions of years of trial and error for a model of how to behave. Takers, on the other hand, ignore the Leaver societies and their years of evidence for how to live well. With this, Ishmael dismisses the narrator, saying that he is too cold and tired to think about the matter any further.

Ishmael seems to be getting sicker—he's cold and tired, and he's a very old gorilla. Nevertheless, we're only dimly aware of all these things, since his physical presence seems secondary to the ideas he's been presenting.

CHAPTER 11

The next day, the narrator returns to the carnival to find Ishmael. It is raining, and the narrator has brought three warm blankets—one for himself, and two for Ishmael. As he and Ishmael settle in, Ishmael begins the lesson.

The narrator continues to go out of his way to continue talking to Ishmael. Though he's a cynic, he shows more and more instances of bravery and commitment.

Ishmael mentions the story of the Leavers—a story that Ishmael had promised to tell the narrator some time ago. Ishmael asks the narrator why he's interested in learning this story. The narrator, noting that Ishmael is in a bad mood, replies that it seems like a natural way to continue the lesson. Ishmael dismisses this, demanding to know why the narrator wants to know the story of the Leavers. After some thought, the narrator replies: he wants to know the story of the Leavers because it's the only way to move forward after learning that the way of the Takers is wrong. In the 60s, he explains, hippies and radicals abandoned the story of the Takers, but because they didn't have a different story to fall back on, their movement failed. If the narrator is to change the world, he concludes, he needs to understand why the story of the Takers is wrong, but also what the right story is. Ishmael seems to accept this explanation.

Here we're reminded of the defining story of the Leavers, and we wonder why Ishmael couldn't have told the narrator the story of the Leavers before. One answer to this concern, articulated by the narrator, is that one can only understand the way of the Leavers after grasping the flaws in the culture of the Takers. This reminds us of the importance of storytelling in Ishmael. *As the narrator knows very well, the goal of his investigations isn't to grasp the literal truth—instead, it's to construct a new story that interprets the truth in a markedly different way.*

Ishmael next asks the narrator how mankind became mankind. The narrator is unsure how to answer this question. To begin answering it, Ishmael tells the narrator another story. According to the Takers, he says, life before the Agricultural Revolution was miserable: people didn't live long, and they were constantly fighting. Thus, the Agricultural Revolution was both a technological and a cultural event, according to the Takers. In short, Takers despise the lifestyle of the Leavers.

The story of the Takers isn't just *a story about the Takers themselves—it's also a story about the Leavers, and why they're inferior to the Takers. This brings us back to the philosophy of binaries, alluded to earlier in the novel. One can't understand the Takers, Quinn suggests, without also understanding the Leavers, and vice versa.*

Ishmael asks the narrator about the plains Indians, the fiercest opponents of the American settlers in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. He tells the narrator that the plains Indians were agriculturalists for centuries before Columbus discovered the New World. Then, as soon as they had access to horses—imports from Europe—the plains Indians returned to living as hunter-gatherers. The point of this example, Ishmael explains, is that the Leavers didn't cling to their lifestyle out of ignorance—they chose to be hunter-gatherers because they genuinely preferred it to a life of agriculture. Ishmael tells the narrator that he's getting closer to discovering the root of the Takers' disagreement with the Leavers—the disagreement that gave rise to the Agricultural Revolution.

Ishmael's example reinforces the idea that Leavers aren't dogmatic—they don't practice foraging or herding simply because their ancestors did so. On the contrary, they are practical and pragmatic—they'll adopt whatever way of life they deem best at any given time. It's difficult to see where Ishmael is going with his explanation of the Takers and the Leavers, but this is a good thing—it keeps us on our toes, waiting for new wisdom.

Ishmael asks the narrator if the Agricultural Revolution was "necessary." The narrator responds that it was necessary to give mankind the lifestyle to which it's grown accustomed: air conditioning, opera houses, etc. Ishmael points out that millions of Takers live in poverty, but would never dare to become Leavers: there has to be a more basic and more irrational reason that the Takers abandoned the Leavers than their desire for material wealth. He tells the narrator that Taker culture trains people to be terrified of Leaver culture—Ishmael now wants the narrator to get to the roots of this terror.

One point that comes across very strongly in this section is that there's nothing inherently "practical" about Taker ideology. While Takers might argue that their way of life is objectively better because it leads to prosperity, longevity, etc., the fact remains that the vast majority of Takers don't derive any practical benefits from the Taker myth. On the contrary, they're victims of Taker culture, because the accumulation of material wealth also leads to poverty and other kinds of sickness.

The narrator brings up an image of "primitive man" that just popped into his head. In the image, the primitive man is running as fast as he can, frantically searching for food and shelter. Ishmael points out that this image—as the narrator well knows—is nonsense: Leavers are every bit as capable of surviving in the wild as wolves or foxes. Ishmael gives the narrator a thought experiment. If the narrator were homeless, he asks, would he press a button that could give him training as a hunter and take him back to prehistoric times? After some thought, the narrator replies that he wouldn't push the button, but he can't describe exactly why. Ishmael nods and says that Mother Culture has done a good job on him—he's been trained to crave Taker life without knowing why it's preferable to the alternative.

Because the narrator can't put his thoughts into words, he turns to picture and images. In an almost Freudian fashion, Ishmael is challenging the narrator to move outside his "comfort zone" at a very deep level. Thus, the narrator makes subconscious associations instead of trying to speak coherently. In this way, he bypasses the constraints of Taker dogma and approaches something like a basic truth.

Ishmael proposes an exercise: he will play the role of a Leaver, while the narrator will play the role of a Taker, named Bwana. Ishmael begins by asking "Bwana" why the lifestyle of the Leavers is so horrible. "Bwana" replies that the Leavers' lifestyle is miserable because they live at the mercy of the gods—they have no control over their sources of food. Ishmael laughs and says that the Leavers have perfect control over their food—they plant it themselves and wait for it to grow. "Bwana" tries to argue that growing food oneself, or hunting it, is often unsuccessful—sometimes, one doesn't catch the animals one was looking for. Ishmael replies that Leavers don't mind this at all—they can always catch different animals or look for different food.

This passage is, to say the least, very annoying. But this is precisely the point: Ishmael is trying to annoy the narrator, pushing him out of his usual patterns of thinking. Thus, the narrator quickly comes to see that the usual excuses for Taker culture—that their lifestyles are more practical, more sensible, etc.—are nonsensical. The reality, we begin to see, is that the Takers are motivated by something utterly irrational when they seek to spread civilization and conquer nature.

Ishmael and "Bwana" (the narrator) continue with their exercise. Ishmael asks "Bwana" what the problem with the Leaver is, and "Bwana" tries a different strategy—he criticizes the Leavers for being weak, and at the mercy of the universe. They have no security from dangerous animals, the weather, or disease. Ishmael seems to agree with this—he asks "Bwana" how the gods could possibly give man so little. "Bwana" realizes that the gods give mankind enough to live like animals, but not enough to live like human beings. When Ishmael prompts him a second time, the narrator begins to understand: Takers accumulate food to prove that the gods have no power over them. They store and stockpile food so that when there is a drought or a storm, they can celebrate the fact that they are not animals, and that their lives are truly in their own hands.

The narrator now takes a different angle in arguing against the Leavers, saying that they are inferior to the Takers because their lives are out of their control—they're constantly at the mercy of the elements, wild animals, etc. This is precisely why Takers become Takers: they can't stand the thought of living in uncertainty. It's important to remember how we've gotten to this conclusion, though. Ishmael used humor, analogy, and repetition to force the narrator to search for new answers to his problems. In the end, this interactive method of teaching proved successful, as the narrator has finally grasped the source of Taker culture in such a way that he'll never forget it.

Ishmael ends the exercise, and tells the narrator that he's made great progress. The goal of the Takers, he explains, is to take control of the world into their own hands. Right now, Taker culture is trying to dominate the entire planet: to control the weather, the environment, etc. In this way, Takers aim to take all power away from the gods.

Takers, in Ishmael's view, try to dominate the world because they want to have control over their own lives. By contrast, the Leavers of the world are content to live without controlling their environments.

Ishmael then quotes Jesus Christ: "Have no care for tomorrow." But only a few people in history have ever heeded Christ's advice, he says. Instead of letting God take care of them, they insist on pursuing agriculture, sowing their own grain, and stocking up for the future. Takers are afraid of the lifestyle of the Leavers because they're terrified of not knowing what will happen tomorrow. Ironically, Ishmael concludes, Leavers are far less anxious about the future than are Takers. Thus, the Takers are those who know good and evil, and the Leavers are those who live in the hands of the gods.

Ishmael pokes holes in Christian culture at several points in the novel, never more effectively than here. Although Western culture ("Christendom") is supposedly influenced by the teachings of Jesus Christ, Ishmael makes it very clear that the West (the Takers) has misunderstood Christ's teachings. Christ, Quinn, believes, was a Leaver, one who was content to live in uncertainty and interconnectedness.

CHAPTER 12

After the latest lesson, the narrator leaves Ishmael to find Ishmael's owner. He tells the owner, a man named Art Owens, that he's interested in buying Ishmael. Owens says that he'll sell Ishmael for three thousand dollars. Together, they haggle the price down to two thousand. The narrator says he'll think about it.

It's worth remembering how passive and cynical the narrator was at the beginning of the novel. Now, he's going out of his way to free Ishmael from his cage—even though he doesn't follow through with the final step right away. Perhaps the narrator is still hesitant to "put his money where his mouth is"—to live according to Ishmael's teachings instead of simply agreeing with them.

On Friday night, the narrator returns to the carnival. After bribing the bribee, he greets Ishmael, eager for another lesson. Ishmael asks the narrator to come back tomorrow, but the narrator says that tomorrow is Saturday—the carnival will surely be too crowded. With this in mind, Ishmael reluctantly agrees to proceed.

In spite of his (understandable) reluctance to live out the difficult reality of Ishmael's teachings, the narrator still goes out of his way to learn more from Ishmael, gradually taking more and more motivated action.

Ishmael asks the narrator how the Leavers live. When the narrator is unsure how to respond, Ishmael asks him, for the second time, how man became man. The narrator responds, a little too quickly, that man become man the same way that birds became birds and horses became horses. Ishmael agrees with this enthusiastically, and then asks the narrator to tease out what he's just said. The narrator suggests that man became man by evolving from older life forms: *Homo erectus*, *homo habilis*, etc. Because they live in the hands of the gods, Leavers are subject to the effects of evolution, like natural selection and competition for finite resources. Takers, by contrast, have tried to halt the processes of natural selection. There is no competition for finite resources, they believe, because there are enough resources for everyone. Thus, there is no "survival of the fittest"—instead, everyone survives together.

Throughout the novel, Ishmael has told the narrator that he already knows more than he thinks he does. Here, we're given a neat illustration of this principle: the narrator already knew the answer to his own question—he's just been so conditioned to ignore the truth that it's often hard for him to think straight. One of Quinn's boldest observations arrives at the end of this section as well. He believes that Taker society (essentially, industrial society) arrests the processes of natural selection. This totally contradicts the usual view that the processes of natural selection are alive and well in "civilization"—what is the free market, for instance, if not a constant competition for limited resources, in which only the fittest survive?

Ishmael asks the narrator to sum up the story of the Leavers. After some thought, the narrator says that the Takers believe that the world belongs to man, and the Leavers believe that man belongs to the world. Only when species "belong to the world" do they change and evolve. Ishmael asks the narrator which alternative he prefers: no more creation, or an endless pattern of creation. The narrator says that the latter, the way of the Leavers, "has my vote."

In the end, the narrator comes to support the Leaver view of the world. It's notable that Ishmael's explanation of Leaver culture is far simpler than his explanation of Taker culture. Perhaps this is because Ishmael himself has never had full access to Leaver culture (except in the jungle). Like the narrator, he's spent his entire life surrounded by Takers.

Ishmael and the narrator turn to the problem of how to live like a Leaver in the 20th century. The narrator suggests that the problem is how to be a Leaver and also be "civilized." As soon as the narrator brings up this word, however, Ishmael becomes angry. He says that humans wrongly believe that to be civilized is to be a Taker, and vice versa. This is false. It's perfectly possible to be intelligent, enlightened, and civilized without believing that man needs to conquer the world and defy the gods.

Even after "voting" for the Leavers, the narrator continues to think in Taker terms. For instance, he thinks that Taker culture has a monopoly on being "civilized." This is clearly false, however—there's nothing particularly "civilized: about Hitler's Germany, which is a perfectly representative Taker society.

Ishmael suggests that aspiring Leavers like the narrator have a powerful source of inspiration: the collapse of the Soviet Union. This event proves that sometimes, people do relinquish their power voluntarily.

The Soviet Union collapsed in the same year that Ishmael *was first published. As Quinn sees it, this event signals the possibility of enormous, rapid progress, and the ability of intelligent, well-organized people to change the world.*

The narrator is not satisfied with the example of the Soviet Union. He asks Ishmael for a "program" for how to be a Leaver. Ishmael tells the narrator that Leavers must try to ensure that Cain stops killing Abel. They must also reject the idea that man's purpose is to dominate the planet. This project, Ishmael acknowledges, is incredibly difficult. And yet modern-day Leavers have some advantages that their predecessors did not: for example, they have access to mass media. Indeed, the narrator himself is a writer, who can potentially reach millions with his work. The narrator asks Ishmael what he should say when people ask him if the Leavers want to return to being hunter-gatherers. Ishmael stresses that he doesn't support being a hunter-gatherer unconditionally. On the contrary, it's perfectly possible to be an agriculturalist without destroying the planet or making more food than one needs. Most of all, the Leavers have a responsibility to experiment with new strategies for living well—they must "invent."

Of all the sections in the novel, this is the one where Ishmael comes closest to acting as a "prophet"—telling the narrator what to do, where to go, and what to think. Yet it's crucial to realize that even here, Ishmael isn't dogmatic in the least. He has his own opinions about how to live life as a Leaver, but he's clear about the fact that they are only opinions. Indeed, the overarching message of his speech is that the narrator (and millions like him) have to use their own ingenuity and inventiveness to solve the problems of the world—they can't rely on gorillas to do so for them. Here Quinn basically admits that Ishmael *is meant to be a teaching tool, designed to spread Leaver ideas around the world.*

Ishmael brings up a small point he's been neglecting. One of his former pupils was an ex-convict. From this pupil, Ishmael learned that the world of prison, like the human world itself, is stratified: there are wealthy prisoners, poor prisoners, strong prisoners, and weak prisoners. In a sense, the entire Taker world is a prison. Like a prison, this world has a prison industry, whose job is to keep the prisoners occupied. The nature of this industry, the narrator correctly guesses, is to consume the world.

Here we're reminded of why Ishmael stays in his cage—there's no point in freeing himself when the world itself is a prison. Indeed, there are some advantages to staying in the cage, because it reminds him of the metaphorical prison of Taker culture. In this way, Ishmael can reach a kind of enlightenment, seeing the world as it truly is.

Ishmael continues discussing prisons. The prison of Taker culture, he argues, cannot be escaped by anyone, even the rich and powerful. Within the prison, some people have more power—for example, men have more power than women, and whites have more power than blacks. The most important task for Leavers, he says, is *not* to make sure that blacks are as powerful as whites within the prison—rather, it's to destroy the prison itself. The narrator agrees, but thinks that this will never happen. Women don't want to destroy the prison of Taker culture itself, he believes—they only want to gain some of the same rights and powers as men. Ishmael points out that, as always, the narrator is being pessimistic.

There are many different radical groups who take different approaches to saving the world, but Ishmael argues that these groups fail to go far enough in their aims. Feminist groups, for instance, don't want to change the structures of Taker society at all—they only want to give women the same advantages as men within this society. This was a common criticism of the feminist and Civil Rights movements during the 60s and 70s, and it's still made today.

Ishmael sighs and stares at the narrator. He tells the narrator that he's finished with him, and the lessons are over. He tells the narrator that he's proud of his progress, and would be glad to count him a friend. The narrator is crushed by the news that his lessons are over, but promises Ishmael that he'll return the next day. Ishmael nods.

Perhaps the narrator hasn't entirely grasped the lesson Ishmael has been trying to teach him yet. The narrator can't rely on other people to teach him what to do—instead he has to work and struggle to develop his own theories of how to be a Leaver.

CHAPTER 13

The narrator is in the process of finalizing a plan, though he doesn't immediately say what this plan is. He drives to a mechanic shop near the carnival, where he proceeds to get his car checked. The mechanic tells the narrator that there are a few problems, which will take a few days to sort out. The narrator reluctantly leaves his car in the shop, rents a van, and gets 2,400 dollars out of the bank—all of his money. He is planning to buy Ishmael and drive him away, but he has no idea where.

The narrator has learned a great deal from Ishmael, but he's still unsure what to do with the information. His plan to escape with Ishmael is badly thought out, reflecting his uncertainty about how to use the knowledge he's been given. He's still in the stage of trying to apply simplified ideals to the complexities of reality.

Having waited over the weekend for his car repairs, the narrator drives back to the carnival. There, he is surprised to find that the carnival has moved on. He notices the bribee, who tells the narrator that Ishmael died of pneumonia over the weekend. The narrator, shocked to hear this, realizes that Ishmael had been sick during their last few lessons. He asks the bribee what's happened to Ishmael's body. The bribee replies that it's been cremated, along with road kill. Stunned, the narrator notices that the bribee is carrying the books, maps, and drawings that Ishmael made for the narrator. He asks the bribee if he could have these things, and the bribee gives them to him.

It has often seemed as if the narrator is focusing on Ishmael too much—that is, relying on his advice instead of thinking things through for himself. Ironically, it now seems as if the narrator hasn't paid enough *attention to Ishmael—he didn't notice that Ishmael was dying until it was too late. While the narrator did bring Ishmael blankets, he should have also been quicker in his plan to buy him from the circus. Instead, Ishmael exists in the novel as a martyr, dying as a direct result of his investment in educating the narrator.*

The narrator drives back to his home, and then calls the Sokolow household. Partridge, the butler, answers the phone. The narrator informs him that Ishmael is dead, and that he and Partridge could have saved him. Partridge asks the narrator if Ishmael would have let them do so, and the narrator replies that he's not sure.

We wonder if Partridge knew about Ishmael's intelligence all along, since he assumes that Ishmael had agency and personal views. At its close, the world of the novel starts to expand—to other people who might seem ignorant about the Takers and the Leavers, but are actually more aware than they let on.

The narrator looks over Ishmael's books and papers, and notices the poster saying, "WITH MAN GONE, WILL THERE BE HOPE FOR GORILLA?" He turns it over, and on the other side the poster says, "WITH GORILLA GONE, WILL THERE BE HOPE FOR MAN?"

With the poster, the novel comes full circle in an elegant way. While the first of the two questions posed here had seemed ambiguous, like a Zen koan, the second seems almost perfectly straightforward: now that Ishmael is dead, what will the narrator do? Will he return to his Taker lifestyle, or will he endeavor to spread Ishmael's teachings to others? As we think about this problem, it becomes clear what the answer is. The narrator has *spread Ishmael's teachings, by writing the book we've just finished. Thus, the poster isn't merely asking the narrator what he'll do next—it's also challenging us, the readers, to take the knowledge we've gained by reading* Ishmael *and translate it into action.*

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