

Johnny Got His Gun



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DALTON TRUMBO

Dalton Trumbo was born and grew up in Colorado. Like Joe, the protagonist of Trumbo's anti-war novel *Johnny Got His Gun*, Trumbo also lost his father at an early age and moved to Los Angeles to work the night shift at a bakery. While going to college in Los Angeles, he wrote 88 short stories, six novels, and several movie reviews, all of which were rejected. While today Trumbo is perhaps most famous as the screenwriter for films like *Roman Holiday* and *Spartacus*, he began his career writing for magazines, later publishing his first novel, *Eclipse*, in 1935. Trumbo's involvement with the American Communist Party got him placed on Hollywood's "blacklist" of banned screenwriters after Trumbo refused to testify in front of Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee. Trumbo continued to write screenplays without receiving official credit and eventually helped end the blacklist in the early 1960s. He died in Los Angeles in 1976. Trumbo's life story received renewed attention after the release of the biopic *Trumbo* in 2015 and the release of blacklist-era Hollywood parody *Hail, Caesar!* in 2016.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dalton Trumbo speculated that *Johnny Got His Gun* might have been the last novel about World War I to be written before World War II. World War I, known as the Great War at the time, started in 1914 and became the most destructive war in history up until that point, largely due to new technology that led to deadlier weaponry, including tanks, toxic gas, machine guns, and aircraft. The war pitted the Central Powers (including Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire) against the Allies (including France, the UK, Italy, Russia, and Japan), with the United States joining in 1917 on the side of the Allies. While a little over 100,000 American military personnel and civilians died in the war, the total number of deaths from all nations was about 40 million, meaning the war had an even more significant impact on Europe. The deaths from the war, combined with the deaths from the 1918 influenza pandemic, helped define the "Lost Generation," people who came of age during World War I. Significantly, many historians credit the harsh conditions placed on Germany after the war with collapsing the German economy and setting the stage for Adolf Hitler to rise to power, eventually starting World War II. Trumbo's novel thus anticipates how World War I would not be the "war to end all wars," like some people predicted.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Johnny Got His Gun is an anti-war novel set during World War I. Perhaps the best-known books in that genre are Erich Remarque's [All Quiet on the Western Front](#) and Ernest Hemingway's [A Farewell to Arms](#), both of which came out a few years before *Johnny Got His Gun* was first published. Both novels criticize the glorification of war and depict the apparent senselessness of the violence, with [A Farewell to Arms](#) in particular exploring some of the horrors that take place in a military hospital. Trumbo's novel makes extensive use of a technique called free indirect discourse, where a character's thoughts blend seamlessly with narration. Jane Austen ([Pride and Prejudice](#)) and Goethe ([Faust](#)) were two pioneers of the technique, although it gained even greater popularity after appearing in the work of modernist writers like James Joyce ([Ulysses](#)) and Virginia Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway*). In addition to having some stylistic similarities, *Mrs. Dalloway* also grapples with the horrors of World War I: One of the book's characters, Septimus Smith, is a WWI veteran who suffers from shell shock (PTSD) and hallucinations before ultimately dying by suicide. Additionally, as one of the most well-known American Communists, Trumbo took philosophical inspiration from the works of the foundational communist writers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels ([The Communist Manifesto](#)), particularly during the end of *Johnny Got His Gun*, where protagonist Joe imagines a revolution similar to Marx and Engels's prediction that the "proletariat" (working class) would one day rise up against the "ruling class."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Johnny Got His Gun
- **When Written:** Mid-1930s
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles
- **When Published:** 1938
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** War Novel, Psychological Fiction
- **Setting:** A hospital in France
- **Climax:** Joe uses Morse code to communicate with a man at the hospital.
- **Antagonist:** The horrors of war and the powerful people who start wars
- **Point of View:** Third Person Limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Johnny Got His Film. Dalton Trumbo wrote and directed his own film version of *Johnny Got His Gun* in 1971, during the middle of the Vietnam War. Today, the rights to the film belong

to the rock band Metallica, who sample it extensively in the music video for their song “One.”

False Alarm. When Trumbo read in an article that the U.S. Army had censored *Johnny Got His Gun* during World War II, Trumbo himself disputed the article’s claims, saying that he had received letters from soldiers abroad and found a copy himself in Okinawa, Japan, while the war was still in progress. The novel did go out of print at times, but Trumbo prepared new editions just after the Korean War and in the middle of the Vietnam War.



PLOT SUMMARY

Joe Bonham wakes up to the sound of a phone ringing at the bakery in Los Angeles where he works. He feels like he’s waking up from a hangover. When he goes to answer the phone, he learns that his father has died. Joe goes home to see his mother and sees men are taking away his father’s body. All of a sudden, he hears another telephone ring and remembers that his father is already dead. Joe realizes that he’s really been hallucinating. In fact, he was gravely injured while fighting in World War I, and he’s now stuck in a hospital.

Joe continues struggles to tell the past apart from the present. While in the hospital, he dreams about his childhood in Shale City, Colorado, and later, his time working in the bakery in Los Angeles. For the most part, Joe had a happy childhood, but his mind still lingers on certain events, like the time he and his friend Bill Harper accidentally lost Joe’s father’s treasured fishing rod or the time that Joe and Howie went to work on a railroad crew in the desert, only to quit after one day of arduous work. One of Joe’s most bittersweet memories is spending the night in the **arms** of his girlfriend Kareen on the day before he shipped off to war.

Meanwhile, in the present in the hospital, Joe begins to learn the full extent of his injuries. Not only is he missing both his arms, but he’s also missing his legs and most of his face, with a feeding tube going into a giant hole where his eyes, nose, and mouth used to be and a cloth mask covering the hole. His condition means he can’t see or hear, either. Barely able to even move without exhausting himself, at one point Joe feels himself being eaten alive by a **rat**. He eventually wakes up, believing the rat was a dream, but in his current condition, it’s hard to distinguish between dreams and reality.

Eventually, Joe decides that the best way to take control of his situation is to find out a way to measure time. Although he initially fails, struggling to keep the right numbers in his head, eventually, he manages to work out a calendar based on the coming and going of nurses and the changes in temperature throughout the day. Keeping track of time helps Joe’s mind stay more focused, and several years pass in this new system.

One day, Joe gets the idea of trying to communicate to his nurses with Morse code. The first time he attempts this with a nurse, however, she doesn’t understand what he wants. Eventually, to stop Joe’s tapping, one of the doctors gives Joe painkillers, causing him to have wild hallucinations about meeting Jesus in person.

One day, Joe finds that he has a new nurse. The nurse draws the letters “MERRY CHRISTMAS” on Joe’s chest, and Joe realizes that he’s finally found someone to communicate with. Not wanting to waste his chance (in case the nurse is just a substitute for the holidays), Joe immediately starts tapping out a message in Morse code. Eventually, a doctor who can understand Joe’s messages comes in to talk with him. The doctor asks Joe what it is that he wants. The questions stump Joe at first—he was so thrilled to finally be able to communicate with other humans again that he didn’t even stop to think about what he might say. After considering the doctor’s question, Joe says he’d like to go leave the hospital. He would like to go out in public—to schools and government officials—so that people can see him and understand what happens to soldiers during war. But the doctor says that it’s against regulations for Joe to go outside the hospital. Then Joe feels the doctor prepare to inject Joe’s arm with painkillers.

As Joe waits for the painkillers, he thinks of how unfair it is that he’s stuck in the hospital against his will. He hopes that people will be able to look at him one day and recognize the horrors of war—and that eventually, the common people on the ground who fight wars will stop pointing their weapons at each other and start pointing them at their real enemy: the people in power who start wars in the first place.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Joe – Joe Bonham is a young man originally from Shale City, Colorado. He gets drafted to fight in Europe during World War I and ends up gravely injured in an artillery shell explosion and hospitalized. The first part of the novel chronicles Joe’s attempts to make sense of his situation as he drifts back and forth between memories of his childhood and his present life in the hospital. As Joe regains his grasp on reality, he realizes to his horror that he’s missing his **arms**, his legs, and most of his face, and he can’t hear or see. Joe feels that his fate is worse than death, and he has one particularly disturbing nightmare about a **rat** eating him alive. Although Joe wasn’t very politically active before his injury, as he spends more time in the hospital, he becomes increasingly angry at the divide between the generals and politicians who start wars and the “little guys” like him who actually fight in them. The biggest turning point for Joe’s character is when he learns how to keep track of time, using various events like the coming and going of nurses and

the changes in temperature in order to build his own calendar. This helps Joe organize his thoughts. Later, he attempts to communicate with people in the hospital by using his head to tap out messages in Morse code. But while Joe eventually manages to communicate with one of the doctors, the doctor refuses to grant Joe his wish—to leave the hospital and be put on display so the public can see the horrors of war—claiming that this would be against “regulations.”

Father – Joe’s father dies before Joe goes to war. Nevertheless, he remains perhaps the most important figure in Joe’s memories and hallucinations as Joe remembers his past while lying in the hospital. The book begins with Joe reliving the day he got the phone call that his father had died; phones remain a common thread throughout the novel, often signifying death. Joe’s father wasn’t an artist, but he took so much pride in small tasks like tending his garden that it was almost like an art. One of Joe’s key formative moments (which he relives while recovering at the hospital) is when he loses his father’s treasured fishing rod while on a trip with Bill Harper. Although Joe’s father is understanding, the loss of the rod coincides with Joe reaching the age when he stops going on camping trips with his father and starts going with his friends, representing Joe’s transition out of childhood.

Mother – Joe’s mother, while not quite as central to Joe’s story as his father, is nevertheless an important figure in Joe’s life, and she seems to represent comfort for Joe. In Joe’s memories and hallucinations, his mother sings the kitchen, makes lots of food for Joe’s whole family, and recites “’Twas the Night Before Christmas” every year for the family. When Joe lies in his hospital bed, unable to see or hear, he imagines that he’s back inside his mother’s womb—his mind seems to be trying to escape his present horror by going back to his mother. But while Joe’s mother embodies comfort, she is also something Joe can never go back to, once again highlighting the innocence Joe lost in the war.

Kareen – Kareen is Joe’s girlfriend before he goes to fight in World War I. One of Joe’s formative memories is spending the whole night in Kareen’s **arms** before he ships off the next day. Long after the last time Joe sees Kareen, he continues to imagine her, sometimes picturing that she might even come to see him in the hospital (although he knows it’s highly unlikely this would ever happen, given that the hospital staff don’t know Joe’s identity). The thought of seeing Kareen both excites Joe and horrifies him because he doesn’t want her to see him in his current condition. Kareen represents one of the many things that Joe left behind and lost when going to war.

Bill Harper – Bill Harper is one of Joe’s closest friends in Shale City, Colorado, although their relationship sometimes gets contentious. Bill Harper is there on the fateful camping trip where Joe loses Joe’s father’s treasured fishing rod. He also goes behind Joe’s back to kiss Joe’s ex-girlfriend Diane. Bill Harper represents the start of Joe’s transition to adulthood as

he forces Joe to deal with some tough new situations. Bill’s eventual death in World War I provides yet another example of the destructive effects of war.

Jose – Jose is a mysterious Puerto Rican man who works at the same bakery as Joe in Los Angeles. Jose uses the services of a local charity called Midnight Mission, suggesting that he’s poor. However, he tells his coworkers tall tales about a rich woman back in New York City who wants to marry him, and he even receives a letter that seems to be from her at one point. Jose leaves the bakery after he claims to have a new job in Hollywood. Although it isn’t clear how truthful he is about the details of his life, Jose nevertheless remains a positive example of working-class decency.

Howie – Howie is Joe’s friend who goes to work with him on a railroad in the desert. Most of the other workers on the crew are Mexican, and for both Joe and Howie, the event is a major coming-of-age moment. Howie and Joe can only endure the grueling work for a single day before heading back home. The experience teaches them that despite the problems they have, they remain privileged compared to other people in the world.

The New Day Nurse – Toward the end of the story, Joe gets a new day nurse, apparently a substitute the hospital brought in to cover for the old nurse over the holidays. Joe tries to communicate with her using Morse code, and she spells out “Merry Christmas” on his chest in response. This is a huge moment for Joe, as it’s the first time anyone has tried to communicate with him since he arrived at the hospital.

The Doctor – After the new day nurse realizes that Joe is trying to communicate using Morse code, she sends for a doctor who knows Morse code. Joe is elated when the doctor comes to speak with him, but his hopes shatter when the doctor denies Joe’s request to leave the hospital—and then gives Joe a morphine injection to silence him.

Lazarus – Lazarus is the nickname for an unknown German soldier whom Joe’s regiment kills. Despite the regiment’s efforts to bury him, Lazarus literally rises from the grave (like the biblical Lazarus rises from the dead) not once but twice after artillery shells send his corpse flying out of the ground. Lazarus’s corpse’s refusal to stay buried and out of sight provides a grim visual reminder of the horrors of war.

Lincoln Beechy – Lincoln Beechy was a real person (although his last name was spelled “Beachy”) and one of the first aviators. His fictionalized version shows up in Shale City when Joe is still young, giving Joe a glimpse of the world outside his relatively small town. Beechy’s stunts show the potential of new aviation technology, but his death soon afterward demonstrates the consequences of this technology.

Diane – Diane is a girl from Shale City, Colorado, who goes on a few dates with Joe before secretly going on a date with Glen Hogan. She is part of the reason that Joe and Howie leave Shale City to work on the railroad. Later, Joe feels betrayed when he

spots his good friend Bill Harper kissing Diane in front of her house.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Old Day Nurse – Joe eventually tries to communicate with hospital staff by banging his head against the bed to tap out messages in Morse code, and he’s frustrated when the nurses who care for him, including the old day nurse, don’t understand what he’s trying to do.

Old Mike Birkman – Old Mike Birkman is Kareen’s father. Despite being a famously cranky man, he allows Joe and Kareen to spend the night together before Joe leaves for war, perhaps because Old Mike recognizes the possibility that Joe might not come back.

Jody Simmons – Jody Simmons is Joe’s foreman at the bakery where Joe works in Los Angeles after leaving Shale City but before going to war.

Laurette – Laurette is a sex worker at Stumpy Telsa’s brothel who befriends Joe, even sending him a graduation present, although they never have sex. She leaves on a vacation for a few months, and Joe never sees her again.

Stumpy Telsa – Stumpy Telsa runs a brothel in Shale City that becomes a place of fascination for Joe and Bill Harper, long before they even know the house’s true purpose.

Onie – Onie is a girl from Shale City who goes on a couple dates with Howie before leaving him for Glen Hogan. The situation is very similar to Joe’s situation with Diane, and it’s what motivates Joe and Howie to go work on the railroad.

Bonnie – Bonnie is a young woman from Shale City who is slightly younger than Joe but who had a crush on him in school. They have sex when they meet again in Los Angeles.

Lucky – Lucky is a Black American sex worker who Joe meets in Paris. She reminds Joe of home in a city where he is otherwise surrounded by foreign people and languages he can’t understand.

of his face, including his sense of hearing, smell, and sight. The novel takes place during World War I, the largest global war in history up until that point, when new industrial technology made warfare more destructive than ever before, and Joe experiences this for himself when an artillery shell explodes. Confined to his hospital bed, Joe’s imagination lingers on the tangible, disturbing details of modern warfare that he can recall. His own body, with its missing parts and oozing wounds, conveys all the things the war took from him. Joe describes his agonizing physical condition thoroughly, such as his (seeming) dream that a **rat** comes in the middle of the night and starts eating him alive. He also considers his mental health, describing his extreme feelings of loneliness and constant feeling of being trapped. While Joe represents an extreme example, his condition nevertheless also embodies the countless horrors that others faced during World War I and in other wars throughout history.

At the end of the novel, the man communicating with Joe denies Joe’s request to be removed from the hospital and displayed around the country. Joe realizes in that moment that the man think he is too horrific for the general public—because if people had to face the horrors of war directly, they might no longer be willing to support it. Similarly, Joe always has a mask on his face, which seems to be more for the benefit of the nurses (to prevent them from seeing his horrific face) than for Joe’s own benefit. In *Johnny Got His Gun*, Trumbo argues that the horrors of war are so extreme that they outweigh any potential benefits, and yet the novel’s grim conclusion predicts that wars will continue because society refuses to look these horrors in the face.



THE VALUE OF LIFE

While Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun* is a grim novel about the horrors of war, it also celebrates the value of life, particularly in Book II, which is called “The Living.” While the protagonist Joe is despondent and perhaps even suicidal in the first part of the book, as the novel progresses, he takes tentative steps to try to make the most of his new life without **arms**, legs, or a face. During one of the most famous sections of the book, Joe recites a long internal monologue where he considers the reasons why people go to war. The politicians and generals who start wars (and who rarely face danger themselves), often appeal to abstract principles, suggesting that a person should be willing to sacrifice their life for the sake of a larger ideal like liberty, democracy, or honor. Joe dismantles these common arguments, ultimately concluding that no ideal is more important than life itself—at least not any ideal Joe has ever encountered.

Once Joe comes to this conclusion about the value of life, he tries to make the most of his dire condition. When he finally manages to communicate with one of the day nurses by using Morse code, it’s the happiest Joe has ever felt in his life—even



THEMES

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



THE HORRORS OF WAR

Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun* is about Joe, a soldier who goes to fight in a war that he barely understands and ends up facing a fate that at times seems worse than death: he loses his **arms**, his legs, and much

including back when he still had all his senses. The fact that Joe can find joy, even in his severely injured condition, suggests that all life is valuable because people can find ways to adapt to even the most adverse conditions. While Joe adapts to his new reality in the hospital and at times even manages to find joy despite his severe injuries, the book ultimately suggests that the real death and destruction that war causes aren't worth the abstract principles like freedom or safety that it purports to defend.



ELITES VS. COMMON PEOPLE

At the center of Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* is the conflict between politicians, generals, and other leaders who start wars and the common people like Joe who actually do the fighting. Protagonist Joe is an "average Joe" who goes to fight in World War I and becomes another battlefield casualty statistic, literally losing his identity when an artillery shell explosion blows off most of his face. It is only after Joe spends some time in isolation in the hospital—with no **arms**, legs, sight, or hearing—that he begins to understand the enormous power imbalance between him and the people who actually make the decisions in war. The more Joe reflects on the issue, the more he realizes that the interests of the "little guys" who actually fight in wars don't align with the interests of the leaders who start wars. At the end of the novel, Joe imagines what might happen if instead of pointing their weapons at their alleged wartime enemies, common people pointed their guns at their true oppressors: the leaders in charge of war. But Joe is powerless to spread his message because even after learning how to communicate with the hospital staff, they deny him his one wish to leave the hospital, instead keeping him locked up due to "regulations." Joe's status as a de facto prisoner in the hospital reflects the powerlessness of ordinary people to oppose authority figures.

The book also examines how class can widen the power imbalance between the privileged and the underprivileged. Joe is shocked the first time he and Howie go out into the desert to work on building a railroad as part of a crew where most of the other workers are Mexican. The Mexican workers endure conditions so harsh that Joe and Howie can only endure one day before they decide to head back to Shale City, realizing that their own problems back home are insignificant compared to the problems that people with less privilege face, and how the railroad workers' exhausting conditions trap them in a cycle, leaving them with little time or energy to do anything else. Ultimately, Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* suggests that the most important conflict in society is not between different countries but between people with power and people without power—and that society maintains the status quo by preventing the powerless from rising up against the empowered.



TIME AND MEMORY

When Joe loses his hearing and sight when an artillery shell explodes, he also loses all concept of time, and so he struggles to distinguish between past and present, often slipping back into memories from his old life in a series of memories and hallucinations. Although Joe's father is dead before the novel even begins, he nevertheless plays a major role in the story through Joe's memories of his childhood back in Shale City, Colorado. Joe remembers key formative moments from his childhood, like when he had to tell his father that he lost his father's treasured fishing rod, emphasizing how even after the dramatic things that happened to Joe in the war, these small memories from home continue to be important to him. Joe's father (as well as others, like Joe's mother, his friend Bill Harper, and his girlfriend Kareen) all helped shape who Joe is, and Joe's memories of growing up in Shale City and working at a bakery in Los Angeles are so vivid that he can return to them even after losing all his senses.

Because of this strong relationship between past and present, it's a major turning point in the novel when Joe finally manages to find a way to keep track of time again. Just as early humans used the movement of the stars to measure time, Joe pays attention to the things outside his small world, like the coming and going of nurses and changes in temperature. Although Joe struggles at first, he finally learns to keep track of time, even keeping track of whole years in his head. Getting better track of time gives Joe better control over his thoughts, and as the novel progresses, he is less likely to unintentionally slip into the past, giving him more autonomy despite his incapacitated condition. In *Johnny Got His Gun*, Trumbo explores the human psyche, showing how memory shapes a person's identity and how a person's concept of time affects the structure of their life and gives them greater agency to shape it.



SYMBOLS

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



ARMS

While arguably Joe's whole body is an important symbol in the novel, his arms are particularly significant because they symbolize the connection and comfort that the war took away from Joe when it took away his arms. After being caught in an artillery shell explosion, Joe doesn't initially know what happens to him, and his slow realization that both his arms have been amputated is his first hint that, while he survived the blast, he might have met a fate worse than death. Arms show up again and again in Joe's memories of his past, as he recalls holding his girlfriend Kareen close to him one

night or comforting his mother after the death of his father. In all these cases, Joe's arms bring him closer to other people, and they also give him agency—Joe fears that without arms, he might never work again (before he realizes that he's missing a lot more than just his arms).

When the war takes Joe's arms, it symbolically takes away both Joe's relationships with his loved ones and his free will. At the end of the novel, Joe muses that if people could see him out in public, it would force them to confront the horrors of war. However, "regulations" prevent him from leaving the hospital. And, unable to fend for himself due to his injuries, Joe realizes that the public will never see his injuries or the horrors of war they represent. Thus, Joe's arms also become a symbol of the public's ignorance of the horrors of war and what war takes from people.



THE RAT

The rat that eats Joe alive (in what may or may not be a nightmare) represents the uncertain nature of reality. It also represents the horrors of war, particularly the mental toll it takes on soldiers like Joe. Joe repeatedly compares his situation in the hospital to being like a dead person, and the fact that rats commonly eat corpses gives credence to Joe's comparison. Another rat in the story eats the face of a German army officer, confirming the link between rats and death. Without **arms**, Joe is powerless to do anything as the rat literally eats him alive, representing how the war took away Joe's agency. Joe thinks that he wakes up at one point and that the rat was just a nightmare, but because he lives in a condition where hallucinations, memories, and the present all blend together, he can't be sure the rat isn't real. Furthermore, even if the rat isn't real, Joe could still have the same nightmare again, and it would be just as terrifying. In this way, the rat also demonstrates how the mental and emotional effects of war can be just as devastating as the physical ones.

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis


These are the opening lines of the novel. They are deliberately disorienting, perhaps to mimic how sick and disoriented protagonist Joe would have felt working the night shift at his job at a bakery in Los Angeles. At first, the lines seem to describe a hangover or a fever, with the telephone's ringing mimicking the ringing sound of someone with a headache. As the chapter goes on however, these first lines take on a different meaning. It turns out that Joe doesn't merely have a hangover or a fever and that he's not in the bakery in Los Angeles at all—he's in a hospital at some unknown location after getting hit with an artillery shell in World War I. In his dream of the bakery, Joe remains tormented by a phone that keeps ringing again no matter how many times he answers it, and this foreshadows how much of the novel centers on Joe's struggles to communicate with others.

The opening passage also examines how the past connects to the present. In his hazy state in the hospital, Joe often slips between past and present, with his memories of his childhood and young adulthood connecting back to his current condition in the hospital. The novel explores how memories and the passage of time shape a person's identity, as Joe's memories of his formative years affect his actions in the hospital in the present. Here, Joe's memory of receiving a phone call and learning about his father's death helps Joe come to terms with his own near-death experience of getting hit by an artillery shell.

☞ "That's not Bill. It may seem like it but it's not."

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Joe, Father

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Joe's mother says this to Joe on the day that his father (Bill) dies, while his father's corpse is still lying in their living room in Los Angeles. In the story, Joe is only dreaming about this interaction as he lies in a hospital bed, but his later dreams and memories suggest that his father did in fact die in Los Angeles and that this scene is based on reality. Joe's



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bantam edition of *Johnny Got His Gun* published in 1984.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ He wished the phone would stop ringing. It was bad enough to be sick let alone have a phone ring all night long.

Related Characters: Joe, Father

Related Themes: 

mother's comment likely refers to the Christian doctrine that a person's essence is their immortal soul and not their physical body. But it has a double meaning because in fact, Joe isn't really looking at his father's corpse—it's simply a memory in Joe's dream.

In the wake of his injury from the artillery shell, Joe also struggles to determine what defines a person. At times, he feels like little more than a piece of meat, not much different from his father's corpse. Nevertheless, Joe's thoughts and memories of the past reveal that he is also full of complexity and depth that isn't always apparent on the surface. Joe's constant flashbacks to the past show how in many ways, his current self is the sum of his past memories. All of this suggests that whatever the state of Joe's physical body, he will always be himself as long as he retains control of his mind.

☛ Where did they get that stuff about bombproof dugouts when a man in one of them could be hit so hard that the whole complicated business of his ears could be blown away leaving him deaf so deaf he couldn't hear his own heart beat?

Related Characters: Joe

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis



This quote describes the pivotal moment in the first chapter when Joe finally realizes that he isn't actually still working at a bakery at Los Angeles—in fact, he went to fight in World War I and was gravely injured when he was caught in an artillery shell blast. Ironically, while Joe just wanted the telephone to stop ringing at the beginning of the chapter, he gets his wish at the end when he realizes that there never was any telephone and that he'll never hear again in his life.

While the novel explores the horrors of war, dramatizing the sacrifice Joe paid with his body, it also has a sense of humor. The place where Joe got hit by an artillery shell was specifically supposed to be a “bombproof” bunker, which turned out not to be the case. Later in the novel, Joe expands on this idea, showing how military, political, and religious leaders use and misuse words in an attempt to justify or even glamorize war.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ After the speech Lincoln Beechy looped the loop five times and left town. A couple months later his airplane fell into San Francisco Bay and Lincoln Beechy drowned.

Related Characters: Joe, Lincoln Beechy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the visit of famous aviator Lincoln Beechy to Shale City, the town in Colorado where Joe spent most of his childhood. Lincoln Beechy is a lightly fictionalized version of a real person (Lincoln Beachy) who was also a famous aviator and who drowned off the coast of San Francisco. Beechy's brief, self-contained story helps illustrate both the wonders and dangers of new technology. As an aviator just a few years after the Wright Brothers, Beechy was a pioneer, with his loop-the-loops helping to convey the wonder of humans being able to fly for the first time in history.

But Beechy's loop-the-loops also show recklessness and a lack of respect for the dangers of the new technology. While Beechy's luck holds for a while, eventually he faces the consequences of pushing the limits of new technology after a crash leads to his death. The role that luck plays in human lives returns many times throughout the story, with Joe himself often musing that in his severely injured condition, he feels like someone who won the lottery in reverse.


Beechy's experience with new technology connects directly to World War I, as new technology made the war more destructive than any previous conflict. Planes, like the one Beechy flew, stopped being curiosities and instead became weapons. Although Joe may not have realized all this about the potential horrors of new technology when he first saw Lincoln Beechy, his time in the war allows Joe to see many of his old memories in a new light.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ They didn't sleep very much. Sometimes they dozed off and awakened and found that they were apart and came back to each other and held one another tight very tight as if they had been lost forever and had just found each other all over again.

Related Characters: Joe, Kareen, Old Mike Birkman

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis



This passage describes the night before Joe shipped off to World War I. Joe spends the night in the arms of his girlfriend Kareen, with the tacit approval of Old Mike Birkin, Kareen's father. Although Old Mike has a reputation for being grumpy, he surprises Joe by letting him spend the night with Kareen, asking only that Joe promise to treat Kareen respectfully. Perhaps because he is older, Old Mike realizes the seriousness of Joe's situation and that Joe might not come back from war, so he allows Joe to make the most of his remaining time at home.

The passage between Kareen and Joe draws attention to both of their arms, foreshadowing how later in this chapter, Joe will realize that he lost both of his arms in the artillery attack. Later, when Joe notices the arms are gone, he thinks back to Kareen, asking her to comfort him. Arms represent how Joe and Kareen connected with each other. Before the war, Joe's arms helped him feel closer to other humans; by taking Joe's arms, the war also robbed Joe of this ability to connect with other people. By going to fight, Joe lost not only parts of his physical body, but also more intangible things like his connection to Kareen, whom he will likely never meet with again.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ "It's just like this. For fellows like you and me to be out her slaving our best years away on a section gang is just as if girls nice girls like Onie and Diane suddenly decided to become washerwomen."

Related Characters: Howie (speaker), Joe, Diane, Onie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from Howie, Joe's friend who convinces Joe to go work out on a railroad section gang in the middle of the desert before changing his mind and deciding that the two of them should go back. Howie and Joe are both from Shale City, and they find themselves in a similar situation: both of them were seeing a girl (Diane for Joe and Onie for



Howie) who left them for Glen Hogan, and so Joe and Howie go to the desert to try to escape their problems in Shale City.

Soon after arriving in the desert, however, both Joe and Howie realize that the work is much more difficult than they expected, which is why the people who do it seem to be Mexican workers with few other options. Howie's speech to Joe here shows a recognition of their privileged status compared to the other workers. Although Howie doesn't directly insult the Mexican workers, he compares them to washerwomen, suggesting that some work is only for people of a lower social status and that Howie and Joe are above that status, just as "nice girls like Onie and Diane" voluntarily became washerwomen. Joe, who is reluctant to leave the job at first, doesn't realize his privileged status until Howie points it out to him. While Joe might be a "little guy" compared to the high-ranking generals in the war, he nevertheless learns that he has his own advantages over some members of society who are less privileged.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ He couldn't live like this because he would go crazy. But he couldn't die because he couldn't kill himself. If he could only breathe he could die. That was funny but true.

Related Characters: Joe

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from one of protagonist Joe's lowest moments in the story, when he realizes that because he lost most of his face in an artillery blast, he has a breathing tube, meaning he couldn't even suffocate himself if he wanted to. As is often the case in the novel, this grim realization comes with some humor: Joe realizes ironically, that in order to die and stop breathing altogether he would have to first attempt *start* breathing normally through his mouth (or at least what remains of it). At this low point in the story, Joe doesn't believe that his life is worth living. He feels that he won the lottery in reverse for bad luck. He also feels that his doctors are keeping him alive not for his own benefit but as a way to show off their own skills.



Joe's horrible physical and mental state provides a clear example of the horrors of war and the toll war takes on soldiers. Nevertheless, this rock-bottom mental state is not the end of Joe's character arc—particularly in Book II, Joe

begins trying to make the most of his remaining time left. Joe's more hopeful attitude in later chapters doesn't negate the horror of these early chapters, however, and throughout the novel, Joe remains acutely aware of all the things the war took from him.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ The guys from the mission came stinking of disinfectant and looking very bedraggled and embarrassed. They knew that anyone who smelled the disinfectant knew they were bums on charity. They didn't like that and how could you blame them? They were always humble and when they were bright enough they worked hard.

Related Characters: Joe, Jose, Jody Simmons

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes some of the temporary workers that Joe met during his time working the night shift at a bakery in Los Angeles. One of these workers, a Porto Rican man named Jose, would eventually become a full-time worker at the bakery after impressing foreman Jody Simmons, and Jose's life story continues to fascinate Joe.


The "bedraggled" look and smell of disinfectant mark men from the Mission (a local charity) like Jose as lower class. causes Joe to reconsider some of his ideas about people from lower-class backgrounds. Despite Jose's lack of privilege, he is a good worker. He tells many interesting stories about his life, many of which seem to combine fact with fiction, that captivate all the workers in the bakery. Jose follows a strict if slightly unusual code of personal honor, demonstrating so much gratitude toward foreman Jody Simmons that Jose refuses to quit the job, instead trying to find a way to get fired. When Jose gets fired for destroying some of the bakery's pies, he feels guilty and pays himself to replace the pies, despite the fact that he seems to be poor and probably needs the money himself. Jose's honorable behavior contrasts sharply with high-ranking military officials in the war, who also claim that honor is important—but who don't live their words the way that Jose does.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ He thought about it afterward. It didn't matter whether the rat was gnawing on your buddy or a damned German it was all the same. Your real enemy was the rat and when you saw it there fat and well fed chewing on something that might be you why you went nuts.

Related Characters: Joe

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Joe remembers a moment during his time in World War I when the soldiers in his company saw a rat eating the face of a German soldier and promptly beat the rat to death. Joe recalls the rat because, in the hospital where he's staying after surviving an artillery blast, he feels a rat crawling on him and eating him alive. In this passage the rat symbolizes death, and Joe and the other soldiers kill the rat to avoid having to face the reality of death. Notably, the rat (and the mortality it represents) is so terrifying that it even causes them to temporarily feel kinship with the dead German soldier.


Perhaps the rat, which gets fat from all the corpses it eats during wartime, represents not only death but also the people who attempt to profit off of war. Later in the novel, Joe explores the idea that perhaps his true enemy in war isn't people from other countries but the people who start wars without putting their own lives at risk. Thus, Joe's fear of the rat and his hatred toward it reflects his feelings toward the people in power who sent him off to fight in the first place.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ He saw he had to do it. Because if he couldn't tell being awake from being asleep why he couldn't even consider himself a grown-up person.

Related Characters: Joe

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis


This quote expands on the previous quote about the rat, after Joe wakes up and realizes the rat eating his wound was seemingly just a dream. Joe knows this for certain, however, because in his current condition he struggles to tell the difference between awake and asleep, just as he struggles to tell the difference between past and present. But while Joe believes the rat isn't real, he still fears that the rat might come back to hurt him in a future nightmare. In this sense, the rat represents not just mortality, but also the mental scars that Joe still carries from the war—all the things in his mind that aren't "real" but still have the power to hurt him.

This particular passage also marks a turning point in Joe's character, as he decides that he has to start acting like a "grown-up person." So far, Joe has had little control over his life, slipping in and out of memories with no firm grip on reality. In this passage, however, Joe realizes that the first step to controlling his life is to get a better grasp on reality, and so Joe begins to actively decide how he will spend his time in the hospital.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ He felt a little lump in his throat that even as he was deserting his father for Bill Harper his father had volunteered the rod.

Related Characters: Joe, Father, Bill Harper

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from another flashback Joe has in the hospital, where Joe remembers a fateful camping trip he went on with his father and Bill Harper. Typically, Joe went fishing with his father, but on this camping trip, he left his father behind at the tent and went out fishing with Bill. On this camping trip, Joe's father lends Joe his valuable fishing rod as a symbolic passing-of-the-torch gesture. But Joe and Bill manage to lose it while fishing, seemingly failing this test of maturity. As it turns out, however, what's really significant about the trip is that it's the last time Joe and his father go camping together, suggesting that even though Joe failed to take care of the rod, he is inevitably growing up anyway.

Although this flashback might seem like a regression for Joe (after he just made a vow to try to keep a better grasp on reality), it also helps Joe come to an important realization,

showing how a person's memories can still affect their present. Joe's memory of losing the rod—of failing an important rite of passage and learning from the experience—helps give him the determination and persistence to continue fighting to organize his thoughts in the present in the hospital.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Somebody said let's go out and fight for liberty and so they went and got killed without ever once thinking about liberty. And what kind of liberty were they fighting for anyway? How much liberty and whose idea of liberty? Were they fighting for the liberty of eating free ice cream cones all their lives or for the liberty of robbing anybody they pleased whenever they wanted to or what?

Related Characters: Joe (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from near the beginning of Chapter X, as part of a long internal monologue Joe has about the injustice of war. This monologue is the culmination of everything Joe has experienced in the first half of the book, as Joe turns his visceral feelings about the injustice of war into a coherent, structured argument. Here, Joe examines the concept of liberty and whether it's a suitable reason to go to war. In Joe's mind, the good type of liberty would be the "liberty of eating ice cream cones" all the time, suggesting that his version of liberty involves simple pleasures.

But as Joe points out, some people define liberty differently, and it's possible that one person's definition of liberty might conflict with another's, leading the first person to infringe on the liberty of the second. Using this logic, which he's able to do now that he has organized his thoughts better, Joe suggests that while some versions of liberty might be a good thing, other versions of liberty could be harmful, depending on who defines what "liberty" means. Ultimately, Joe argues that "liberty" is a bad justification for war because it contains so many potential meanings that it can mean almost anything. By examining the meaning of liberty and other ideals that people cite in wars, Joe tries to prove that these ideals might sound good on the surface but are not important enough to justify the destruction and loss of life that occur during war.

☞ There's nothing noble about dying. Not even if you die for honor. Not even if you die the greatest hero the world ever saw.

Related Characters: Joe (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 123



Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes near the end of Joe's internal monologue about the injustice of war. After dismantling many of the most common ideals used to justify war, Joe comes to his ultimate argument: that life itself is too precious to ever trade for any ideal. Joe focuses particular attention on *honor*, which he believes is the ideal that people in power use most often to justify the death of "little guys" like him in battle. Joe seems to realize that his claim—that even the greatest hero in the world doesn't die nobly—is bold and controversial. Joe arrived at this conclusion based on his own time in the hospital: in his seriously injured state, he has spent so long feeling like a corpse that he believes he knows more about death than just about anyone alive. Joe doesn't feel that his current state—where he relies on nurses and complicated machines to stay alive—is particularly noble. While he's glad to be alive, he doesn't feel that he accomplished anything by getting hit with an artillery shell, and he uses his own experience to imagine how others might feel. Joe argues against war, where death is inevitable, by suggesting there's no good way to die.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☞ He thought if I never have anything else I will always have dawn and morning sunlight.

Related Characters: Joe

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis


This quote comes from near the beginning of Book II, right after Joe has begun figuring out how to measure time in the hospital despite the fact that he still can't see or hear and can barely move. Although Joe can't physically see the morning sunlight, after he learns how to tell day apart from night, he has such a strong sensory memory of morning that it's as if he can see the sunlight. Morning often represents new beginnings, and Book II of the novel represents a new

beginning for Joe as he starts to come to terms with his condition and try to make the most of his remaining time. Joe's new beginning coincides with the start of his new calendar, suggesting that Joe's newfound ability to keep track of time is an important part of his character development. Whereas previously Joe drifted through memories without controlling them, forced to relive painful moments like his father's death, now he begins to reclaim some of his past, starting with the image of the dawn.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ Oh god the happy happy new year he had counted three hundred and sixty-five days and now it was new year's eve.

Related Characters: Joe

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after Joe has managed to keep track of time for a whole year (by paying attention to changes in temperature and the comings and goings of nurses). While Joe doesn't know what date it actually is on the outside, he nevertheless celebrates the anniversary of when he began keeping track of time as New Year's because the date represents an important new start for him. In order to keep track of time, Joe used both persistence and ingenuity, so this New Year's marks a major accomplishment for him as a character—it was the day he finally reclaimed some of the autonomy that the artillery strike took away from him.


Notably, this quote lacks capitalization and punctuation. Although the novel technically has a third-person narrator, Joe's thoughts often blend together with the narration. For example, in this section, the lack of punctuation helps convey how quickly Joe is thinking. A couple sentences blend together, mimicking the way that Joe's thoughts come so quickly that they blend together due to Joe's excitement about celebrating his New Year.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☞ American generals and English generals shook your hand but since he had no hand to shake maybe this was an Englishman or an American who had decided to follow the French custom because there was no other way to do it.

Related Characters: Joe, Lucky

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis



This quote comes during an unusual incident when Joe senses strangers in his room who place a medal on his chest. One of the men kisses Joe after pinning on the medal, leading Joe to conclude that the man in French, since that is the custom among high-ranking French officers. Joe himself has a complicated relationship with his identity as an American. On the one hand, Joe believes that national boundaries are mostly arbitrary and that, like “liberty,” a “homeland” is not sufficient justification for going to war, not when life is more valuable.


On the other hand, however, Joe nevertheless takes comfort in the familiar. When he was in Paris before his injury, he spent much of his time with an American woman named Lucky who reminded him of home in a place where he found himself surrounded by people speaking a foreign language. In this passage also, Joe seems to feel anxiety about the possibility that he’s surrounded by people with foreign customs. Once again, this passage explores the idea of honor. Joe seems to find it darkly humorous that high-ranking military officials have to honor him without even knowing his true identity and without Joe knowing theirs. This scene, then, dramatizes Joe’s belief that military honor is an empty ritual.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ He felt change through the tips of her fingers and a sharp little twinge of disgust went through him but in spite of the disgust he was responding to the touch responding to the mercy in her heart that caused her to touch him so. Her hands sought out the far parts of his body. They inflamed his nerves with a kind of false passion that fled in little tremors along the surface of his skin.

Related Characters: Joe, The Old Day Nurse

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Joe’s experience with a day nurse who feels sympathetic for Joe but who doesn’t understand his attempts to communicate. Joe tries to speak to the day nurse by tapping in Morse code, but she either misinterprets or ignores his tapping. In this passage, the nurse sexually stimulates Joe, touching him in a way that makes him feel “passion.” But while “passion” might seem like a positive emotion, Joe characterizes his feelings as “false passion,” suggesting something less positive. Without his sense of sight, Joe has to imagine many aspects of the nurse, and he believes that she’s touching him out of a sense of mercy or pity. Joe reacts with disgust to this “mercy” because he feels that, whatever the nurse’s intentions, she is condescending to him. In Joe’s mind, the nurse’s behavior is just like that of the generals who pin medals on Joe’s chest or the doctors who take pride in keeping Joe alive. In all of these cases, other characters act out of seeming concern for Joe, but Joe believes that they are really acting out of self-interest, either to improve their own reputations or to quiet their guilty consciences.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ He thought of the slaves who built the pyramids thousands of them tens of thousands of them spending their whole lives to put up a dead monument to a dead king. He thought of the slaves who fought each other in the Coliseum in Rome for the entertainment of big guys who sat in the boxes and held their thumbs up or down to give the slaves life or death.

Related Characters: Joe

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after Joe realizes that, while he has the capability to communicate with people on the outside by tapping his head in Morse code, the staff at the hospital refuse to listen, preferring to sedate him rather than putting up with his tapping. Unable to communicate with the outside world, Joe feels that he’s a prisoner, and so he thinks back to some of the most famous imprisoned people from throughout history. While previous parts of the book focused on Joe’s past, this passage considers a much more distant past, showing how Joe’s time in isolation has focused his mind and allowed him to think beyond himself.


Joe’s comparison between himself and enslaved people from ancient history suggests that some truths about humanity remain constant throughout time. Once again, Joe

considers the injustice of war, suggesting that the fighting of World War I, while supposedly for liberty or honor, was really just a logical evolution of Coliseum fights in ancient Rome, with the common people fighting each other and the elites watching from the sidelines. Joe also expands on the conflict between “little guys” and elites, using the example of the construction of the Pyramids. While the enslaved people who constructed the Pyramids didn’t fight in a war, Joe nevertheless feels solidarity with their situation, believing that just as he lies trapped in a hospital, they were trapped in their work for the people who enslaved them. Joe sees the conflict between elites and common people as universal, whether in the past or in the present, and whether in battle or in work.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ Outside the crowds were yelling and the bands were playing and here he was with four or five guys in a quiet little room and they were playing blackjack when Christ came up from Tucson and walked in on them.

Related Characters: Joe, Howie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes a hallucination that Joe has after a doctor injects him with a sedative in order to stop him from tapping his head. The incident causes Joe to lose his grasp on reality as he imagines that he sees Jesus Christ in a modern-day setting playing cards. The scene of Christ playing cards outside a train station mashes up some crucial moments from Joe’s life. On the one hand, it recalls the fateful train that took Joe off to fight in World War I. The train in the desert also recalls Joe and his friend Howie’s short-lived attempt to work on a railroad construction gang. The card game Christ plays represents the role that random chance plays in people’s lives. The playing cards perhaps connect back to Joe’s belief that he is extremely unlucky, having won the lottery in reverse. As the hallucination goes on, Joe realizes that the scene he witnesses is a sort of purgatory in which Joe is both an observer and a participant, perhaps reflecting how his own severely injured condition is on the border between life and death. Ultimately, this surreal scene is a setback for Joe as he attempts to get his thoughts back together and communicate with the outside world again.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝ Now he understood. The old nurse had left to spend the Christmas holidays away from him and this new nurse this young lovely beautiful understanding new nurse was wishing him Merry Christmas. He nodded back at her frantically and his nod meant Merry Christmas to you Merry Christmas oh a Merry Merry Christmas.

Related Characters: Joe, The New Day Nurse, The Old Day Nurse

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes one of the biggest turning points in the book, when a new day nurse writes on Joe’s skin to wish him Merry Christmas and Joe realizes that he understands what she’s saying. Unlike the old day nurse (who is apparently away on holiday), the new day nurse demonstrates a genuine interest in trying to communicate with Joe instead of simply using him as a prop to soothe her own conscience, as so many members of the hospital staff have done with Joe.

The lack of capitalization and punctuation in this passage deliberately recalls the passage where Joe celebrates his first New Year, suggesting that Joe feels just as excited in this moment, if not more so. This passage brings things full circle back to the beginning of the book, when Joe imagined that he heard a telephone while he was still working at the bakery in Los Angeles. Now, instead of hearing an imaginary telephone from the past, Joe can communicate with a real human again for the first time since his injury. This occasion marks a major turning point in Joe’s character with the new day nurse representing a “new day” for Joe, although the remainder of the book will explore some of the ways that this hopeful occasion fails to live up to its promise.

☝ The hotel manager looked out into the darkness and saw Mary’s white anxious face there. She’s a pretty kid he thought and scared too like her husband says. It’ll be an awful mess if she has a baby on the premises people who can’t afford them shouldn’t have babies anyway but what are you going to do about it?

Related Characters: Joe, The New Day Nurse, Jody Simmons

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 213


Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes a dream Joe has shortly after the new day nurse wishes him Merry Christmas. Like Joe's previous dream about Christ at a railroad station, this dream also draws from the Bible (specifically the nativity story of Jesus's birth) and mixes the past together with the present. In this passage, the innkeeper from the nativity story gets updated to a "hotel manager," and his concerns about Mary and Joseph staying at his hotel also feel modern. Like Joe's old foreman at the bakery, Jody Simmons, the hotel manager occupies a minor position of authority, and so he has power but isn't quite a member of the elite. The hotel manager's in-between level of authority makes him feel ambivalent toward Mary, sympathizing with her situation but not wanting her to inconvenience him in any way. By modernizing the nativity story, Joe's dream shows how some issues involving class and money have stayed the same throughout the centuries. Joe's dream shows that the conflict between elites and common people is not always black-and-white, and within those two large groups there are still conflicts and other divisions.

Chapter 18 Quotes

 What do you want?

Related Characters: The Doctor (speaker), Joe

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 226


Explanation and Analysis

This quote, perhaps the most important one in the book, comes from a nameless character, possibly a doctor at the hospital where Joe resides, who finally understands Joe's tapping in Morse code and asks him a question in return. All Joe knows about the man is that he has heavy footsteps, which represent how this man embodies the weight of all the authority pressing down on Joe and keeping him trapped in the hospital.

While the man's question may seem simple, it lends itself to multiple interpretations, taking Joe a while to formulate his response. On the one hand, it could be a practical question, where the man expects Joe to give a practical answer like asking for a new shirt. But the question could also be more

philosophical, asking Joe what he wants in life in general. In a way, Joe has been trying to answer the question "What do you want?" for the entirety of the novel, attempting to find new purpose in his life after his injuries from the artillery shell made his old life impossible. Eventually, Joe decides that what he wants is to communicate with the outside world, dedicating his whole life to that purpose, and so it disorients him when he achieves that goal and discovers that he has no plan about what to do next. While Joe's experience in the hospital is extreme and unusual, it nevertheless captures a universal human experience of trying to find meaning in life.

Chapter 19 Quotes

 Take me into your churches your great towering cathedrals that have to be rebuilt every fifty years because they are destroyed by war. Carry me in my glass box down the aisles where kings and priests and brides and children at their confirmation have gone so many times before to kiss a splinter of wood from a true cross on which was nailed the body of a man who was lucky enough to die.

Related Characters: Joe (speaker), The Doctor

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is Joe's answer to the question in the previous quote ("What do you want?"). Joe doesn't convey all of this to the Doctor, repeating just "Let me out." In his head, however, he imagines his wish in greater detail, going through a long list of places in the outside world he wants to visit, including schools, universities, and parliaments. Once again, Joe explores the horrors of war with a dark sense of humor, suggesting that at least Jesus was "lucky enough to die," unlike Joe, who can't die on his own. Joe's image of war destroying churches and cathedrals every fifty years in a cycle conveys how war doesn't respect anything sacred.

Ultimately, Joe wants not only to see the world (to the extent he still can "see") but for the world to see *him*. He feels that if people around the world could see his body, they would be able to experience the horrors of war firsthand by seeing what war did to Joe. Joe's reference to Jesus's cross in the passage suggests that Joe sees himself as something like the founder of a new religion. Just like Jesus's body remains an important part of Christianity, Joe wants his own body to become a symbol of a new "religion" based on pacifism. Joe's language is grandiose, perhaps

reflecting how he feels that, after figuring out how to communicate with the outside world, he feels like he can accomplish the impossible.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☞ Why didn't they want him? Why were they shutting the lid of the coffin against him? Why didn't they want him to speak? Why didn't they want him to be seen? Why didn't they want him to be free?

Related Characters: Joe (speaker), The New Day Nurse, The Doctor

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is Joe's internal monologue after the doctor informs Joe that they can't let him outside of the hospital due to "regulations." Although Joe knew that his request was complicated, he is nevertheless crushed to learn that he'll have to spend the rest of his life in the hospital. Joe feels that this outcome is as if the hospital staff are "shutting the lid of the coffin against him," perhaps because if Joe can't leave the hospital, then it really is as if he's dead to the outside world.

While it might seem that Joe is asking rhetorical questions in this passage, in fact, Joe does have answers. He believes that the military and the hospital don't want him going out in public because his body will force people to confront the horrors of war. Joe suspects (correctly) that after all the years he's spent in the hospital, the war must be over. He wants his injured body to be a visible symbol of the war's toll, but he fears that by keeping him locked up in the hospital, the military and other powerful forces want to hide him—and the true horrors of war—from the public.

The end of this passage recalls one of Joe's earlier internal monologues about liberty: although the soldiers of World War I supposedly fought for "liberty," Joe himself has essentially become a prisoner, showing how if he really did fight for liberty, it wasn't for himself.

☞ Make no mistake of it we will live. We will be alive and we will walk and talk and eat and sing and laugh and feel and love and bear our children in tranquility in security in decency in peace. You plan the wars you masters of men plan the wars and point the way and we will point the gun.

Related Characters: Joe (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is the final lines of the book. In this passage, Joe imagines himself finding solidarity with other common people and rising up against the "masters of men" who "plan the wars" but seldom risk their own lives in them. There is some ambiguity in the very last line of the book. On the surface, it sounds like the "masters of men" will give orders to Joe and his allies to point their guns, and Joe's allies will follow these orders. In fact, however, it seems more likely based on the full passage that the "masters of men" will give orders, and instead of following the orders, Joe and his allies will instead point their guns *at* the "masters of men."

While the novel explores class with nuance, showing how even among the "little guys" there are divisions and hierarchies, in Joe's prediction, these distinctions ultimately matter less than the even bigger distinction between the "masters of men" in positions of authority and the lower classes they command. Joe's prediction is grandiose, just as his earlier fantasy about going out in his current condition to schools and parliaments was grandiose. Still, despite all the setbacks Joe has experienced in the hospital, he attempts to make peace with his imprisonment there by remaining hopeful that perhaps one day more people will wake up the horrors of war and start asking questions about who truly benefits from the fighting. While Joe's body may stay locked away in a hospital, it also gets brought to life in this novel, and so in a way, Joe's final thoughts are Trumbo's appeal to the members of audience who have "seen" Joe's body through the novel to take the novel's anti-war message seriously.



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

At a large bakery in Los Angeles, on a rainy December just before Christmas, Joe seems to have a massive hangover and is annoyed to hear a phone ringing loudly. It's far away, so he heads over to the night shipping room to find it. He answers the phone and hears from his mother that his father has died. He goes to his foreman, Jody Simmons, and tells him the news. His foreman lets him punch out and take a truck home.

Joe makes it back to his parents' two-story house, where his father lies dead in the living room with a sheet over his face. His father had been sick for a while. His mother and his two younger sisters are there too; the younger sister sleeps while the older sister cries.

Two men knock at the door and come in to take care of the body. Joe sees the face of his father, who is only 51, and thinks that he feels older than his father. He thinks about how the world has been getting harder and tougher, and so maybe it's not so bad that his father has left it. His mother says that the corpse isn't really his father anymore, even if it looks like him. Joe pats her shoulder and puts his **arm** around her to comfort her.

Just when Joe thinks it's all over, the phone starts ringing again. He loses sense of reality and thinks at first that maybe he has a terrible hangover and is just remembering his father's death as part of a bad dream. He seems to keep getting the same phone call about his father's death again and again. He realizes he might be sick in a hospital and that the ether is wearing off. The telephone ringing, which announces the death of his father, seems to be part of the dream. Joe hears it again and gets scared.

The book starts with a ringing phone, and more phones appear throughout the novel, emphasizing the importance of communication in the story. The rain and Joe's hangover give the scene in which Joe learns of his father's death an appropriately dreary mood. All is not as it seems, however, and the end of the first chapter will put these early events into a new perspective.



This passage demonstrates some dark humor (with Joe's father dead in the "living" room). Death comes right into Joe's house, where he and the rest of his family can't avoid it, dramatizing how death is inevitable.



The reference to Joe feeling older than his father hints at Joe's experiences as a soldier in World War I (an experience his father wouldn't have had), but at this point the chronology of the story is still unclear. Joe's mother's comment that Joe's father isn't inside his body anymore suggests that she believes a person's essence lies in their intangible soul, not their physical body. The question of what makes a person's essence—including how a person's body affects their sense of self—is central to the novel.



Joe struggles to tell the difference between memory, dreams, and reality throughout much of the novel. Joe's inability to keep events straight in his head often leaves him feeling powerless, and the repetition of the telephone in this section illustrates how Joe is trapped in a cycle that he can't control.



Joe's whole body convulses with pain. His heart pounds, and he realizes when he can't hear his pulse in his ears that he's deaf. He realizes that maybe the "bombproof" dugout that he was in (as a soldier in World War I) wasn't so bombproof after all—and that he got hit. He wonders what happened to the other men who were with him. Joe considers that while he might never hear again, at least he won't hear the sounds of machine guns or screaming ever again. He collects his thoughts and realizes that he is alive in a hospital, hallucinating things like the ringing telephone.

Joe thinks back on his childhood and how his mother and father always seemed happy. He remembers them talking about courting each other over the telephone on a party line; anyone else in his mother's small Colorado town could pick up the line and interrupt. His mother would play piano over the phone for his father, and sometimes other people on the line would make requests about what to play next. Joe hears a distant piano keeping time with the ringing phone and wants to be dead like his father.

CHAPTER 2

One fall, in Shale City, Colorado, before Joe went to war, Joe's mother sings in the kitchen while baking bread. Between baking, canning, and making jams and jellies, his mother spends most of the fall working in the kitchen. His mother really likes the hamburgers from the hamburger man downtown who some people claim is a "dope fiend" but who is harmless and makes the best hamburgers around. Joe's father used to bring some home for her on Saturday nights.

Fall in Shale City usually means snow, often before Thanksgiving. Joe's father always wakes him early on the first snowfall of the season. Joe loves the snow, and after looking out the window at it, he puts on his heavy clothes to go outside.

Although the book explores the grim nature of war, it sometimes uses dark humor. For example, in this section, it's ironic that Joe got hit with an artillery shell in a dugout that was specifically called "bombproof." Furthermore, Joe's ability to see the bright side of his situation—that at least he'll never have to hear the awful sounds of war ever again—also demonstrates a dark sense of humor. The ringing telephone seems to connect to "ringing" ears, a common side effect of being caught in a big explosion like the artillery shell blast that injured Joe, which can lead to deafness like Joe's.



While the telephone was a grim symbol of death earlier in the chapter, this passage portrays the telephone in a more positive light, as a symbol of human connection and love. Joe's memories of stories from before the war are idyllic, depicting a happy world where people communicate with each other. By losing his sense of hearing, Joe loses the ability to connect with other humans that the telephone represents.



Parts of Joe's childhood take inspiration from author Dalton Trumbo's own Colorado childhood. This passage emphasizes the "all-American" nature of Joe's childhood, with references to a close nuclear family and the typically American food of hamburgers, although rumors of the hamburger man using drugs suggests that there is more than meets the eye in Shale City.



This chapter goes through a typical year in Shale City. One of the most significant effects of Joe's injury from the bomb blast is that he loses his sense of time, and so in a way, this chapter is his first attempt to regain his sense of time. While the novel features many flashback, technically it all takes place in the present, with the segments set in the past implied to be dreams and hallucinations that Joe experiences as he recovers at the hospital.



In spring, the snow melts and primroses grow in the vacant lots. One spring, Lincoln Beechy comes to Shale City, in the first airplane anyone in town has ever seen. Everyone gets excited to see Lincoln Beechy, amazed that he risks his life in his fragile-looking airplane, even doing loop-de-loops. The arrival of Lincoln Beechy suggest that Shale City is becoming a real city, like Denver or Salt Lake City. A school superintendent gives a speech about how planes like Lincoln's will one day unite the world in peace. A few months later, Lincoln drowns when his airplane crashes into the San Francisco Bay.

There was a real person named "Lincoln Beachy" (note the novel's slightly different spelling of the last name) who had the same life story as this character. His amazing feats in the air demonstrate the wonder of new technology and the dawn of human flight. Nevertheless, Beechy acts recklessly, and it's no surprise that this new technology eventually leads to his death. The life story of Lincoln Beechy/Beachy has clear parallels to World War I, which also demonstrated how quickly the wonders of new technology could turn horrific.



Joe's birthday is in December. His mother always makes him a big dinner, and he invites his friends over. All his friends like his father, and his father likes them back.

Joe had a happy home life. Part of the tragedy of World War I is all of the things from Joe's past life that he lost by going to war.



County fair week in the fall is the biggest week of the year in Shale City, in some ways even bigger than Christmas. A carnival comes to town with magicians, stunt motorcycle riders, and rows of stalls selling sweets and produce. The fair grounds are a popular date location for people who can't afford to go to dances.

While much of this chapter portrays an average American town in the lead-up to World War I, it also goes into the specifics of life in Shale City, with one of the major local highlights being the country fair. The fact that the country fair is more important than Christmas suggests how local traditions can become even more important to people than religious ones.



One day, Joe's father decides to move the family from Shale City to Los Angeles. Although old men in Shale City's cigar store used to talk about the war in Europe sometimes, Joe begins to really hear about the war—and particularly Germany's atrocities—in Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, Joe's father dies, the U.S. enters the war, and ultimately Joe goes off to war himself. That brings him to his current condition—deaf and in pain in a hospital. Joe thinks that he should never have gotten involved in the war in the first place.

Joe's family's move to Los Angeles provides Joe with his first glimpse of what it feels like to lose his innocence. Joe only begins to hear about the atrocities of war after he moves to Los Angeles, and Los Angeles is also where his father dies. While these events might have happened anyway regardless of where Joe was living, his family's move to the big city seems to suggest that Joe must leave behind the relative comfort and safety of his small-town childhood



CHAPTER 3

Joe feels like he's swimming through cool water, trying to make it to the surface before he drowns. He tries to relax, remembering how when he started swimming as a kid, he learned that you could float on your back for a long time if you relax. As Joe regains his senses, he realizes that the people in the hospital are operating on him. He can't hear them because he's deaf, and with the bandages over his head, he can't see them either.

Joe's feeling of drowning reflects how he is at the mercy of forces larger than himself. It reflects not only his current injured condition but also his larger status as a common, drafted soldier in a war that is much bigger than him. People operate on Joe, and Joe can't even tell what they're doing to him, further establishing Joe's lack of agency.



Joe feels the people in his room taking his bandages off. He itches all over and wishes they'd pinch him less. He pays attention to the parts of his body they're touching and realizes with horror that they're touching a stump on his shoulder because his left **arm** has been amputated. Joe is angry, feeling that his doctors should have had to sign a paper or something before just cutting his arm off. Joe wonders how he'll ever work again without a left arm.

Joe wonders what they did to his amputated left **arm**. Do they bury it respectfully or throw it out like trash? He wonders what happened to the ring he had on that hand and wants it back. It's a moonstone. He remembers Kareen giving it to him and how she kissed him one day after he got drafted and the day before he left for Europe.

In Joe's memory, he and Kareen are kissing when Old Mike Birkman, Kareen's father, enters the house and interrupts them. But after Kareen explains that Joe leaves for war the next day, Old Mike tells them both to go into Kareen's bedroom since they might never get another chance. Old Mike warns Joe to treat Kareen respectfully.

At first, Kareen is shy, but eventually she gets naked and goes to bed. Joe also takes off his clothes and joins her. They embrace, and Kareen begs him not to leave. He puts his left **arm** under her to cushion her as they kiss. The whole night, they hold each other tight, not sleeping much. In the morning, Old Mike brings them breakfast. Reluctantly, Joe gets out of bed to face the cold room, then he heads off to make his train.

As he boards the train, Joe sees his mother, his sisters, Kareen, and Old Mike there standing on the platform to see him off. People in the crowd repeat patriotic quotes from Abraham Lincoln, Patrick Henry, George Washington, the song "Johnny Get Your Gun," and more. Johnny's memories blur together, interspersing patriotic quotes with the image of Kareen begging him not to go. He thinks about Kareen and how he's lost her. Then he realizes that has not only lost his left **arm**, but his right arm as well.

Joe feels a sense of injustice over losing his arm. While he blames the doctors, it seems that the problem is even larger and that perhaps what really upsets Joe is the unjust system of war that led to him getting injured in battle in the first place. Once again, Joe feels that he is at the mercy of people and forces more powerful than he is.



Joe realizes that his arm, which is very important to him, probably doesn't merit a proper burial from the government. Similarly, his ring from Kareen is important to him but also matters little to the government. Joe starts to realize that perhaps even his own life is disposable in war.



Under different circumstances, Old Mike Birkman might have stopped Joe from sleeping in Kareen's bedroom with her, but Old Mike seems to recognize that the war is making Joe grow up early, and so he allows Joe and Kareen to act like adults.



Joe and Kareen embrace each other, showing how Joe used his arms to connect with other people before his injury. The cold temperature in the morning outside the bed represents the cold reality that Joe will have to face when he goes to war. Temperature plays an important role in the story, since despite everything Joe has lost, he still has the ability to feel, including changes in temperature.



"Johnny Get Your Gun" is an old song that became particularly popular during World War I. The title of the book—Johnny Got His Gun—differs from the song, with the novel's past-tense title suggesting that it focuses not on the hopeful feelings at the beginning of a war but instead on the aftermath. This passage shows how people justified going to war as a patriotic duty. But this hopeful beginning to Joe's journey quickly fades once he realizes that he's missing both his arms.



CHAPTER 4

It's so hot that Joe can barely breathe. He hallucinates now that he and his friend Howie are working on the railroad. It's a tough job where everyone works quietly and seriously in the desert heat. Many of the other workers are Mexican. Joe and Howie assumed they'd get lunch on the job, but the foreman has nothing to offer them. Some of the Mexican workers offer fried egg sandwiches with red peppers, but Joe and Howie refuse. Just then, all the Mexican workers get up and start heading down the tracks. Joe and Howie ask the foreman what's going on, and he tells them the other workers are going for a swim.

Joe and Howie run to take a swim, not realizing the canal is two miles away. At the canal, Mexican workers strip down and swim. Joe and Howie join them, though they're embarrassed to be so pale. Eventually, everyone gets out, dresses, and runs back to work. Joe and Howie lose energy that afternoon and begin to collapse in the heat. In his daze, Joe thinks about Diane, a girl he was seeing back in Shale City, who cheated on him by going on a date with another guy named Glen Hogan. At last, Joe hears that it's the end of the day.

Joe and Howie go back to their bunkhouse with the other workers. They're too tired to get dinner, so they go right to their bunks and lie down. Later that night, around 10 p.m., Joe feels Howie shaking him awake. Howie has just gotten a telegram from a girl named Onie back home, begging Howie to forgive her for going on a date with Glen Hogan and take her back. It turns out Glen Hogan dumped Onie for Diane. Joe is angry that Howie woke him up for this.

Howie says they can take a gravel train back to Shale City that night. He wants to go back to see Onie. Joe protests at first, but he agrees to come. Joe thinks about how he hit Bill Harper, the innocent boy who delivered the news to him that Diane was on a date with Glen Hogan, only to go to the local theater and find Diane and Glen together. That was the night Joe and Howie made their pact to go work in the desert and forget all about girls.

Joe and Howie board the gravel train back to Shale City. Joe thinks of Diane and hopes she isn't with Glen Hogan anymore. When the train arrives, Howie goes immediately to see Onie, leaving Joe alone in the dark. Joe feels bad, then he realizes that part of the reason why he feels bad is that he's walking on Diane's street. He's dirty from working all day and he doesn't want her to see him that way.

Joe has spent most of his life living in a relatively small town in Colorado, so meeting so many Mexican people is a culture shock to him—although perhaps not as much of a shock as going to Europe for war will be. The Mexican workers try to be kind to Joe and Howie by offering food, but their fear of the unknown stops them from trying the unusual sandwiches. Joe often thinks about swimming, and the literal swimming in this memory seems to suggest how in the present, when Joe is in the hospital, his thoughts are metaphorically swimming, caught between past and present.



The Mexican workers are so desperate for a break that they're willing to run a full two miles just to go swimming, showing the lengths they'll go to in order to make their working situation more endurable. Joe and Howie's pale skin reflects not only how they come from a different (and more privileged) background than the Mexican workers but also how they aren't used to working long hours in the sun.



Compared to the Mexican workers, Joe and Howie have led privileged lives, and so their whole trip to the desert is a wake-up call about how difficult some other people's lives are. They also begin to understand the hierarchy of the workplace, where despite having many things in common, a foreman and the regular workers don't have quite the same status.



This passage reveals why Joe and Howie went to go work in the desert in the first place: they wanted to get away from some drama involving girls back in their hometown. While this passage suggests that Joe and Howie's troubles in the desert (and later Joe's experience in the war) are more significant than this small-town drama, human connection is an important theme in the book, and so Joe's relationships with girls are also important.



As Joe and Howie leave their job in the desert, their problems in the desert begin to fade away while their problems from home become more real again. They learn that, while their problems in Shale City might not be as difficult as the problems of working in the desert, they're still real, and it isn't possible to just run away from them.



As Joe passes Diane's house, he sees her on the front steps kissing Bill Harper. Joe goes home, his whole body aching after the long day. He's sad not only to lose Diane but also to lose his friend Bill. It will be even harder to forgive Diane for kissing Bill than if she'd stayed with Glen Hogan. Joe feels that compared to Howie (who has Onie) or even the Mexican workers in the desert (who have their own women), he has nothing worthwhile in his own life.

Back in the present in the hospital, Joe reflects on how his worries about girls used to feel so real but don't anymore. He imagines Glen Hogan and Howie still living somewhere in Colorado, but he knows that Bill Harper died in the war. Joe feels mixed up and tries to remember what he's doing. He doesn't feel hot anymore. Now, everything is cool.

CHAPTER 5

At the hospital, things in Joe's mind melt together like clouds. He feels like he's floating on his back in the Colorado River, which passes through Shale City. As he floats, he imagines being back with Kareen in her room and begging her to stay near him. He fears she'll drown if she gets too far away. Suddenly, Joe feels like he's sinking and starting to drown himself. He keeps sinking and can't even struggle.

Rockets and explosions shoot in front of Joe's eyes, as he feels like he's drowning just a few feet from the surface. Then it all stops, and Joe feels at peace, as if he's finally drowned (although he hasn't really). He might be deaf, but at least he's alive and can't feel pain. He wonders why the nurses have him propped up at an angle instead of lying flat. His lower body feels much lighter than his heavy chest. He tries to kick to move to a better position before realizing that he doesn't have legs anymore.

Joe wants to yell with fear after realizing he has no **arms** or legs, but he can't—he doesn't even have a mouth with jaws or a tongue. He can't even swallow and feels like someone is smothering him. He knows that if he's missing so many body parts he must be dying, but he's still curious about his condition, which lets him know that he's not dead yet. He figures the space that used to be his mouth and nose is now just a hole covered with bandages. He realizes the hole is so big that he doesn't have eyes anymore either, meaning he's blind.

Bill Harper, who seemed to earn Joe's trust by telling him about Diane and Glen Hogan earlier, now betrays Joe by kissing Diane. Before, Joe seemed to naively believe that things would always be the same—that Diane would always be his and that Bill Harper would always be loyal—and so this passage is an important coming-of-age moment when Joe learns about the nature of change.



The experience with the Mexican workers was Joe's first hint that the world contained greater problems than his worries about girls, but the war gave him even greater perspective. Joe's shift from hot to cool (similar to what he felt after spending the night with Kareen), once again symbolizes having to face the cold reality of war.



Once again, swimming and floating imagery suggests Joe's powerlessness. Joe is powerless not only within the context of being drafted to fight in World War I—he is also powerless to control the workings of his own mind. Joe longs for Kareen because she represents perhaps his last moment of safety and normalcy before going to war.



Just as Joe's lack of arms signifies his lack of power and ability to work, his lack of legs signifies how he has no escape from his current situation. Although the doctors and nurses take care of Joe, they also control his life, and the more time Joe spends in the hospital, the more he begins to see the potentially sinister side of this arrangement.



Joe's lack of a mouth represents (and contributes to) his inability to communicate with the outside world. Although he has seen the horrors of war firsthand, he can't actually tell them to anyone else, and so he must suffer alone with his knowledge. The empty hole over Joe's face also represents how the army has stripped Joe of his unique identity, turning him into yet another casualty statistic.



Joe feels like he's dreaming but knows he's not. He feels like nothing but a slab of meat. He feels that if he stays alive, he'll go crazy, but he's not even able to kill himself. In his head, he calls out to his mother to wake him. He wants to scream or move but can't do anything.

Women often play a comforting role in the book, and so when Joe isn't thinking of Kareen, he thinks of his mother. Joe's thought that he's nothing but a slab of meat contradicts with what his mother said earlier about his father's corpse (where she argued that a person's true self is more than just a physical body).



CHAPTER 6

Joe hallucinates being in the bakery in Los Angeles, walking 11 miles every night, all night long without getting tired. Friday night is the busiest because of the Saturday morning deliveries, so extra workers often come to the shop, often from the Midnight Mission (a local charity organization that serves meals at midnight after church services). One of the extra workers is a Puerto Rican man named Jose. Jose seems luckier and better-looking than many of the other workers from the Mission.

The similarity in names between Joe and Jose (as well as their supervisor, Jody) shows how much these characters have in common, despite coming from different circumstances. Jose's association with the Midnight Mission suggests that he lives in poverty and is likely homeless, which is why his good looks and good luck are so extraordinary.



Jose tells Joe that California is great for people with nowhere else to go, since you can sleep outside most of the year. Jose would like to get a steadier job at the bakery, partly because he'd like to stay clean without having to use the disinfectant-filled water at the Mission. Jose asks around at the factory if anyone has any connections to the movie studios, where Jose would like to work in research, but of course no one in the bakery has any such connections.

Like the Mexican men that Joe worked with earlier, Jose helps Joe realize how people in different situations live. Jose's situation is more precarious, since he lacks a full-time job and needs to rely on the Mission for basic needs like water to clean himself with. Jose's questions about the movie business may seem naïve, but they also show how he is hopeful and perhaps less jaded than Joe.



During the Easter rush, when another worker quits, Joe's foreman, Jody Simmons, hires Jose full time. Jose tells his coworkers a story about a rich girl back in New York City who wants to marry him; he met her while working as her family's chauffeur. No one believes him until one day an expensive piece of stationary with a Fifth Avenue return address shows up. The girl says she has come into some money that's hers, not her parents, and she wants Jose's real address so that she can come meet him to marry him. Everyone encourages Jose to give her his address, but Jose himself hesitates because he knows he doesn't love the girl back.

Jose's life blurs the line between fact and fiction, though the letter he receives from New York seems to confirm at least some of his incredible claim. Jose refuses to do what people expect him to do, which confuses the other workers, who go along with whatever authority figures tell them to do. Jose's reluctance to give his address may be related to the fact that he's homeless (while also leaving open the possibility that perhaps he is playing a hoax).



Other workers in the factory get the idea that Jose must be crazy. Then one day he tells them he's leaving because he found a better job—he found a position at a Hollywood studio after all. Jose worries about how to resign to Jody Simmons, since he still feels grateful for the bakery job. He doesn't quit and claims to be working both jobs, getting only 45 minutes of sleep at night.

Jose's stories only become more unbelievable the longer he works at the factory. Additionally, Joe seems to be remembering all of these details as he lies in the hospital, potentially further blurring the line of what's real and what he has imagined. Jose's life illustrates the difficulty of figuring out the truth, an issue that Joe himself often struggles with when he's in the hospital.



After talking with the other workers, Jose gets the idea to force Jody Simmons to fire him. He intentionally pretends to accidentally drop several pies right in front of Jody Simmons, but this isn't enough to get fired. The next day, Jose plans to dump a whole rack of pies, and all the other workers look forward to seeing what will happen. Before Jose arrives, the other workers notice a box on Jody's desk. Jody opens it and finds 24 roses with no card. He doesn't understand the gift or where it came from, but he says he'll give them to his wife.

Jose gets nervous as the time for spilling the pies draws near. At last, it's time, and Jose spills 180 pies on the floor. Jody Simmons comes down and starts cursing at Jose, firing him and telling him to get out. Jose leaves, feeling bad about what he did to Jody by destroying the pies. Jose reveals that he's the one who secretly ordered the flowers for Jody. He doesn't care that Jody will never know that Jose gave him those flowers. When Jose leaves the bakery, no one ever sees him again, but Jody receives a money order for all the lost pies. Back in the present, Joe suddenly feels like he's talking to Jose. But then he realizes that he's actually in a hospital bed, not the bakery.

Jose's code of honor—where he can't quit his job at the bakery but can get fired—doesn't make a whole lot of sense. In a way, Jose's outsider perspective helps to highlight the arbitrary nature of the concept of honor in the first place. The 24 roses seem to be a preemptive apology from Jose for the pies he's about to destroy, but once again, Jose's rather unusual gift demonstrates how Jose refuses to act in a conventional way.



The money order for the pies that Jody receives from Jose raises even more questions about Jose's life. If Jose was telling the truth about his life and is homeless, then presumably paying for so many pies would be a substantial hardship for him. Even more important to Jose than the money, however, is his sense of honor, which is why sacrifices the money to pay for the pies. Honor comes up again and again throughout the novel, usually in the context of war, but this chapter challenges traditional ideas of honor by showing how it can come in unexpected places and not just from the battlefield, as many believe.



CHAPTER 7

Joe wants to break his constant cycle of sinking and rising. He wants to think clearly. He feels that his bandages are gone, meaning a lot of time has passed. Everything is so still that he feels like he's back in the womb. He regrets that he'll never again see the faces of the people who make him happy, like Kareen, and that he'll never walk again.

Joe wonders how he's still alive when he hears so many stories of people dying suddenly and unexpectedly. He wonders if maybe he isn't dying, and if after a solid three or four years of practice during the war, doctors have finally gotten good enough at keeping people like him alive. He knows his blindness and deafness aren't unusual for someone who gets hit by an artillery shell, and plenty of people live with their condition. Joe wonders how he avoided bleeding to death and recalls how he heard the maggots in a wound are a good thing because they keep out gangrene. He's heard all sorts of stories about soldiers surviving serious wounds, with tubes of all kinds keeping them alive.

At the end of Chapter V, Joe was in despair and even feeling suicidal. This chapter shows him trying to get his life back together, perhaps motivated in part by the life of Jose (detailed in Chapter VI), who had little but made the most of what he had.



The more time Joe spends in the hospital, the more cynical he gets, particularly about the function of the hospital itself. While this passage describes the extraordinary technology that keeps Joe alive, it also hints at how new technology was also the reason Joe got injured in the first place (he was caught in the blast of an artillery shell explosion).



Joe feels that he has to be a sort of triumph for the doctors, given everything they had to do to keep him alive. He feels like he's won the lottery in reverse, becoming so unlucky it's hard to fathom. He realizes that he has a cloth mask over most of his face, probably so that the nurses don't have to look at it. He tries to move his head to get the mask off. He realizes he can make a small rocking motion but can't do much else. He's 20 years old and hasn't been sick a day in his life, but now he can't even roll over.

Joe notices a hole in his side that hasn't healed yet. He feels moisture dripping in the area. He remembers visiting a friend in a hospital ward where lots of men had holes that wouldn't heal and smelled like a corpse. He figures maybe he's lucky he lost his nose after all.

Joe feels himself slipping away, yet not quite fainting, as the place he's in gets dimmer. He feels the claws and whiskers of a **rat** climbing on him near his wound, but he can't do anything about it. He remembers the face of a Prussian officer he once saw, after he and his company swarmed some German trenches. As the man lay immobile in the trench, a rat ate his face, causing several of the men in Joe's company to shout and beat the rat to a pulp.

Joe feels the **rat** eating his flesh near the edges of his wound. He wonders where the nurse is. He tries to rock to knock the rat off, but it seems to like this. Joe knows that rats are smart and that if it evades capture, it will keep coming back to eat little parts of him, day after day.

CHAPTER 8

Joe feels a nurse washing him and is glad to not be alone. He feels relieved that seemingly the **rat** was only a dream, although he fears that even if it's just a dream, it might come back. He tries to remember the tricks he used when he was younger to wake himself up from nightmares. The problem, however, is that these tricks involved opening his eyes, and Joe no longer has any eyes to open.

Joe resents how the doctors view him as a triumph, when in fact, he feels that it's a failure that he ended up in the hospital in the first place. When Joe realizes that he's wearing a mask, he figures out that the mask isn't for his benefit but for the benefit of the nurses who treat him. People don't want to look at Joe's mutilated body, and this represents people's unwillingness to confront the horrors of war in general.



The gory details of Joe's condition once again question the narrative that his survival is some kind of medical triumph. The focus on sensory details like the awful smell of the wound helps to highlight the horror of Joe's condition.



Like the ringing telephone, the rat is another symbol of approaching death in the story. To the outside world, Joe is about as dead as the Prussian officer, and the rat makes no distinction between Joe and a corpse. The strong reaction of the soldiers in Joe's company to the rat eating a dead man's face shows how eager they are to try to repress their fear of death and personal injury.



Without his arms or legs, Joe is powerless to stop the rat from eating him alive. The idea that the rat would keep coming back to gradually eat little parts of him illustrates Joe's mortality and how he's in the process of dying.



Joe's inability to physically open his eyes mirrors his inability to discern between fantasy and reality. In Joe's current condition, the rat can hurt him even if it isn't technically real, showing how the war took a mental toll on Joe that is just as significant as the physical toll.



Joe feels certain that he's currently awake and that the nurse is real. He decides that as soon as he feels sleepy, he's going to force himself not to think about **rats**. But then he realizes that he's not even sure what sleepiness will feel like in his current condition—now, everything feels like sleep. He has heard stories of other people developing new skills after losing one of their senses or part of their body, so he decides that he needs to learn how to tell the difference between being asleep and being awake.

Once Joe begins to tentatively accept that he's stuck in his current condition, his thoughts turn more philosophical as he wonders what it means for someone without eyes to feel sleepy. Joe's thinking also becomes more rational as he realizes that he needs to work out a system of determining what's real and what's just a hallucination.



CHAPTER 9

In the hospital, Joe hallucinates that he's 15 and camping in a place full of pine trees and lakes that he's gone to ever since he was seven. He's going fishing with Bill Harper, and it's the first time he's been fishing with someone other than his father, who will be joining Joe camping in the mountains but won't be part of the fishing trip. Since Bill doesn't have a rod, Joe's father says Bill should use Joe's rod, and Joe can use his father's rod. Joe knows that this is a big deal—his father has a nice fishing rod. While Joe is happy to go and take the nice rod, a part of him regrets leaving his father behind.

Despite Joe's intention to get a better grasp on reality at the end of the previous chapter, the beginning of this chapter makes it clear that Joe hasn't succeeded yet, as he finds himself yet again drawn back to a pivotal moment in his childhood. Joe's father's decision to let Joe use his fishing rod is an acknowledgment that Joe is growing up. Joe's father trusts Joe with one of his most important possessions, showing his belief that Joe is responsible.



Joe is sleeping in a tent with his father, when Bill Harper comes by to start their fishing trip. At first Joe and Bill Harper's fishing goes well. But then at night, when Joe is rowing and Bill is watching both rods, all of a sudden, a fish bites on Joe's father's rod and pulls it out of Bill's hand. Both boys try to grab the rod, but it disappears into the water. They go back to shore, clean the fish they caught, and then part ways.

When Joe and Bill Harper lose the rod, Joe feels that he has betrayed his father's trust by acting less responsibly than his father hoped. Bill's role in losing the rod recalls how earlier Bill kissed Diane, perhaps hinting at Bill's lack of concern for the feelings of others. What should have been a triumphant moment of growing up for Joe and Bill instead becomes a moment of shame, perhaps foreshadowing how the war itself would fail to be the glorious coming-of-age moment that many young soldiers predicted it might be.



Joe thinks about how his mother and father don't have much money but find ways to get by. His father isn't an artist, but he shows some creativity in his garden that he wakes up early every morning to tend. Joe's parents also keep chickens, rabbits, and even bees. But despite having all these things, many in Shale City see Joe's father as a failure because he doesn't make much money. The "successful" people in town are all the ones who leave for California to go make more money.

This passage questions traditional ideas about art, suggesting that you don't need a paintbrush and easel to display creativity. It also suggests that even mundane aspects of ordinary life can be significant when done well, even if people don't receive recognition. By contrast, the money and "success" of California is more visible but not necessarily better.



Joe goes back to the tent and tells his father he lost the rod. His father puts an **arm** over Joe's chest to comfort him and tells him not to worry and not to let anything spoil their last trip together. From then on, Joe goes on camping trips with friends, and his father goes on trips with the other men.

Back in the present, Joe wakes up thinking of his father and wondering where the nurse is.

As is often the case, Joe's father shows understanding toward Joe. While it's possible that the lost fishing rod caused a rift between Joe and his father, it seems more likely that the reason why they stop going on camping trips together is that Joe has grown up. This passage captures what Joe and his father both lose as Joe becomes more of an adult.



Joe's association of his father with the nurses shows how the nurses have taken over the role his parents once played and how Joe's injuries have forced him to revert back to a more childlike state in some ways.



CHAPTER 10

Lying on his back, Joe feels like he's on a camping trip all by himself. He wonders why he went to war in the first place and what, if anything, he really accomplished. Supposedly, he fought for liberty, but if he really thinks about it, he doesn't even know the meaning of *liberty*. He figures maybe no one who uses the word *liberty* really knows how to define it. Joe concludes that anyone who fights for liberty in the trenches is a "goddam fool," and anyone who sends these people into the trenches for liberty is a "liar."

Joe thinks about how people have always been fighting for liberty. He figures a lot of Americans died fighting for liberty in 1776, yet today Americans don't have any more liberty than Australians or Canadians. Other concepts, like *democracy*, *freedom*, *decency*, and *honor* are just as meaningless, particularly since the meaning can change based on who gives the definition.

Joe thinks about how lots of wars revolve around land, especially *native land*, and he wonders what good land does for you after you're dead. He notes that when the people starting wars really struggle to recruit soldiers, they often use women as a prop, suggesting that the enemy wants to rape all of the native land's beautiful women. He supposes that it might be noble to fight to protect a real woman, but wars ask you to fight for "women in the bulk," making them so abstract that they're just another word like *liberty*.

This chapter represents the culmination of everything Joe has learned over the course of the first half of the book. The concepts that Joe considers, like "liberty," deliberately mimic the grand, idealizing language the language that politicians, generals, and other authority figures use to justify war. Whereas other parts of the book indirectly get at the horrors of war, in this passage, Joe's thoughts use direct language, as he plainly calls the people who start wars "liars."



Like the United States, Australia and Canada both used to be part of the British Empire, but the difference is that they didn't fight for independence. Joe shows his willingness to challenge convention by questioning the value of the Revolutionary War, since it seems like Australia and Canada achieved similar results without a war.



Joe's arguments are based on dismantling common justifications for war, not just during World War I but throughout history. Although his arguments use humor and sarcasm, Joe is serious about wanting to challenge the status quo and to question commonly held opinions about war and honor. While "protecting women" might seem like a universally worthwhile goal, Joe breaks down these claims, showing how the reality of war doesn't seem to line up with many of its supposed justifications.



Joe feels that people who die in a war don't gain anything themselves, and it's possible that no one else gains anything either. He's heard idealists who think there are principles more precious than life, but Joe thinks that if it's "barbarous" to value life more than principles, he'd rather be barbarous. He notes that lots of people in churches, schools, newspapers, and Congress like to talk about sacrificing lives, but the dead themselves never get to come back and say whether their sacrifice was worth it.

Joe thinks that many people justify war as self-defense. But he thinks that risking your life in combat to try to save yourself is as paradoxical as trying to save money by spending it. He doesn't feel like he should have to be willing to die just to earn the privilege of living. He thinks that all the millions of people who have died in the war so far likely didn't die with democracy on their minds—in reality, they were probably crying out in fear and longing for comfort.

As the living person in the world closest to being dead, Joe feels sure about his conclusions. He wants to tell all the bloodthirsty hypocrites in positions of power that, as a dead person, he knows nothing is really worth dying for. He'd rather work underground in a coal mine 20 hours a day than die. He'd give up freedom and democracy just to be alive again. He concludes that there's nothing noble about death, and if you die in war, you die for nothing.

CHAPTER 11

Joe's thoughts swirl, mixing multiplication problems with astronomy, biblical quotes, and the plots of Charles Dickens books. As his thoughts come together, he realizes that all he has left is his mind. He wishes that he had memorized a book cover-to-cover so that he could put his mind to use and keep himself occupied.

Joe decides he needs a new start. He thinks about time, which he remembers from history class is one of the first things that ancient humans paid attention to. He feels that if he learns to keep track of time, he'll be able to hold his other thoughts in place too. All he knows right now is that time stopped for him one day in September 1918. Since then, he has no idea how much time has passed, since he was unconscious for part of it.

Joe questions the idea that any principle or ideal, no matter how significant, is really more important than life. Joe isn't necessarily advocating for nihilism or totally abandoning principles—arguably, he is putting forward his own set of ideals, where preserving valuing life is the most important ideal. Joe knows he is fighting an uphill battle, and his references to churches, schools, and Congress illustrate all the different institutions that uphold conventional ways of thinking.



Having come as close to death as possible, Joe isn't ready to casually dismiss life. Joe believes that humans have a fundamental right to live and that this contradicts the idea that a person must fight for self-defense. Joe believes that everyone deserves a chance to live—but that war (along with the ideals used to justify it) can distort the way that people view the issue.



Despite the cynical and at times grim nature of Joe's thoughts in this chapter, they also have an element of triumph, as Joe decides he wants to make the most of his remaining life. Joe's comparison of himself to someone who works in a mine for 20 hours a day suggests the universal nature of Joe's struggle and how the conflict between leaders and common people plays out not just in war but in other mundane areas of life, too.



Joe's thoughts span a range of different types of knowledge, from math to science to religion to literature. Although Joe wasn't an intellectual before his injury, his long period of mental isolation seems to have made him more introspective.



Joe tries to regain control of his life by better understanding time. The book explores the idea that people go to war because they forget history and don't want to look at its horrors, and so Joe's attempts to create his own calendar represent the opposite of that, as he makes a deliberate effort to make sense of time and remember history.



Joe works out a system of measuring time. He counts sixty seconds to get a sense for a minute, but as he keeps counting, he eventually loses track. He realizes his current plan won't work because he can't stay awake and count accurately for 24 hours to measure a day. Trying to remember seconds and minutes and hours all at the same time is too much when counting.

Joe develops another system of measuring time. He notices that he has a bowel movement once every three or four visits from the nurse. But that doesn't help because Joe doesn't know how his current schedule of bowel movements matches up with a healthy person's.

Finally, Joe gets the idea of using changes in temperature to tell time, figuring that warmth must signal sunrise. Knowing sunrise and sunset will allow him to count how many times the nurse visits in a day. At first, he struggles to keep track of temperature, either falling asleep too soon or wondering if his temperature feels different because of a fever. After more struggle and failure, he finally manages to get a better idea of time passing. He feels triumphant as he stays awake at dawn and almost thinks he can smell grass. He imagines the sun rising over a peaceful town, thinking that no matter what, he'll always have dawn.

CHAPTER 12

Joe remembers past New Year's Eves, in both Shale City and at the bakery in Los Angeles. Joe has decided that the current day is New Year's Eve because he's counted 365 days since he first started keeping track. The year went fast because he kept himself busy trying to keep track of time. He even learned how to tell the nurses apart by the feel of their hands.

Joe imagines a new schedule for himself, going on walks every Sunday, where it's always springtime, and not caring what day it really is to the people outside. Each day, he imagines himself going to sleep with Kareen. Though she must now be in her early twenties, she'll always be 19 in his mind.

Joe's first attempts to keep track of time are logical but not practical. As he tests new ideas, he learns the limits of his own mind and body. Rather than getting discouraged, however, Joe treats his attempts as experiments to learn from, showing his growth as a character.



Cut off from the outside world, Joe has no concept of changing days or seasons, but he finds a way to replace them with other cycles, such as his own body rhythms and the coming and going of nurses.



Book II of the novel is subtitled "The Living," and while it also deals with the consequences of war, it also has a few hopeful moments, mostly related to Joe's attempts to regain control of his life. Dawn is a common symbol of hope and new beginnings, and so Joe imagines that he can see the dawn because his new ability to keep track of time has given him a new lease on life. Joe's belief that he'll always have the dawn somehow suggests that all people, even those in seemingly impossible predicaments, have the potential for hope.



An earlier chapter notes that Joe's injury took place in September 1918, just a couple months before World War I's end in November 1918. This means that Joe's more hopeful feelings about his own life likely correspond with what's going on in the outside world as it, like Joe, tries to rebuild in the aftermath of the war.



While the rat from Joe's earlier nightmare represented the dark side of the human mind, this passage demonstrates the exact opposite, showing how a person can use their mind as a refuge from the outside world. Joe makes his current situation more bearable by taking solace in memories of happier times.



Joe wishes he could go back to America, but he figures that without a face or other identifying markers, people might misidentify him as British based on where he fell in battle. Joe always found the English soldiers strange, even stranger than the French soldiers.

Joe recalls the story of a German soldier that his British comrades nicknamed Lazarus. In the story, Lazarus wandered alone out of the fog near British lines, probably lost on patrol, so all the British fired at him until he fell. But after the corpse starts to reek, the corporal of the group decides it's time to bury him. Later, the Germans fire artillery on the trenches, and while they don't hurt any British, the dead German soldier flies into the air and lands on some barbed wire, pointing at the British soldiers. Since he looks like he rose from the dead, they call him Lazarus.

The corporal buries Lazarus again, but he gets shot in the butt during the burial service and has to go on leave for eight weeks. A couple days after he gets hit, another artillery shell blows Lazarus out of his grave again. The British regiment opens fire on him to knock him off the barbed wire fence that he's stuck on.

An inexperienced, 18-year-old British soldier wants to prove his bravery, so he tries to sneak out one night to go on patrol. The next day, everyone finds him vomiting because when he tried to get through the barbed wire, he fell and stuck his whole arm right through Lazarus. This upsets the young soldier so much that he goes "stark crazy" and eventually ends up institutionalized. Back in the present, Joe wishes this young soldier a happy New Year's.

In his interior monologue at the end of Book I, Joe argued against the idea of fighting for a homeland. This passage expands on the idea, since if Joe can easily be mistaken for British, perhaps the differences between the people of different countries are not so great after all.



In the Bible, Lazarus is a dead man that Jesus brings back to life. The Lazarus in this passage doesn't literally come back to life—he just looks that way after an artillery shell explosion blows him out of his grave. In some way, Lazarus's condition is similar to Joe's (since they both get hit by artillery shells) but in other ways, it's the opposite: Whereas Lazarus is dead but looks alive, Joe is alive but looks dead. This passage shows how war dehumanizes the enemy, as "Lazarus" becomes little more than a distant target for the British soldiers to fire at. When Lazarus rises from the grave and points at the British soldiers, his corpse seems to be accusing them, forcing them to remember that they killed a real person.



As Lazarus's story goes on, it becomes more farcical, where the horror gets mixed with dark humor. The British soldiers want to keep Lazarus—and the horrors of war that he represents—buried deep, but he keeps rising up where they have to look at him.



After all the soldiers try to avoid Lazarus as much as possible, this 18-year-old soldier accidentally makes direct contact with Lazarus and ends up institutionalized. This suggests that the horrors of war are so extreme that anyone who faces them directly as the young soldier does with Lazarus's body—will come away from the experience mentally scarred.



CHAPTER 13

Nothing noteworthy happens in Joe's second year at the hospital, aside from when one of the night nurses trips and sends a vibration through Joe's bed. In his third year, Joe gets moved to a new room. His new mattress helps him detect vibrations better, making the year go by quickly. His fourth year starts slower as he tries to remember the Bible but only recalls bits and pieces. His difficulty remembering the Bible makes him question whether he hasn't been keeping time correctly.

One day, the night nurse changes Joe's bed linens, even though someone just did it the previous day. This fills Joe with expectation and excitement because this has never happened before—the linens always change every third day. There seems to also be a new day nurse who gives him a bath and takes care that his blankets and mask are all arranged correctly.

Soon after, Joe feels lots of vibrations and realizes he has visitors. He pictures his mother, his sisters, and Kareen. But his excitement soon fades when he realizes that he doesn't want anyone he knows to see him in his current condition. He starts rocking around in his bed, until a man's hand rests on his forehead and calms him. Finally, Joe thinks he knows who the visitors are: they're doctors, examining him because he must be a very rare and famous case.

All of a sudden, Joe senses that something important is happening. One of the men pins a heavy thing onto Joe's chest. He tries to reach for it with his hand and almost feels like he can hold it for a second before he remembers both his **arms** are gone. He feels a man with a moustache kiss him, and this tells him that he's in France, since the French kiss soldiers when they hand out medals. Although he supposes the man could also be an American or Englishman who simply used the French custom because Joe has no hands to shake.

Time in this passage moves significantly quicker than it has in most of the previous passages. While the events in Joe's second, third, and fourth years at the hospital may seem insignificant, they have major implications for Joe. When creating his new calendar, Joe took inspiration from ancient humans. As Joe observes minor events in the hospital around him, he recalls ancient humans watching the sky to learn about the larger universe through astronomy, placing his own experiences within the broader context of the development of human civilization.



Joe has fully adapted to his new life in the hospital, and so now even minor disturbances, like an unexpected changing of bed linens, becomes a major event for him. Previously, Joe expressed frustration that he didn't pick up any new skills after losing his senses, but this passage shows that he has learned to make better use of his remaining senses—it just took a lot of time for him to achieve proficiency.



Although earlier Joe scoffed at the idea of going to war to defend an abstract concept like "women," the women from his past remain important to him, even after years in the hospital. Similarly, Joe feels conflicted about the doctors at his hospital—while he wants to make the most of his remaining life, he still regrets how his doctors view him as a success story rather than a cautionary tale about the dangers of war.



Once again, Joe questions traditional ideas about war. While medals traditionally represent a great honor in war, here Joe observes his medal ceremony with mild bemusement, taking a detached tone as he speculates on the nationality of the soldiers in his room. As Joe learns that he may have ended up in France and perhaps even been mistaken for a French soldier, his situation once again highlights how arbitrary the distinctions between countries can be.



As Joe thinks about his medal, he gets a little angry, thinking of how generals love to hand out awards but almost never face danger themselves. He feels the vibrations of a voice speaking, which sounds to him like the grunting of a pig. Then it's quiet, and everyone leaves. Joe hears more vibrations and realizes that maybe vibrations can tell him things about the outside world, like the height, weight, and distance of people in his room. He wonders if he can use vibrations to communicate back.

Joe remembers using Morse code to send messages to Bill Harper on a telegraph machine when he was younger. Using his head on the pillow, he taps out SOS. He tries to tap out other questions too. The door to his room opens, and the old day nurse comes in. Joe gets anxious when he fears the nurse doesn't understand his tapping. Then, she puts her hand on his forehead. She strokes him while he keeps tapping. He realizes that she's trying to hold him down to stop the tapping, but he keeps going until he's exhausted and has to stop.

CHAPTER 14

Joe loses all track of time—he forgets about everything except tapping. He taps all day and dreams of tapping all night. The old day nurse tries to comfort him but can't seem to fathom that he might still have some intelligence in him and be tapping deliberately. One day, the nurse begins to touch him differently. Her hands go to “the far parts of his body.” While Joe's body gets excited, he feels that it's a “false passion” and that the nurse mostly just pities him. Nevertheless, he tries to find the same rhythm as her and suddenly feels his blood pumping.

Joe thinks back to the girls he used to know. Many of the guys in Shale City had their first sexual experience with a girl named Ruby, but by the time they reached high school, some of them feel ashamed about the things they did with her. They blame her for those feelings of shame and make fun of her. One day, Ruby disappears from town.

Joe recalls another time when he was 17 or 18. In Joe's flashback, he and Bill Harper decide to visit a mysterious house that belongs to a woman named Stumpy Telsa. Older men in town often visit this house. Although Stumpy threw them out one time when they tried to investigate the house when they were younger, this time she lets them stay and tells her Black kitchen worker to make them sandwiches. Joe and Bill have heard rumors of naked women wandering around inside the house, but when two women come down the stairs, they're fully dressed in nice clothes.

Pigs commonly symbolize greed and sometimes also ignorance. While the visiting soldier's voice might literally sound like a pig to Joe (who can only “hear” vibrations), the pig comparison also helps to convey Joe's disdain for the man. In Joe's mind, the man pinning a medal on him is a coward, willing to commend others for putting their lives at risk—but not willing to put his own life on the line.



Communications technology plays a major role in the book: the novel begins with the sound of a telephone, and now Joe achieves an epiphany by considering the telegraph machine. Just like when he was creating his calendar, however, Joe struggles to execute his theories at first. While Joe's struggle to communicate with the nurse is an extreme example, it captures a universal truth about how people struggle to communicate with others.



Joe's failure to communicate with the nurse frustrates him so much that it causes him to lose some of the progress he made by creating a calendar. In this passage, Joe finds himself in an unusual situation where the nurse seems to be masturbating him, possibly as a result of misinterpreting his tapping. Once again, Joe feels at odds with his body as he feels the physical effects of “passion” but resents his feelings because he knows the nurse doesn't really understand him.



Joe's experiences with Ruby reveal a conflicted view of sex, where it is intriguing and exciting but also a source of shame. With the benefit of hindsight, Joe seems to realize that perhaps it wasn't fair to blame Ruby for his own feelings of shame.



Stumpy Telsa runs some sort of brothel. She kicks out Joe and Bill Harper when they're young but allows them to stay when she thinks they're old enough to know (or learn) what sex is. Joe and Bill are surprised to see that the women at Stumpy Telsa's place wear nice clothes, which contrasts with their preconceived idea that sex is a shameful, disreputable act (a belief that the previous passage about Ruby hinted at).



Joe and Bill Harper talk with the women for half an hour before Stumpy Telsa sends Joe and Bill away. The woman who likes Joe better is named Laurette. Joe comes back to see her a couple times a month, always before 9:00 p.m. He knows she's a sex worker but can't bring himself to have sex with her because the thought makes him feel dirty.

When Joe graduates high school, he gets a pair of gold cuff links in the mail, with a card that just says L on it. Soon after, Joe goes to Stumpy Telsa's to see Laurette, but he learns that she has gone off to a place called Estes Park, where she stays in the nicest hotel for three months and spends all the money she earned over the year. Joe ends up working in the bakery in Los Angeles before she gets back, and so he never sees her again.

In Los Angeles, Joe runs into Bonnie, who went to school with Joe in Shale City and recognizes him in a drug store. Joe pretends to remember her, but he doesn't. She invites him to come over and see her sometime. She's a little younger than him but has already had three husbands. Joe finds her agreeable enough, and they have sex a few times.

Abroad during the war, Joe meets Lucky, a Black American woman who works in a Paris brothel and who has a six-year-old son going to school back in Long Island. She got her nickname from surviving a San Francisco earthquake. Paris is a strange place for the American Joe, and he takes comfort in Lucky, who is one of the few people around who speaks his language.

Back in the present, Joe's thoughts become scattered again, as he pictures various French imagery combined with memories of the war. Eventually, all is silent, and all Joe wants is some peace and rest.

Despite their curiosity about Stumpy Telsa's brothel, both Joe and Bill still have some of their boyhood innocence. Joe isn't totally naïve about what Laurette does for a living, but he nevertheless still struggles with his deeply ingrained belief that sex is shameful.



Laurette's lifestyle suggests that she has decided to make the best of her situation: in exchange for working for Stumpy Telsa for most of the year, she gets a few months of freedom to enjoy on her own terms. Laurette's more matter-of-fact relationship to sex contrasts with Joe's more hesitant feelings, helping him to realize that not everyone feels shame the same way that he and the other boys in Shale City do.



The change in location from Shale City to Los Angeles coincides with a change in Joe's attitude toward sex. Some time has passed since Joe last saw Laurette, and in the interval, he has become more open to sex and more casual about it, perhaps reflecting the different values of a big city like Los Angeles and a smaller town like Shale City.



As Joe gets older, he continues to meet people who lead very different lives than he did. After spending almost all of his life in the western United States, Joe suddenly finds himself halfway across the world in a country where people don't even speak his language. Although Lucky differs from Joe in many ways, she nevertheless reminds him of home, suggesting that, as much as Joe scoffs at the concept of fighting for a homeland elsewhere in the novel, he nevertheless feels a connection to his home.



Until recently, Joe was doing a good job of keeping his thoughts in order, but his frustration at not being able to communicate in Morse code combined with his recent sexual experience with his current day nurse have both scrambled his thoughts, showing how emotions can impact the way a person perceives time.



CHAPTER 15

Joe doesn't give up on tapping. He knows that he's sane, even if the people on the outside can't see it yet. Joe begins to wonder if the old day nurse is deliberately keeping him hostage. If she were, there would be nothing Joe could do about it. He compares himself to enslaved people throughout history, from the Carthaginians who fought against Rome or the Egyptians who built the pyramids.

A doctor with heavy footsteps enters the room. Joe feels the man inject something into the stump of his arm. It's some kind of painkiller, and Joe realizes maybe they do know what he's doing with the tapping but just want him to be quiet. Joe wants to keep tapping, but his mind falls into a fog.

While Joe often explores the conflict between leaders and common soldiers in the army, in some sections, he looks more broadly at the conflict between elites and common people throughout history. Here, Joe sees himself as part of a diverse lineage of oppressed people, drawing comparisons between his lack of agency in the hospital and more famous examples of people who were imprisoned or enslaved by a more powerful entity.



Just when Joe starts finally overcoming the limitations of his own body, he faces an even bigger obstacle: the hospital staff and the regulations they follow (which are a microcosm for the larger authority of the military and the government). The cloth mask over Joe's face symbolizes how the hospital wants to keep Joe out of view, a position that the actions of the doctor now further emphasize.



CHAPTER 16

Joe has abstract, hazy thoughts. He thinks he hears music, then all is silent. Soon after, he starts hallucinating that he's with Jesus Christ in a railway station. Christ has just come from Tucson, and he starts playing blackjack with a man who has red hair. Christ gets a 12 in blackjack and says he never hits on a 12, even though he knows logically that it's safer than hitting on a 13.

Suddenly, the red-haired man throws down his cards and announces that he knows the date he's going to die, so he has to go say goodbye to his wife and kids. A Swedish man who's also sitting at the card table tells the red-haired man to stop complaining—everyone at the card table knows they're about to be killed. All of a sudden, they hear ghostly music, and Christ explains it's the music of death.

Joe's confused thoughts show that sedative is taking effect. With the sedative, the hospital staff prove that they can control not only Joe's body but even his mind—the one thing he has left. Joe's thoughts while on the sedative turn surreal, providing a sharp contrast from the more orderly and rational thoughts that he tried to convey in Morse code.



These men seem to be in some kind of purgatory, with Jesus acting as their guide. Cards in this scene symbolize random chance, calling back to the earlier scene when Joe mused that surviving an artillery blast like he did was a bit like winning the lottery in reverse. The music of death also bears some similarity to the ominous telephone ringing that appeared in earlier chapters.



The card players notice that one of the men at the table actually isn't about to die. Everyone looks at him. Joe seems to see himself from an outsider's perspective as he explains that, while he isn't about to die, he is about to lose his **arms**, legs, hearing, and sight. Eventually, all of the card players, including Joe, board a train. Christ says he'll go with them for a little while, but then he has to go back to meet more dead people. The train rumbles through the desert. Eventually, Christ comes out of the train and floats above the desert. Joe runs after Christ to throw himself at his feet and cry.

The perspective in the chapter shifts around, with Joe seemingly a participant in the action and an observer at the same time. The imagery of a train in the desert seems to be a callback to Joe's experience working on train tracks in the desert with his friend Howie, showing how fantasy and reality mix in Joe's current, sedative-induced dream. Joe's desire to cry at Christ's feet in the dream seems to be a manifestation of the frustration and desperation he feels in real life and how he wants someone to help him.



CHAPTER 17

Joe wakes up feeling like he's coming out of a hangover. As soon as he wakes up, he's tapping SOS with his head against the pillow. He stops, however, when he realizes he has a new day nurse. Joe imagines the nurse looking at him for the first time, having been told what to expect but still not believing it. He's excited and hopeful that this new nurse will finally understand him. He doesn't know if the old day nurse is gone for good, but he wants to make the most of this opportunity.

The beginning of this chapter recalls the very first chapter of the book, perhaps hinting at how this chapter contains a new start for Joe. The arrival of the new day nurse is perhaps also a pun on how Joe is about to start a "new day," metaphorically speaking. Despite his recent discouragements, Joe remains determined to communicate with the outside world.



Before Joe can do anything, however, he feels the new day nurse touching his bare chest. He realizes after a while that she is writing letters. Finally, he puts the message together: "Merry Christmas." The old day nurse must be away for the holiday. Joe feels like he's suddenly heard a beautiful sound after years of silence—someone has finally broken through to him.

The arrival of the new day nurse is the first time in several years that Joe has learned what day it is in the outside world. Once again, this chapter calls back to the beginning of the book (where Joe dreamed of working in the Los Angeles bakery just before Christmas and learning that his father died).



Joe recalls his mother reading him "Twas the Night Before Christmas." He recites the whole thing from memory, interspersing related memories of how he spent Christmas with his family in Shale City. Whenever his mother finished reading, the whole family would be quiet for a while. His mother would then reach for a different book that told the story of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem.

Once again, Joe's mother plays a comforting role in Joe's memory, connecting him to his childhood and to tradition through the classic poem "Twas the Night Before Christmas." Finally communicating with another person (the new day nurse) causes Joe to remember a time from his past when he felt more connected to people.



Joe imagines he's seeing the nativity story in real time, watching Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem where Jesus will be born. Just like in the Bible, Mary and Joseph can't find a place to stay for the night, so they end up staying in a stable, although Joe modernizes some details of the story, imagining the innkeeper from the Bible as a "hotel manager" who is worried that Mary and Joseph will cause a problem with his insurance.

Joe's religious hallucination here is more coherent than his previous one about Jesus out on a train in the desert. Earlier, Joe compared his situation in the hospital to famous prisoners and enslaved people from history, and in this dream, Joe humorously combines past and present in a different way, updating the nativity story to fit with modern conventions. All of these combinations of past and present emphasize how some human truths are universal and timeless. In his re-telling of the nativity story, Joe sees the nativity as yet another conflict between authority and underdogs, with Mary and Joseph representing underdogs and the "hotel manager" being the person in power.



Mary gives birth to Jesus in the manger. Somewhere far away, a shepherd who's just trying to get some sleep sees a shining light and realizes there's a new star in the sky, which he follows. Along the way, the shepherd runs into three foreign men with camels. He's surprised because he thinks they look too wealthy to have to pay taxes (which is why Mary and Joseph had to come back to Bethlehem). When the shepherd finally gets to the manger, he's so surprised that he falls to his knees. Somewhere far off in a palace in the Roman Empire, a man nearly wakes up, wondering why he's having such disturbing dreams.

As with the previous passage, Joe's dream here follows the same general plot as the Biblical nativity story, but it adds modern details, like the shepherd who just wants to sleep and the wealthy kings (a version of the Three Magi) who want to avoid paying taxes. The mysterious sleeping figure in the palace at the end of this passage seems to be King Herod (who, like the Biblical figure, sleeps uneasily because he fears that one day Jesus will usurp him), although it could also be another instance of Joe seeing himself from the outside.



CHAPTER 18

Joe forces himself to stop thinking about Christmas and start tapping again. He taps carefully and methodically, not wanting to scare off the new day nurse. The nurse knows at once that he's trying to tell her something. She tries adjusting his mask, breathing tube, and clothes, but he keeps shaking his head. At last, she stops, as if waiting for him to tell her what to do next.

Joe demonstrates extraordinary persistence over the course of the novel. Despite his many setbacks, he remains determined to make the best of his circumstances. His desire to keep living emphasizes the value of life and makes a case for why it is wrong for generals to sacrifice the lives of men like Joe in battle, even for a supposedly good cause. It also demonstrates why it is wrong for the hospital to ignore Joe's attempts to communicate—and why the new day nurse is so special for making the extra effort to try to understand Joe.



Joe didn't use to pray much, but he prays as hard as he can that the new day nurse will understand his tapping. At last, she touches his forehead. She taps the letter H, which makes Joe think that, while she understands the tapping is important, she doesn't understand what it means yet. The nurse leaves, and Joe knows she's going to go tell someone. He feels that he's happier than he's ever been in his life and that he's accomplished something impossible.

Joe's interaction with the nurse is like trying to communicate with someone who speaks a foreign language, perhaps reflecting how Joe felt while living abroad during World War I. This passage demonstrates how even with two willing participants it can be difficult to bridge the communicative gap between two humans.



The door to Joe's room opens again, and based on the vibrations, it seems that a man comes in. The man (the Doctor) puts his finger on Joe's forehead and taps in Morse Code: "What do you want?"

Joe recognizes men based on their heavier vibrations, perhaps reflecting how men in the hospital are more authoritative and perhaps more oppressive as a result. This man's rumbling footsteps recall the deep piglike voice of the military officer who was in Joe's room earlier.



CHAPTER 19

Joe can't believe it. He's spent so long preparing for this moment that he never thought about what to do next. He wonders what answer the Doctor and the others on the hospital staff expect him to give, whether it's some new clothes or a complaint about his bed. What Joe wants is too big to put into words. Most of all he wants his **arms** and legs back, as well as his senses, but he knows there's no way to do that. Unfortunately, that's not something they can give him.

Joe faces an important existential question: after achieving his life's goal (to communicate with someone on the outside), what does he do next? This passage explores the complexity of human desires and how the pursuit of goals can be even more important than actually achieving them. Joe has already experienced a few similar moments that blend achievement with anticlimax to a lesser extent, such as when he first went into Stumpy Telsa's house only to find that it was relatively unremarkable on the inside.



Joe imagines that even if he can think of a good answer to the question, they might not be able to give it to him. Certainly, the government won't want to spend any more money on someone like him. But Joe decides to tell them what he wants anyway. "Let me out," he taps multiple times, meaning that he wants to go back to out in the world, maybe even work a job. He imagines being part of a circus freak show.

Joe considers the question "What do you want?" not only from a practical perspective but from a philosophical one. The question forces Joe to consider his whole reason for living, particularly now that he has already accomplished his goal of communicating with the outside world. Ultimately, Joe's answer shows that he wants to experience an even greater level of connection with the outside world, finding some way to overcome his condition and interact with people outside the hospital in whatever limited capacity he can.



Joe wants to see farmers in the country. He wants to see the places where people work to make things. He wants to see schools, perhaps serving as a lesson to children. Then he wants to go to colleges and universities so that people can see him and study him. After that, he wants to go to government buildings and force all the politicians to look at him before they vote to send more "little guys" off to go kill and die. Finally, he wants to go to churches and call all the people in them "fools" because he's the only one who knows the real truth.

Joe knows his dreams might not be realistic, but after having already achieved something that seemed impossible, he allows himself to dream even more. Joe's dreams perhaps bear some similarity to the real life of deaf and blind political activist Helen Keller. As Joe laments how he will probably never be able to live out his dreams, he returns to the topic of condemning people in power, whom he believes have the resources to help him achieve his dreams but choose to spend the resources elsewhere.



CHAPTER 20

The people leave the room, and Joe is alone again. Joe gets anxious, wondering if he made a mistake with his tapping, just as he sometimes did while keeping time. Eventually, the Doctor comes back. He taps against Joe's forehead to tell him that what he asked for ("Let me out") is against the regulations. He asks who Joe is.

Joe realizes with horror that the people he's communicating with now might be his last chance. It seems like what they want most is a way to get Joe off their consciences. Joe starts tapping, saying again that he wants out. He wants to feel the air outside of the hospital he's been inside for so many years. He wants to be less lonely. But soon he realizes that the Doctor is preparing an injection, presumably to silence Joe with painkillers again.

Joe doesn't want to submit to the painkillers. He keeps tapping "Why? Why? Why?" He suddenly has a vision of himself as a new Christ surveying an apocalyptic world where mothers without **arms** hold babies without heads. He feels that after he told the strangers his secret, they have revealed theirs to him: that they are preparing for a new war and that Joe is a problem because he reminds people what war is like.

Joe imagines the excuses that people will use to justify future wars. He imagines himself with the people who make things, talking to the people who start wars. He imagines a future where people take up guns and seem to be following the orders of the war's master planners, but this time they aim their weapons at the true enemies: the people who plan wars in the first place.

Joe continues to deal with the issue of what to do with his life after achieving his goal of communicating with the outside world. Ultimately, he faces disappointment when he learns from the man (presumably one of the hospital's doctors) that it's against regulations for him to leave the hospital. While Joe is asking to physically go outside, the question also has symbolic meaning, showing how Joe remains trapped in his current situation, unable to advance in life due to the regulations.



Before they realized Joe could talk back, the doctors and army officials treated Joe's survival as a triumph. His inability to communicate allowed them to turn him into a symbol that suited their purposes. But when they find out Joe still has his own agency and ideas, he stops being useful and instead becomes a hindrance. While the painkillers physically tranquilize Joe, they also stand in for all the other techniques that authority figures use to metaphorically silence "little guys" like Joe.



While this passage might seem to refer to World War II, the book was written before WWII and published just two days after the start of that war. Both Joe's mother and arms represent comfort, and so Joe's apocalyptic vision of mothers without arms suggests that these future mothers will be powerless to comfort their children. Meanwhile, the babies without heads are like Joe (who is missing his face), perhaps standing in for the many children who will die in the future wars that Joe predicts.



Like the novel as a whole, the final lines are grim but hopeful. Joe seems to accept that he may never achieve this dream of leaving the hospital, and he fears that people will soon repress their memories of the horrors of war just as regulations keep Joe himself (whose body clearly demonstrates the consequences of war) locked out of sight in the hospital. Nevertheless, while Joe doesn't believe he'll ever see a world without war, he hopes it might one day be possible if common people can communicate with each other and unite behind a common goal.





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