

# Dawn



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ELIE WIESEL

Elie Wiesel was born into a multilingual Hasidic Jewish family in Romania's Carpathian Mountains. From a young age, he was encouraged to study Hebrew, religion, and literature. In 1944, 15-year-old Wiesel was deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp along with his family and the rest of his town's Jewish population. His mother and younger sister, Tzipora, were killed upon their arrival. After Wiesel and his father were transferred to the Buchenwald concentration camp, his father died, but Wiesel himself survived until the U.S. Army liberated the camp in April, 1945. After World War II, he spent time in France, studying at the Sorbonne and writing for French and Israeli publications. However, it wasn't until 10 years later, on the encouragement of close friend and Nobel laureate François Mauriac, that he began writing about his Holocaust experiences, first publishing *Night* in 1955. Around this time, he moved to the United States, married a woman named Marion Rose, and wrote extensively—he penned a total of 57 books, including novels, nonfiction, and memoirs. He taught in the philosophy and religion departments at Boston University and held visiting appointments at numerous other institutions. Throughout his life, he campaigned for human rights around the world, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. He was also involved with establishing the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mandatory Palestine existed between 1920 and 1948. After jointly administering this land with France following an Arab uprising against Ottoman rule during the First World War, Britain received a mandate from the League of Nations in 1922 to administer the region. Over the next two decades, the British mandate was challenged by Arab and Jewish nationalist movements. *Dawn* focuses on the 1944–1948 Jewish uprising and war; at the conclusion of the Palestine war, Mandatory Palestine was divided between the State of Israel, the Kingdom of Jordan, and the Kingdom of Egypt. The Jewish insurgency was led by Zionist underground paramilitary groups, including one called Irgun, which the United Nations classified as a terrorist organization for its attacks on British military targets. The Irgun's goal was to eject the occupiers in order to create a Jewish state, something it believed only Jewish forces could achieve, and which ultimately came about on May 14, 1948. At that point, Irgun was integrated into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

## RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Over the years, *Dawn* has been overshadowed by the better-known *Night* (first published in English in 1960), a memoir detailing Wiesel's own experiences in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps. *Night* and *Dawn* are followed by *Day* (1962), which describes a Holocaust survivor's experiences after being struck by a taxicab in New York City. Wiesel suggested that while *Night* was meant to testify to what happened to him in real life, the subsequent, fictional books in the trilogy provided a way to pose thought-provoking questions about what happened. Primo Levi's 1947 memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* provides a more analytical look at themes of survival and suffering, as does Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946).

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Dawn*
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1961
- **Literary Period:** Modern
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Mandatory (British) Palestine in the late 1940s
- **Climax:** Elisha shoots John Dawson.
- **Antagonist:** The British; Dawson; Death
- **Point of View:** First Person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Multinational Acclaim.** *Dawn* has inspired two film adaptations: a 1985 French-Hungarian film and a 2014 film co-produced by Swiss, German, British, and Israeli filmmakers.

**What Could Have Been.** When the Irgun bombed Jerusalem's King David Hotel in 1946, Wiesel was initially inspired to join the Zionist movement himself, but he was unable to get to Palestine from France, where he was living at the time. He did end up writing and translating for movement-related publications. Later, Wiesel said that he wrote *Dawn* in part to explore the question of what might have happened to him if he *had* traveled to Palestine and taken part in the resistance movement there.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The novel opens on a hot evening in British-ruled Palestine with a young man named Elisha, a member of the Movement (a

group of Jewish insurrectionists). Elisha has just been ordered to execute an English captain named John Dawson in retaliation for the scheduled death sentence of a Jewish fighter, David ben Moshe, at **dawn** tomorrow. Gazing out a window, Elisha also thinks about a mysterious beggar he met as a child, back in his village in Europe, before World War II began. The beggar taught him to distinguish between day and night by looking at a window: if he sees a **face** in the window, he'll know that night has followed day. Ever since Elisha met the beggar, he always looks outside at nightfall and sees the face of someone dead. Tonight, he sees his own face.

Elisha met Gad, a compelling young terrorist, not long after Elisha was liberated from the Buchenwald concentration camp. At the time, Elisha's goal was to study philosophy in Paris—after the sufferings he witnessed in the camp, he wanted to understand where to find God. But Gad showed up unexpectedly and persuaded Elisha to sacrifice his future to the Movement to create an independent Jewish homeland. In Palestine, Elisha was trained in terrorist tactics and Movement ideology, such as the “eleventh commandment” to hate one's enemy.

The night before the executions, Elisha, Gad, and other Movement fighters, including Joab, Gideon, and Ilana, sit around somberly swapping memories related to death. Around midnight, ghosts from Elisha's past begin appearing to him in the room—including the ghosts of his parents, the beggar from his childhood memories, his old rabbi, and people killed in the concentration camps or in terrorist operations. The only ghost who directly answers Elisha's questions is a little boy who resembles Elisha himself before the war began. The little boy explains that the crowd of ghosts is here in order to watch Elisha become a murderer—because they are all part of him, the boy explains, Elisha can't kill without them. Elisha walks among the ghosts, trying to defend his actions, but once again he gets no response from them.

By the time John Dawson has had his last meal in the prison cell downstairs, it's four o'clock in the morning—dawn is only an hour away. Elisha decides to get to know Dawson before killing him; it seems cowardly to do otherwise. When he gets downstairs, he finds that Dawson is a handsome man in his 40s with a distinguished bearing. More strikingly, Elisha immediately feels an unexpected liking for Dawson. Dawson asks Elisha's name and age and tells Elisha he feels sorry for him; he has a son Elisha's age. He tells Elisha stories about his son and jots a farewell letter, which Elisha promises to mail that day. Elisha tries to hate Dawson by blaming him for Elisha's own violence and by imagining that Dawson was responsible for David ben Moshe's death. However, none of this works, and Elisha can summon no hatred. He wonders if God is present in this lack of hatred.

Just before dawn, the ghosts troop silently into the cell to witness the killing. Moments before the execution, Dawson

suddenly smiles, saying he just realized that he doesn't know why he's dying. He wants to tell Elisha another story. However, Elisha tells him not to smile, raises his revolver, and fires. As Dawson dies, the name “Elisha” is on his lips. Elisha watches as the ghosts accompany Dawson's spirit from the room, the little boy at Dawson's side and Elisha's mother sadly repeating, “Poor boy!”

Elisha rejoins the others upstairs and looks out the window. Dawn is breaking. Just beyond the window, he sees a face—it's his own.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Elisha** – Elisha is an 18-year-old survivor of the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps who joins the Movement for an independent Jewish nation in Palestine. Elisha grew up in a devout Hassidic home, studying Cabala (Jewish mysticism) with the grizzled master alongside his close friend, Yerachmiel, and praying fervently for the Messiah to come. However, his sufferings in the Holocaust make him doubt the goodness of both God and humanity. After World War II, Elisha's goal was to study philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, but Gad persuaded him to join the Movement instead. Elisha quickly became passionately convinced by the Movement's terrorist ideology, believing that Jews must act in God's place by taking their future into their own hands. However, being a sensitive soul, he soon finds that killing makes him feel sick and causes him to look repugnant in his own eyes. When the Old Man orders him to carry out the execution of John Dawson, Elisha spends the night before feeling tormented by the prospect. Over the course of the night, he is even visited by the ghosts of many people whose lives have touched his, including his father, mother, former lover Catherine, a little boy representing his younger self, and a mysterious beggar, among others. Elisha longs for these figures to speak to him and pass judgment on his actions, but they silently refuse. Before **dawn**, Elisha decides, out of a mixture of courage and curiosity, to meet and talk with John Dawson before killing him. Though he's determined to feel hatred for Dawson (in order to help him feel justified in his actions), he finds he cannot, and he even feels a reluctant liking for his victim. Nevertheless, he goes through with shooting Dawson. At the end of the story, Elisha feels like he, too, has undergone a kind of death.

**Gad** – Gad is the compelling young terrorist who recruits Elisha to join the Movement in Palestine and oversees his training there. Gad tracks down Elisha in Paris and claims to know everything about him. Elisha entrusts his future to Gad because to him, Gad's fiery gaze and prophetic voice make him resemble a messenger from God; the desire to please Gad is a strong motivation for Elisha. Gad is fully committed to the

Movement's ideology and believes that Jewish people have put up with persecution for too long and must learn to fight back violently. David ben Moshe is a lifelong friend of Gad's and was captured during an operation Gad commanded, so he's especially bitter and vengeful about David's impending execution.

**John Dawson** – John Dawson is a British captain who is kidnapped and sentenced to execution by the Movement in reprisal for the death sentence of David ben Moshe. Dawson is a handsome man in his 40s and a professional soldier. Dawson has a son Elisha's age who's studying at Cambridge, and he immediately feels sorry for Elisha; in the last hour of Dawson's life, he even shows a fatherly tenderness and quiet humor toward Elisha. In fact, the last word on Dawson's lips before he is shot is "Elisha," though it's not clear what he meant to say. After Dawson dies, the ghosts of Elisha's past, including the little boy, accompany Dawson's spirit from the prison cell, suggesting that they side with Dawson and not Elisha.

**David ben Moshe** – A childhood friend of Gad's, David ben Moshe is a Jewish freedom fighter who is taken captive and sentenced to death by the British. In retaliation, the Movement kidnaps British captain John Dawson and sentences him to execution. Though David doesn't appear directly in the story, Elisha imagines the last moments before David's hanging while he's preparing to shoot Dawson.

**The Beggar** – The beggar is a mysterious figure whom Elisha first met when he was 12 years old. The shabbily dressed, gaunt beggar had an otherworldly look in his [eyes](#). The mysterious beggar taught young Elisha how to distinguish between night and day by peering into a window and looking for the reflection of a face. The ghost of the beggar also appears in the room the night before Elisha executes Dawson, but he declines to pass judgment on Elisha's actions. From studying Hassidic literature, Elisha knows that a beggar could be either the prophet Elijah or the Angel of Death in disguise. Throughout the story, Elisha thinks the beggar represents both of these figures at different points.

**The Old Man** –The Old Man is the anonymous leader of the Movement. Though Elisha doesn't know the Old Man's identity, he believes he met him during training camp, as Elisha worked with a masked instructor who had a surprisingly gentle voice. The Old Man's ideology centers on the belief that the Jewish people must take their future into their own hands by learning to hate their enemies. The Old Man orders Elisha to execute John Dawson. He refuses to back down from Dawson's death sentence, despite worldwide protest, because he believes that Jewish people have passively endured persecution for too long and must fight back.

**The Grizzled Master** – The grizzled master is Elisha's childhood Cabala (Jewish mysticism) teacher. Elisha looked up to the master as a mentor and guide; he was especially

influenced by the Master's teaching on the sixth commandment—that it's wrong to take God's prerogative into one's own hands by killing another. He also told Elisha that Death is "all eyes" and taught him other Jewish legends, like the story of a little boy who was turned into a prayer in the night sky. The ghost of the grizzled master appears the night before Dawson's execution, though he remains silent.

**Ilana** – Ilana is Gad's girlfriend and also the "Voice of Freedom" who broadcasts on the Movement's behalf each night in Palestine. Except for Gad, Elisha, and a few others, nobody else knows the identity of the mysterious, beautiful radio voice. The night before Dawson's execution, Ilana comforts Elisha, reminding him of his former love, Catherine.

**Catherine** – Catherine was a delicate blonde woman in her late 20s whom Elisha met in France after World War II. She was the first woman Elisha got to know up close, outside of his family. She asked Elisha about his past and spoke to him about love; they eventually began a romantic affair, but when Elisha told her that he loved her, she became distressed, and Elisha fled before they could consummate their relationship sexually. After this, Elisha realized that Catherine saw him as a pitiable little boy. Catherine's ghost is the first one Elisha sees around midnight on the night before Dawson's execution.

**The Little Boy** – The little boy is the ghost of Elisha's younger self as he was before the war began. He appears the night before Dawson's execution and is the only one of the ghosts who directly answers Elisha's questions. He explains to Elisha that the ghosts must witness the execution because they are part of everything he does, though they will not judge him.

**Yerachmiel** – Yerachmiel is a childhood friend of Elisha's. They studied Cabala (Jewish mysticism together under the grizzled master and prayed and fasted fervently in hopes of bringing the Messiah. The two were separated at the beginning of World War II. Then Yerachmiel's ghost appears to Elisha the night before Dawson's execution, confirming that he must have been killed in a concentration camp.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Gideon** – Gideon is a Movement fighter and one of Ilana's bodyguards. He is nicknamed "the Saint" because he is devoutly religious and prays almost constantly.

**Joab** – Joab is a Movement fighter and one of Ilana's bodyguards. He is a young man with an innocent-looking face and white hair. Joab is nicknamed "the Madman" because he fled interrogation by pretending to be insane.

**Elisha's Father** – [The ghost of Elisha's father appears the night before the execution of Dawson, but he remains silent.](#)

**Elisha's Mother** – The ghost of Elisha's mother appears the night before the execution of Dawson. She says "Poor little boy!" over and over again, though it's not entirely clear if she's

referring to Elisha or Dawson.

**Stefan** – Stefan is a sculptor and member of the German resistance whom Elisha met in Buchenwald. When Stefan refused to give up the names of other resistance members, his fingers were cut off by a Gestapo chief.



## 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.



### REVENGE, TERRORISM, AND WAR

*Dawn* takes place in British-ruled Palestine before the creation of the state of Israel, when a group of young Holocaust survivors are attempting to overthrow British rule in order to establish a safe Jewish homeland. These freedom fighters are referred to simply as “the Movement.” In the story, the Movement has begun exacting revenge for the British government’s execution of Jewish soldiers. In retaliation for the execution of a fighter named David ben Moshe, the Jewish soldiers plan to execute an English captain named John Dawson. Elisha, an 18-year-old, is the soldier ordered to carry out the execution at **dawn**. Haunted by memories of the concentration camps, Elisha accepts the justifications that more seasoned fighters give him for committing this act of murder, yet he also searches in vain for assurance that the Movement’s actions have an enduring purpose: can death and killing really be the means to a just end? By exploring Elisha’s personal struggle to find meaning in terroristic actions like Dawson’s execution, Wiesel suggests that even “justified” violence only perpetuates suffering and revenge and therefore can’t secure peace and justice.

The terrorists justify their actions on the basis of having been terrorized in the past. In their efforts to secure a new Jewish homeland, the Movement accepts the label of terrorist—their “goal was simply to get the English out; the method, intimidation, terror, and sudden death.” In the Movement fighters’ minds, this method is justifiable because of what they’ve suffered in the past. The Jewish Holocaust survivors, who are used to being terrorized, are now the terrorizers. Gad, the soldier who recruits Elisha to the Movement, tells him that the Jewish freedom fighters strike fear into the hearts of the British occupiers of Palestine: “The Holy Land has become, for [the British], a land of fear. They don’t dare walk out on the streets at night [...] or stroke the head of a child for fear that he may throw a hand grenade in their face. They dare neither to speak nor to be silent. They are afraid.” The Movement inflicts fear—fear of doing ordinary things like walking down the street

or even speaking—equivalent to the fear that’s been inflicted on them in the recent past, even though the British weren’t responsible for that.

Despite the lack of direct British culpability, the fighters believe that the ends justify the means. Gad tells Elisha, “If we must become more unjust and inhuman than those who have been unjust and inhuman to us, then we shall do so. We don’t like to be bearers of death; heretofore we’ve chosen to be victims rather than executioners. The commandment *Thou shalt not kill* was given from the summit of one of the mountains here in Palestine, and we were the only ones to obey it. But that’s all over [...] We shall kill in order that once more we may be men...” Gad believes that although Jews do not wish to cause death and are even commanded not to, they will now break the commandment as everyone else has done, in order to secure the freedom to live a peaceful human life. At the time, Elisha accepts Gad’s reasoning.

But when Elisha is forced to execute a British soldier in simple retaliation, Elisha is no longer satisfied with the justifications he previously accepted, and he questions whether terror can really achieve a peaceful goal. The night before the execution, Ilana, the Movement’s radio broadcaster, is the only comrade who will talk openly with Elisha about whether terroristic actions are truly justifiable. She tells Elisha, “We say that ours is a holy war [...] that we’re struggling against something and for something, against the English and for an independent Palestine. [...] But these are words; as such they serve only to give meaning to our actions. And our actions, seen in their true and primitive light, have the odor and color of blood.” Ilana confirms what Elisha has begun to suspect: that no matter what justifications the fighters use to describe their actions, that doesn’t change the cold-blooded nature of their actions.

Later, when trying to offer Dawson a justification for killing him, Elisha finds that his words fall flat. Elisha initially claims that the Jewish people’s “tragedy, throughout the centuries, has stemmed from their inability to hate those who have humiliated and from time to time exterminated them. Now our only chance lies in hating you, in learning the necessity and the art of hate. Otherwise, John Dawson, our future will only be an extension of the past[.]” In other words, hatred is merely a tool that’s necessary to secure a new future for his people.

But, moments later, when Dawson presses Elisha as to why he hates him, Elisha admits that he tries to hate “in order to give my action a meaning which may somehow transcend it.” In the end, Ilana’s warning unsettles Elisha’s certainty, forcing him to admit that, underneath his words, his actions might *not* be justifiable and might not achieve the meaning which the freedom fighters have attributed to them.

Elisha’s struggle with executing Dawson suggests that, both in his individual case and in the Movement more generally, fighters seek justifications for actions that cannot ultimately be justified. No matter what words are used or how just their



reasoning might appear, Wiesel argues, the fighters cannot redeem their own suffering or secure peace by committing further violence.



### PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

In *Dawn*, Wiesel portrays the dead as the witnesses and judges of the present. He does this by having Elisha's dead acquaintances appear as ghosts at key moments in the story. (Although only Elisha can see these figures, the ghosts' visibility, and the hot, stuffy sensation they bring with them, suggest that they're really ghosts, not just Elisha's memories.) The presence of the dead in the story indicates the heavy shadow of the past that guides Elisha's choice to go to Palestine after surviving the Holocaust; he assumes he is acting on behalf of the dead and for the sake of a better future for his fellow Jews. The ghosts are oppressively prominent the night before Elisha is slated to execute a British soldier, adding to Elisha's fear and doubt about his orders to kill Dawson. Though Elisha insistently asks, he can't get a direct judgment from any of these witnesses—not from the ghost of his father, his old rabbi, or even his younger self—about what he's about to do. Yet at the end of the book, the ghosts wordlessly depart with Dawson's spirit, suggesting that they aren't on Elisha's side after all. Elisha's interactions with the ghosts suggest that, not only does he make his predecessors somehow complicit in his violent actions, but he cannot assume that the dead would approve of his committing violence on their behalf.

Through Elisha, the book emphasizes that one cannot act for the future's sake without carrying the burden of the past at the same time. The night before the execution, Elisha is surrounded by the ghosts of his parents, his old rabbi, and English soldiers he's ambushed: "As I let my eyes wander about the room I realized that all of those who had contributed to my formation, to the formation of my permanent identity, were there." At first, none of the ghosts will respond to Elisha's questions, until the ghost of Elisha himself as a small child tells him, "We want to see you carry [the execution] out. We want to see you turn into a murderer." Elisha realizes that in some sense, everyone who's part of him will witness the execution.

Not only that, the ghosts will become complicit in the execution: "'You are the sum total of all that we have been,' said the youngster who looked like my former self. 'In a way we are the ones to execute John Dawson. Because you can't do it without us. Now, do you see?'" Elisha comes to understand that "An act so absolute as that of killing involves not only the killer but, as well, those who have formed him. In murdering a man I was making them murderers." Elisha is not only answerable to those who've contributed to making him who he is; he inevitably implicates them—and, by implication, all Jewish people—in his actions.

The execution makes Elisha wonder if his action for the future's

sake really achieves any good on the Jewish people's behalf. As Elisha prepares to carry out his orders, he tries to convince himself that John Dawson is interchangeable with those who've made him and his loved ones suffer in the past: "As I went down the stairs I was sure that I would meet the man who had condemned David ben Moshe to death, the man who had killed my parents, the man who had come between me and the man I had wanted to become, and who was now ready to kill the man in me." Yet, instead, Elisha finds that Dawson is a likeable man with his own connections to the past back in England, who doesn't even know why he's being executed. This causes Elisha's logic—that, through this execution, he's striking a blow on his people's behalf—to begin to unravel.

After the ghosts watch Elisha shoot Dawson, they offer no comment, but they accompany Dawson's spirit out of the cell: "the little boy walked at his side as if to guide him. I seemed to hear my mother say: 'Poor boy! Poor boy!'" It's ambiguous whether his mother's words here refer to Elisha or to Dawson. In either case, the ghosts' actions suggest that, contrary to Elisha's self-justifications, they side with the unjust sufferer, Dawson, and not with Elisha. This destroys Elisha's previous understanding of his actions. Though he carries the burden of his past wherever he goes, he realizes he cannot assume that there is an unbroken line of logic between his past, his present actions, and his people's future. In turn, this forces him to question whether the ghosts of his past—the people whose sufferings motivate him—approve of his methods to secure a future for the Jewish people.



### GOD AND RELIGION

Though Elisha grew up religiously observant, the Holocaust destroys his youthfully naïve beliefs about God. Yet when God recruits Elisha into an organization called the Movement, Elisha's religious beliefs are rekindled in a different form—one that urges survivors to take the future into their own hands instead of continuing to be victimized. These beliefs undercut some of the very tenets of Elisha's upbringing, like the belief that killing is wrong, by calling upon people to take on the role of God in creating their future—even if that means causing the deaths of others. Though Elisha remains committed to these beliefs in the abstract, taking Dawson's life forces him to rethink them. In the aftermath, he doubts that he has been right to try to occupy God's place, and he questions whether God has been with him at all. Through Elisha's struggle to force his religious beliefs to align with his actions, Wiesel suggests that attributing one's actions to God is arrogant at best and, at worst, will lead to the destruction of the world one is trying to create.

Elisha's sufferings during the Holocaust alter his belief in God, making him believe that human beings must take the initiative to act where, in their view, God has failed to act. The experience of living in the concentration camps has altered Elisha's once-

fervent belief in God. “In the concentration camp I had cried out in sorrow and anger against God and also against man, who seemed to have inherited only the cruelty of his creator.” In other words, Elisha’s suffering makes him doubt that either God or man is as good as he had once believed.

After he survives the camps, Elisha is left with pressing questions about God: “Where is God to be found? In suffering or in rebellion?” Though he intends to pursue these questions through the study of philosophy, he ends up seeking it through what the freedom fighters call simply “the Movement”: a terroristic group that is fighting the British for control of Palestine, where the fighters hope to create a Jewish homeland. By attributing religious meaning to the Movement’s efforts, Elisha assumes an answer to his question—that God is to be found in rebellion, not in the sufferings he’s just survived.

Not only does Elisha assume where God can be found, he also assumes that human beings must effectively take God’s work into their own hands. As a child, Elisha had been taught that murder was wrong because, in committing it, a person assumes one of God’s prerogatives. Now, Elisha reasons that it’s necessary for the Jewish people to “become God” in order to change the course of their history. Ironically, Elisha comes closer to answering his questions when he’s called upon to become an executioner. In Palestine, Elisha’s belief in the need to “become God” is soon put to the test: “I wanted to understand the pure, unadulterated essence of human nature [...] I had sought after the truth, and here I was about to become a killer, a participant in the work of [...] God.” Elisha’s abstract questions about God and humanity become extremely real when he’s ordered to kill, and he acts in the belief that, because God is found in rebellion, his participation in “God’s work” of killing is necessary.

Before the execution, when Elisha sees the ghost of his father, he argues that his actions should be blamed upon God: “Father [...] don’t judge me. Judge God. He created the universe and made justice stem from injustices. He brought it about that a people should attain happiness through tears, that the freedom of a nation, like that of a man, should be a monument built upon a pile, a foundation of dead bodies[.]” Because Elisha has been persuaded of the holiness of his cause, he justifies his actions in religious terms, claiming that it is God’s fault that the war for Palestine is happening in this way. But his anxiety suggests that, underneath it all, he’s beginning to doubt this himself.

In the end, Elisha questions whether God is really with him. Though God is present at Dawson’s execution, it isn’t clear where: “We were the first—or the last—men of creation [...] And God? He was present, somewhere. Perhaps He was incarnate in the liking with which John Dawson inspired me. The lack of hate between executioner and victim, perhaps this is God.” Where once Elisha had identified himself with God in the act of killing, his unexpected liking for his victim unsettles this belief. Elisha is left doubting that he’s acted in God’s stead,

or even that God is with him at all. In a sort of vision or imagination, Elisha sees that when David ben Moshe is executed by the British, the rabbi who accompanies him to the scaffold assures him moments before his death that “God is with you.” But after he pulls the trigger on John Dawson, Elisha receives no such assurance. There is nothing besides himself and Dawson’s crumpled body.

In the end, Wiesel suggests that God is found with those who suffer and not primarily with rebels who take matters into their own hands. Elisha remembers his childhood fervency in trying to summon the Messiah: “No one can force God’s hand with impunity. Men older, wiser, and more mature than ourselves had tried in vain to wrest the Messiah from the chains of the future; failing in their purpose they had lost their faith[.]” Wiesel hints that the actions of the rebels, too, are a misguided attempt to “force God’s hand” and bring about the Messiah’s arrival on tragically false grounds.



### HATRED, KILLING, AND HUMANITY

Early in the book, Elisha observes that becoming a terrorist has damaged his humanity by making him just like the S.S. officers he hated in the concentration camp during the Holocaust. He rightly concludes that, once a person becomes a killer, that aspect of their identity can never be erased. Yet this isn’t the end of Elisha’s story. When Elisha is ordered to execute John Dawson, he feels inexorably drawn to talk to Dawson in the hours before his death. Their conversation fails to fuel Elisha’s hatred for his enemy (a hatred he’d *hoped* to feel in order to justify the killing), and in fact forces Elisha to face his own hatred and culpability. Though Elisha then follows through in executing Dawson, the possibility remains open that those humanizing moments might yet lead to a kind of moral rebirth for Elisha. As Elisha confronts his identity as a killer and undergoes a moral “death” of his own, Wiesel argues that the cycle of hatred can only be broken when killers affirm both their own and their enemies’ humanity.

When Elisha becomes a terrorist, he starts to become what he hates. The first time Elisha participates in a terrorist operation, he pictures himself in the uniform of an S.S. officer. He remembers that S.S. officers once murdered Jews by the same methods he is now using to kill the British: “A few Jews tried to break through the circle of fire, but they only rammed their heads against its insurmountable wall. They too ran like rabbits [...] sotted with wine and sorrow and death mowed them down.” As a terrorist, Elisha ends up recreating the same horrors he has fled from.

*Dawn* suggests that once a person becomes a killer, a person can never shed that identity. Elisha reflects, “[A killer] can’t say I’ll kill only ten or only twenty-six men; I’ll kill for only five minutes or a single day. He who has killed one man alone is a killer for life. [...] War had made me an executioner, and an executioner I would remain even after the backdrop had

changed, when I was acting in another play upon a different stage.” In other words, the identity of “killer” cannot be rejected just because the war will someday end; killing even once stamps that identity on a person forever.

Though Elisha tries to hate John Dawson in order to justify killing him, he finds he cannot; in fact, facing Dawson personally reconnects Elisha to his own humanity. The relationship between Elisha and Dawson creates an undeniable bond between them. “The seated victim, the standing executioner—smiling, and understanding each other better than if they were childhood friends. [...] There was harmony between us [...] No human being would ever understand me as he understood me at this hour.” Ironically, the anticipation of killing elicits an unexpected feeling of deep humanity in Elisha, and even “harmony” between himself and his soon-to-be victim.

Though Elisha tries to hate Dawson, the effort instead forces him to face his own humanity. “I certainly wanted to hate him. That was partly why I had come to engage him in conversation before I killed him. [...] A man hates his enemy because he hates his own hate. He says to himself: This fellow, my enemy, has made me capable of hate.” Though Elisha is a killer capable of doing terrible things, there’s still humanity in him, indicated by his effort to get to know Dawson. Though he’d set out to hate Dawson, Elisha finds the conversation backfires, forcing him to examine himself—especially his capacity for hate—instead.

After killing Dawson, Elisha feels that he has killed himself in some way. He explains, “[Dawson’s] body remained in a sitting position [...] I stayed for a few moments beside him. [...] The shot had left me deaf and dumb. That’s it, I said to myself. It’s done. I’ve killed. I’ve killed Elisha.” Though Elisha is a killer, the unexpected moments of shared humanity with Dawson lead him to identify with his victim to some extent. At the same time, the killing makes him feel as though a part of himself is irrevocably destroyed. Over the years, whenever Elisha looks into a window at the transition between night and day, he has typically seen the **face** of someone dead. But this morning, after the execution, the face looking back at him is his own: “The tattered fragment of darkness had a face. Looking at it, I understood the reason for my fear. The face was my own.” Elisha’s frightening vision—especially when he might have expected to see Dawson’s face instead—confirms that he is now “dead” in some sense.

Yet Wiesel leaves the meaning of Elisha’s “death” ambiguous. As a killer, is Elisha destroyed forever, or did his encounter with Dawson “kill” the cold-blooded murderer in Elisha? Having faced his identity as a killer without ultimately trying to justify his hatred for Dawson, will he end up preserving his humanity? The conclusion of the book—the coming of **dawn**—leaves room for hope that, by humanizing his victim, Elisha might yet regain his own humanity, even if he can never undo what he’s done.



## SYMBOLS

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



### FACES AND EYES

In *Dawn*, faces and eyes symbolize death, both physical and spiritual. The frequent presence of faces and eyes in the novel suggests that the dead are always watching the living and witnessing their actions. In other words, death is always hovering over life, and the past always weighs on the present, no matter how the living try to ignore or escape this reality. For instance, before Elisha executes John Dawson, he is haunted by the faces of loved ones and acquaintances who’ve died. These ghosts silently witness Elisha as he becomes a killer and remind him that whatever he does, he carries them with him and involves them in his actions.

When Elisha was a young boy, a beggar had taught him to distinguish day from night by looking for a face in the window at nightfall. Whenever Elisha gazes into a window, he usually sees the face of someone dead, but Elisha sees his own face in the window after Dawson’s execution, suggesting that, in committing murder, Elisha has undergone a moral death. The grizzled master also taught Elisha that Death is a creature who is “all eyes”—meaning that it’s made up purely of eyes and no other body parts. When Elisha prepares to execute Dawson, he wonders if he will appear to be “all eyes,” and he wonders if David ben Moshe’s hangman looks the same way.



### DAWN

Ironically, dawn symbolizes hope in *Dawn*, though on the surface, it also signals death. Dawn is the hour at which Elisha executes John Dawson, as well as when David ben Moshe is hung by the British. After Elisha shoots Dawson at dawn, he sees his **face** reflected in the window. Because such faces normally appear at nightfall, this reflection suggests that Elisha’s actions have led to a kind of moral death. Yet the appearance of his face at dawn is ambiguous, hinting that Elisha’s willingness to face his victim’s humanity might lead eventually to his rebirth and the salvaging of his own humanity.





## QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hill and Wang edition of *Dawn* published in 2006.

## Chapter 1 Quotes

●● I did not know the man. To my eyes he had no face; he did not even exist, for I knew nothing about him. I did not know whether he scratched his nose when he ate, whether he talked or kept quiet when he was making love, whether he gloried in his hate, whether he betrayed his wife or his God or his own future. All I knew was that he was an Englishman and my enemy. The two terms were synonymous.

**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker), John Dawson

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 3

**Explanation and Analysis**


This quote captures the thoughts of 18-year-old Elisha, a Jewish revolutionary fighter in Palestine, after he learns that he will be responsible for executing John Dawson, a British captive. It also shows how the terrorist policy of reprisals (capturing and killing enemy soldiers in revenge for British executions) fell on the shoulders of ordinary fighters. Elisha realizes that he is commanded to kill a human being with specific traits, both mundane (like scratching one's nose) and profound (like betrayal of principles). But in the context of war, all these traits are erased by the overriding necessity of killing one's enemy. Elisha's preoccupation with such details shows the weight that such killings could place on those commanded to carry them out, as well as showing Elisha's sensitive nature. Because faces occupy such an important part in the story (as a sort of window into a person's humanity), it's also significant that Elisha mentions Dawson having "no face." Later, Elisha feels driven to see Dawson's face in order to come to terms with the reality of killing him.

●● "Listen," he said, digging his fingers into my arm. "I'm going to teach you the art of distinguishing between day and night. Always look at a window, and failing that look into the eyes of a man. If you see a face, any face, then you can be sure that night has succeeded day. For, believe me, night has a face."  
[...]

Every evening since then I had made a point of standing near a window to witness the arrival of night. And every evening I saw a face outside. It was not always the same face [...] I knew nothing about them except that they were dead.

**Related Characters:** The Beggar (speaker), Elisha

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 6

**Explanation and Analysis**

When Elisha was a young boy, before he was forced from his home village during the Holocaust, he encountered a mysterious beggar while walking home from the synagogue. Even in the story's present, Elisha is never sure who the beggar might have been—whether it was the prophet Elijah (as Hasidic tradition suggests) or perhaps the Angel of Death in disguise. Either way, the beggar's message is just as mysterious as his identity. The beggar impresses on Elisha that nighttime isn't to be feared—in fact, he hints that it's a purer time than day, when one is able to see the nature of reality more clearly. Because of that, it's important to be able to distinguish between day and night, and this can be done by gazing into a window and looking for the reflection of a face. Soon Elisha discovers that, when he looks in windows as the beggar once instructed, the "face of night" is always the face of someone dead. Elisha's frequent sightings of the dead further suggest that the dead are constantly witnessing the present—a truth that the purity of night makes visible, and something that Elisha is forced to come to terms with over the course of the story.





●● The situation was grave. The Zionist leaders recommended prudence; they got in touch with the Old Man and begged him, for the sake of the nation, not to go too far: there was talk of vengeance, of a pogrom, and this meant that innocent men and women would have to pay.

The Old Man answered: If David ben Moshe is hanged, John Dawson must die. If the Movement were to give in the English would score a triumph. They would take it for a sign of weakness and impotence on our part, as if we were saying to them: Go ahead and hang all the young Jews who are holding out against you. No, the Movement cannot give in. Violence is the only language the English can understand.

In the late 1940s, following the horrors of the Holocaust, the Jewish community in British-ruled Palestine is filled with conflict. Though Zionists agree on the importance of creating an independent Jewish homeland in Palestine, they disagree on methods for establishing that homeland. In *Dawn*, the “Old Man”—the anonymous leader of the radical “Movement”—resorts to terrorist tactics like reprisals. This means that if the British execute a Jewish fighter, then the Movement will respond by executing a British soldier in turn. From the Movement’s perspective, the Jewish people have submitted to violence at others’ hands for far too long; if there is any hope for establishing an independent nation, then they must now treat others as they have been treated throughout history. Though other Zionists argue that such actions will invite indiscriminate violence, the Old Man maintains that anything less will keep the Jewish people in the same persecuted position they’ve occupied for centuries. Elisha soon finds himself in the middle of this tension as the Old Man calls upon him to carry out the execution.

**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker), John Dawson, David ben Moshe, The Old Man

**Related Themes:**  



**Page Number:** 8

## Chapter 2 Quotes

●● In the concentration camp I had cried out in sorrow and anger against God and also against man, who seemed to have inherited only the cruelty of his creator. I was anxious to re-evaluate my revolt in an atmosphere of detachment, to view it in terms of the present.

So many questions obsessed me. Where is God to be found? In suffering or in rebellion? When is a man most truly a man? When he submits or when he refuses? [...] Philosophy, I hoped, would give me an answer. It would free me from my memories, my doubts, my feeling of guilt.

**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 12

### Explanation and Analysis

Though he grew up in a devout Hasidic Jewish family, Elisha finds that the sufferings of the Holocaust crush his faith in both God and humanity. He doesn’t understand how God could permit such atrocities to take place, and he sees this cruelty reflected in the perpetrators of his suffering. After surviving World War II, Elisha hopes to consider his loss of faith in a “detached” setting by studying philosophy at the Sorbonne. His questions—about where God and true humanity can be found—set the tone for the novel. Yet Elisha assumes that he will find answers in a neutral academic setting. He is soon forced to explore the answers to these questions in the far different setting of war in Palestine, suggesting that one’s past cannot be evaluated in a truly objective way; such an evaluation can only occur in the midst of the pain of the present, and the past can never be neatly detached from the present.

●● "You want my future?" I asked. "What will you do with it?" He smiled again, but in a cold, distant manner as one who possesses a power over men. "I'll make it into an outcry," he said, and there was a strange light in his dark eyes. "An outcry first of despair and then of hope. And finally a shout of triumph."

**Related Characters:** Gad, Elisha (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 14

### Explanation and Analysis

When Gad tracks down Elisha in Paris after the Holocaust, he asks Elisha to hand over his future. He assures Elisha that he will transform his life into a force for the Movement (which refers to Irgun, a Jewish nationalist group that was gathering notoriety in Palestine at the time). Gad has an angelic, almost godlike presence that promises to be able to change the meaninglessness and doubt in Elisha’s life into something powerful. Given Elisha’s devastating experiences in the Holocaust and his crushing loss of faith and loss of loved ones, it’s easy to see how Gad’s promises would seem to offer him a meaningful new path in life. At the end of the book, however, it’s unclear whether Elisha’s life indeed

becomes an outcry of despair, hope, and triumph. Wiesel lets this remain ambiguous, suggesting that after Elisha's experience of getting to know Dawson and then executing him, Elisha could either move toward greater humanity and hope or deeper into despair—it's up to him, not Gad or anyone else.

☞ Gad's stories were utterly fascinating. I saw in him a prince of Jewish history, a legendary messenger sent by fate to awaken my imagination, to tell the people whose past was now their religion: Come, come; the future is waiting for you with open arms. From now on you will no longer be humiliated, persecuted, or even pitied. You will not be strangers encamped in an age and a place that are not yours. Come, brothers, come!

**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker), Gad

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 16

### Explanation and Analysis

In the past, Elisha has seen religion as primarily having to do with history. He believes that the Jewish people's withdrawal into the past has made them passive and therefore susceptible to oppression from outsiders. Gad represents a totally different way of conceptualizing and approaching religion. In Gad's view, religion is primarily oriented toward the future, not the past, calling upon Jewish people to take the initiative to change their situation for the better. In so doing, they will liberate themselves from persecution and exile. Elisha has never heard anything like this before. After losing his faith during the Holocaust, Gad's stories reawaken his religious consciousness because they are so different from what he's ever been taught before. This idea of a persecuted people taking hold of the present in order to create a new future restores Elisha's faith in a different form. His receptivity to Gad's ideas also suggests that somebody who's suffered can be especially receptive—and perhaps vulnerable—to different perspectives on the future, including ones that justify revolutionary violence.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ We don't like to be bearers of death; heretofore we've chosen to be victims rather than executioners. The commandment *Thou shalt not kill* was given from the summit of one of the mountains here in Palestine, and we were the only ones to obey it. But that's all over; we must be like everybody else. Murder will be not our profession but our duty. In the days and weeks and months to come you will have only one purpose: to kill those who have made us killers. We shall kill in order that once more we may be men[.]

**Related Characters:** Gad (speaker), Elisha

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 23

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote represents the climax of Gad's appeal to Elisha to hand over his future and join the Movement. Gad suggests that, in the past, religious beliefs have allowed Jewish people to be victimized over and over again. Their refusal to kill might have made them morally superior to others, he suggests, but it also made them vulnerable and allowed them to be targeted for persecution—to the point that, in the last few years, it's led to the Jewish people being nearly eliminated altogether via the Holocaust. Because of this, Gad argues, Jews must fundamentally change their attitudes about the future. They must play on everyone else's terms now and begin to kill for the sake of preserving their humanity. By arguing that their suffering has been due to their own passivity, Gad is able to justify a shift to extreme and violent tactics. In the aftermath of his own suffering and loss of faith, this justification appeals to Elisha, and he agrees to go to Palestine to fight for a Jewish nation.

●● I remembered how the grizzled master had explained the sixth commandment to me. Why has a man no right to commit murder? Because in so doing he takes upon himself the function of God. And this must not be done too easily. Well, I said to myself, if in order to change the course of our history we have to become God, we shall become Him. How easy that is we shall see. No, it was not easy.

When Elisha trains to become a terrorist, he doesn't just discover new ideas about what it means to live in Zion (the Holy Land). He also discovers new interpretations of the religious teachings on which he was raised. Here he explains how his childhood mentor, a rabbi known as the grizzled master, taught him to understand the sixth of the Ten Commandments, the one which prohibits killing. The grizzled master explains that life and death are in God's hands, so killing someone means wrongly playing the role of God. As Elisha becomes indoctrinated into the Movement's ideas, however, he looks at the sixth commandment in a new way—accepting that in order to secure a peaceful future, the Jewish people have a *responsibility* to “become God,” even if that includes killing. If they don't do this, he reasons, they will continue to be at the mercy of history and may eventually cease to exist as a people. *Dawn* as a whole is the story of Elisha learning just how difficult it is to live out such an idea.

**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker), The Grizzled Master

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 23

## Chapter 4 Quotes

●● I felt the blood gather in my head and my head swell to several times its normal size, so that I must have looked like a caricature, a miserable clown. I was sure from one minute to the next that it would burst into a thousand shreds like a child's toy balloon. At this moment the assistant leader took a good look at me and found the sight so comical that he released his grip and burst out laughing. He laughed so long that he forgot his intention to kill. And that's how I got out of it unharmed. It's funny, isn't it, that I should owe my life to an assassin's sense of humor?

The night before the execution of British captive John Dawson, the Movement members pass the time by exchanging stories of their brushes with death. Elisha's story is the nearest encounter with death and easily the most horrifying: he shares a memory of being nearly choked to death by a barracks guard in the Buchenwald concentration camp during the Holocaust. Almost casually, the guard had begun to squeeze Elisha's throat, but when he saw Elisha's ludicrously swollen appearance, he callously laughed and let go. Elisha's story shows that even a merciful action, like deciding not to kill someone, can be done with callousness, dismissing the other person's humanity. Later, when Elisha talks with his soon-to-be victim Dawson, he keeps asking Dawson for a funny story. The implication is that if Elisha can laugh at his victim, then maybe he'll find an excuse to let him go like his own tormentor did. Though it's also possible that Elisha would laugh and kill him anyway. It turns out that Elisha enacts neither of these scenarios, but that by listening to his Dawson talk about his life, Elisha faces his victim's humanity more honestly than his own captors did—the one hint of hope in the story.

**Related Characters:** Elisha

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 35

●● "Poor boy!" she repeated. [...] Ilana disappeared, and Catherine was there instead. I wondered why Catherine had come, but her apparition did not particularly surprise me. [...] She liked to speak of love to little boys, and since men going to their death are little boys she liked to speak to them of love. For this reason her presence in the magical room—magical because it transcended the differences [...] between the present and the past—was not surprising.

**Related Characters:** Ilana (speaker), Catherine, Elisha

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 39


### Explanation and Analysis

The night before Dawson's execution, Gad's girlfriend, Ilana, tries to comfort Elisha regarding his role in the war and in this particular killing. Before his eyes, Ilana transforms into the image of Catherine, a girl he knew in the immediate aftermath of the war and who also called him "Poor boy!" at times. At this point in the story, such memories, visions, or "ghosts" begin to accompany Elisha and will do so until the end of the novel; their precise nature is never defined, but their significance is that they connect Elisha's past with his present. Catherine at first seems to be an odd figure to appear so vividly in Elisha's memories, but he reasons that it's because she doesn't belong entirely to either his past (particularly his childhood) or to his present in Palestine. Catherine befriended and loved Elisha at a particularly lost and vulnerable moment in his life, so her reappearance at another such moment—as Elisha comes to terms with his responsibility to kill—makes sense. Catherine's appearance also speaks to the fact that, though he's 18, Elisha really is a young boy in many ways. He has spent his youth imprisoned, tormented, and now subject to leaders who try to channel his past sufferings into rage against enemies. He longs for reassurance, and the women in the story—even when they're just ghosts—fulfill this longing for sympathy and understanding.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ Suddenly I became aware that the room was stuffy, so stuffy that I was almost stifled. No wonder. The room was small, far too small to receive so many visitors at one time. Ever since midnight the visitors had been pouring in. Among them were people I had known, people I had hated, admired, forgotten. As I let my eyes wander about the room I realized that all of those who had contributed to my formation, to the formation of my permanent identity, were there. Some of them were familiar, but I could not pin a label upon them; they were names without faces or faces without names. And yet I knew that at some point my life had crossed theirs.

**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 44

### Explanation and Analysis

A few hours before Elisha is supposed to kill British captive John Dawson, he is suddenly confronted by the ghosts of his past. These ghosts are from all parts of Elisha's life, especially his upbringing and his years in the concentration camps. Elisha has been trying to justify violent actions for the sake of his people's future, accepting the Movement's argument that the Jewish people have historically failed to defend themselves and must do so now. The sudden influx of ghosts makes him realize that the past cannot be so easily rejected. Though all of Elisha's loved ones are now dead, they remain witnesses of the present; not only that, they will be with him no matter what he does in the present, even acting with him in a sense. In this way, the ghosts of his past offer a poignant self-defense that Elisha feels obligated to answer somehow. This reinforces Wiesel's argument that the present and the future are unthinkable unless one fully reckons with the past—something Elisha has so far failed to do.

☞ "But it's all quite simple," he exclaimed. "We are here to be present at the execution. We want to see you carry it out. We want to see you turn into a murderer. That's natural enough, isn't it?" [...]

I was beginning to understand. An act so absolute as that of killing involves not only the killer but, as well, those who have formed him. In murdering a man I was making them murderers.

**Related Characters:** Elisha, The Little Boy (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 46

### Explanation and Analysis

When Elisha questions the ghosts who appear the night before the execution, the only one who will speak to him is the ghost of himself as a little boy. The little boy explains that the ghosts are always with Elisha, not because they're here to judge him, but because they make up Elisha's identity, so they're involved in everything he does. The ghosts' appearance therefore complicates Elisha's understanding of his role relative to history. Gad helped recruit Elisha to the Movement on the grounds that the Jewish's persecutors have helped turn them into murderers, requiring them to strike back in kind. But the appearance of the ghosts makes Elisha realize that the past doesn't just shape the future; the future impacts the past,



too. In other words, if Elisha goes through with executing John Dawson, then his people—everyone who has helped make him who he is—also become killers. The present is always unavoidably entangled with the past, and people must be mindful of the past in order to better shape the future.

“We say that ours is a holy war,” she went on, “that we’re struggling against something and for something, against the English and for an independent Palestine. That’s what we say. But these are words; as such they serve only to give meaning to our actions. And our actions, seen in their true and primitive light, have the odor and color of blood.”

Though female characters play a relatively small role in the novel, their role is important in that these characters—especially Catherine and, here, Ilana—help Elisha talk through his struggles more than any male characters do. Often, these women raise and grapple with ethical questions more directly than the story’s central characters do. Perhaps because she isn’t directly involved in terrorist operations (she’s the voice of their radio broadcast), Ilana serves as an honest, approachable confidant for Elisha as he faces the reality of the execution he must carry out within hours.

Ilana acknowledges that the Movement has a specific aim which they believe to be “holy”—the establishment of a free Jewish nation. Ilana doesn’t speak for or against this idea directly. However, she draws a distinction between the actions that the Movement fighters carry out and the words with which they interpret those actions. She openly acknowledges what Elisha has been thinking—that, when the Movement’s actions are separated from their justifications, their violent, murderous nature becomes clear. Ilana’s articulation of the ethical dilemma stays with Elisha. Later, when Elisha faces John Dawson, he tells Dawson that he’s trying to hate him in order to give meaning to the act of shooting him.

**Related Characters:** Ilana (speaker), Elisha

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 54

“There are not a thousand ways of being a killer; either a man is one or he isn’t. He can’t say I’ll kill only ten or only twenty-six men; I’ll kill for only five minutes or a single day. He who has killed one man alone is a killer for life. He may choose another occupation, hide himself under another identity but the executioner or at least the executioner’s mask will be always with him. There lies the problem: in the influence of the backdrop of the play upon the actor. War had made me an executioner, and an executioner I would remain even after the backdrop had changed, when I was acting in another play upon a different stage.”

**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 55

### Explanation and Analysis

In the hours before the execution, Elisha and Gad’s girlfriend, Ilana, talk about the war and its implications on their lives. The Movement has always said that the realities of war necessitate cold-blooded killing, hence Gad’s repeated assurances to Elisha: “Don’t torture yourself; it’s war.” But Ilana acknowledges to Elisha that even if there is a valid justification for their actions, this doesn’t change the brutality of their actions. As Elisha reflects further on Ilana’s thoughts, he realizes that she’s right—no matter how often or how many people he kills, he will always be a killer. And even if the “backdrop” of war changes, the fact of his being a killer will never change. In other words, apart from the justifications of war, the act of killing shapes a person’s humanity in ways that can never be changed, even when war is in the past. With Ilana’s prompting, Elisha is able to admit this to himself as none of the other characters do, suggesting that there’s hope for his humanity after the war.



“Yerachmiel and I decided to try. Of course we were aware of the danger: No one can force God’s hand with impunity. Men older wiser, and more mature than ourselves had tried in vain to wrest the Messiah from the chains of the future; failing in their purpose they had lost their faith, their reason, and even their lives. [...] We purified our souls and bodies, fasting by day and praying by night. [...]”

“We too,” I said, “my comrades in the Movement and I, are trying to force God’s hand. You who are dead should help us, not hinder...”

But Yerachmiel [was] silent. And somewhere in the universe of time the Messiah was silent as well.



**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker), Yerachmiel

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 59

### Explanation and Analysis

When Elisha was young, he and his friend Yerachmiel studied the Torah together and became obsessed with the idea of trying to bring about the Messiah's arrival. They fasted, prayed, and did whatever they could to try to change the future by forcing the Messiah to come. Facing Yerachmiel's ghost, Elisha now argues that by fighting in the Movement, he's doing something similar—fighting a deadly war in hopes of finally bringing about a longed-for peaceful future. As a boy, Elisha knew there was a risk of going too far and risking his life, faith, and sanity. He implies that the Movement's actions carry the same risk today, but that the dead should be sympathetic to these religious motivations and try to help. Yerachmiel's silence—and what Elisha perceives as the Messiah's silence, too—suggests that Elisha should not be too confident that he is successfully “forcing God's hand” by acting in this way. With this, Wiesel suggests that people's religious motivations often go astray when they too quickly dismiss the potential risks of forcing God's hand.



## Chapter 6 Quotes

☛ John Dawson shook his head and said in an infinitely sad voice: "You hate me, don't you?"

[...]

I certainly wanted to hate him. That was partly why I had come to engage him in conversation before I killed him. It was absurd reasoning on my part, but the fact is that while we were talking I hoped to find in him, or in myself, something that would give rise to hate. A man hates his enemy because he hates his own hate. He says to himself: This fellow, my enemy, has made me capable of hate. I hate him not because he's my enemy, not because he hates me, but because he arouses me to hate.

**Related Characters:** John Dawson (speaker), Elisha

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 75

### Explanation and Analysis



When Elisha visits John Dawson in the hours leading up to the man's execution, he's forced to wrestle with the nature

of his own hatred. He realizes that he'd come to visit Dawson in hopes of finding an enemy worthy of his hatred. If he doesn't find Dawson to be intrinsically hateful, then surely Elisha can blame him for causing him to hate. Elisha's reasoning shows the absurdity embedded in cycle of violence and revenge. If people constantly blame their victims for stirring them up to hatred and violent acts, then how can the cycle of vengeance be stopped? As it turns out, Elisha's willingness to speak to Dawson ends up undercutting his own intentions. He finds he can't bring himself to hate Dawson after all, and that in the process, he has recognized his enemy's humanity and has even come to *like* Dawson. With this, the novel suggests that it's only by seeing people as fellow human beings, instead of objectifying them as enemies, that cycles of revenge can be broken.

☛ Armies and governments the world over have a definite technique for provoking hate. By speeches and films and other kinds of propaganda they create an image of the enemy in which he is the incarnation of evil, the symbol of suffering, the fountainhead of the cruelty and injustice of all times.

[...] All enemies are equal, I said. Each one is responsible for the crimes committed by the others. They have different faces, but they all have the same hands, the hands that cut my friends' tongues and fingers. As I went down the stairs I was sure that I would meet the man who had condemned David ben Moshe to death, the man who had killed my parents, the man who had come between me and the man I had wanted to become, and who was now ready to kill the man in me. I felt quite certain that I would hate him.

**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker), Stefan, David ben Moshe, John Dawson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 75

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Elisha reflects on the nature of war propaganda—especially the way it projects all evil onto an enemy and thereby justifies hatred of the enemy, and even elimination of the enemy, at all costs. Elisha tries to repeat this propaganda as he faces Dawson, struggling in vain to persuade himself that all enemies are interchangeable. From the Movement's perspective, Dawson does not have to be distinguished in Elisha's mind from the Gestapo chief who cut off his friend Stefan's fingers; he can stand in for

those who are now preparing to kill David ben Moshe, and he can be blamed for the fact that Elisha is about to become a killer himself. But as he thinks through this, Elisha realizes that Dawson is not equal to all other enemies—he's a distinct human being—and because of this, he begins to realize the absurdity of a reprisal mindset altogether. Elisha's inability to muster up hatred for Dawson represents a flicker of hope for breaking the cycle of violence he's gotten sucked into as part of the Movement.

Without hate, everything that my comrades and I were doing would be done in vain. Without hate we could not hope to obtain victory. Why do I try to hate you, John Dawson? Because my people have never known how to hate. Their tragedy, throughout the centuries, has stemmed from their inability to hate those who have humiliated and from time to time exterminated them. Now our only chance lies in hating you, in learning the necessity and the art of hate. Otherwise, John Dawson, our future will only be an extension of the past, and the Messiah will wait indefinitely for his deliverance.

**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker), John Dawson

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 77

### Explanation and Analysis


When Elisha goes downstairs to talk with John Dawson an hour before executing him, Dawson asks Elisha why he hates him. Elisha has to give the question much thought, since not only does he *not* hate Dawson, he actually finds that Dawson is likeable, warm, and kind. Finally, Elisha explains to Dawson that hate is the only thing that will sustain the Movement's efforts and assure their victory. He believes this is due to the fact that, historically, the Jewish people have failed to hate. Even when persecuted and killed, they haven't responded to their oppressors in kind. That's why the Movement must now resort to hatred, in effect doing this on behalf of all Jewish people. If they don't, then the future of the Jews will be no different from their past.

By referring to the Messiah, Elisha refers to the belief that the future deliverer of the Jewish people will never come unless believers actively strive to summon him through their prayers and actions. This quote shows how Movement ideology has permeated Elisha's thinking—yet, when faced with an individual enemy, he finds it harder to use this ideology to justify killing. This suggests that hatred is more easily sustained in the abstract than in person, and that with

his willingness to face Dawson personally, Elisha might be taking the first steps toward undoing his commitment to the Movement ideology, even if he does so unknowingly.

I fired. When he pronounced my name he was already dead; the bullet had gone through his heart. A dead man, whose lips were still warm, had pronounced my name: *Elisha*. [...] That's it, I said to myself. It's done. I've killed. I've killed Elisha. The ghosts began to leave the cell, taking John Dawson with them. The little boy walked at his side as if to guide him. I seemed to hear my mother say: "Poor boy! Poor boy!"

**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker), Elisha's Mother, The Little Boy, John Dawson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 80

### Explanation and Analysis

As Elisha fires the revolver and kills John Dawson, Dawson speaks his name. He's still pronouncing Elisha's name as he dies. As Elisha confusedly comes to terms with Dawson's death, he feels that, by committing this act, he's killed himself. There's a sense in which, in becoming a killer, Elisha has killed a version of himself that can never be brought back. Just as the little boy version of Elisha could not survive the concentration camps, so the version of Elisha that existed before executed Dawson cannot survive this act. For his part, Dawson's ghost joins the ghosts who've been silently following and watching Elisha all night. Though the little boy's ghost had told Elisha that the ghosts aren't here to judge him, their accompaniment of Dawson shows that their job is to console the dead, not the living. Confirming this point, Elisha's mother's refrain of "poor boy!" seems to apply to Dawson now, not to Elisha himself. This also poses the question of if Elisha's mother has actually been lamenting Dawson's fate all this time.

The night lifted, leaving behind it a grayish light the color of stagnant water. Soon there was only a tattered fragment of darkness, hanging in midair, the other side of the window. Fear caught my throat. The tattered fragment of darkness had a face. Looking at it, I understood the reason for my fear. The face was my own.

**Related Characters:** Elisha (speaker)

**Related Themes:****Related Symbols:****Page Number:** 81**Explanation and Analysis**

In these last lines of the book, dawn finally breaks after Elisha's long night of wondering about Dawson and waiting to execute him. Earlier in the book, Elisha explains that, when he was a child, a mysterious beggar taught him to watch for nightfall by waiting until he could discern a face in the window. The ability to see a face enables a person to distinguish between day and night. The face Elisha sees is

usually that of a dead person. Unexpectedly, Elisha sees a face at dawn, too, but the face is his own.

This suggests a couple of things—first, it confirms that part of Elisha has died when he became a killer. More ambiguously, it also suggests that it isn't as easy to distinguish between night and day as Elisha had been taught. Is it really dawn—a time of new hope for himself and his people—or is Elisha stuck in a seemingly endless night? Though Elisha's openness to talking with John Dawson is hopeful, the fact that he went through with Dawson's killing makes it impossible to know if Elisha will continue down a hopeful path or become hardened. Wiesel's ambiguous ending suggests that Elisha's future path will be up to him.



## 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

On a hot autumn evening in Palestine, a child is crying somewhere. Elisha stands by a window, overlooking the city. He thinks about the fact that tomorrow, he is going to kill a man. He doesn't know the man or anything about him, except that he's English, and that he's Elisha's enemy. Softly, Gad tells Elisha not to torture himself, because this is war. But Elisha can think of nothing but the impending execution.

It's just before nightfall. This time of the evening always makes Elisha think of a beggar he met in the synagogue long ago, when Elisha was 12. The war was just starting, and "God still dwelt in our town." The shabby, gaunt beggar had an otherworldly look in his **eyes**. From Hassidic literature, Elisha had been taught that a beggar might be the prophet Elijah in disguise. If Elijah is treated well, he rewards people with eternal life. But a beggar might also be the disguise of the Angel of Death. If the Angel of Death is mistreated, he might take a person's life or soul.

Frightened by the beggar, Elisha asked him if he was hungry or needed anything else, but the beggar said no. Elisha feared being stuck in the synagogue with the beggar at midnight, because that's when the dead rise from their graves to pray. So he and the beggar walked toward Elisha's house, and the beggar told Elisha that he shouldn't fear the dark—night, he said, is purer than day. He added, "The tragedy of man is that he doesn't know how to distinguish between day and night." Because of this ignorance, things are said at night that should only be said by day.

As they stopped in front of Elisha's house, the beggar told Elisha that he would teach him how to distinguish between day and night. He said that Elisha should look at a window or into a man's **eyes**. If he sees a face, then he'll know that night has succeeded day. Then the beggar disappeared.

*Wiesel immediately plunges into the central conflict of the story: a wartime execution that the protagonist must reluctantly carry out. Though Elisha's companion tries to comfort him with the reminder that they're at war, this justification for killing clearly doesn't satisfy Elisha. The sound of the crying child heightens the tension.*



*The past often haunts Elisha throughout Dawn. In particular, World War II seems to be a stark dividing line in his history: he implies that, after the war, God seems to have become absent. But when Elisha was younger, his whole world was filled with religious meaning. (Hasidic Judaism is a subset of Orthodox Judaism, more common in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust, which emphasizes God's nearness in everyday life.) In the Bible, Elisha was the servant and successor of the Prophet Elijah, so the beggar's appearance—and the possibility that such a figure could be a disguised Elijah—would be especially meaningful to him.*



*Elisha seems to have had a lifelong wariness of getting too close to death, making his present conflict even more poignant. His boyhood encounter with the beggar is mysterious and difficult to understand, though the beggar's words echo throughout Elijah's life. The beggar suggests that night isn't to be feared, and perhaps that truth can be spoken more openly at night. But most people never learn this.*



*The mysterious beggar teaches Elisha to look for the "face" of night by looking into a window or into someone's eyes. Eyes become an important symbol in the story, associated with the dead's watchfulness over the living.*



Ever since then, Elisha always watches for the arrival of night. Every night, he sees a **face** outside the window. It's not always the same face—sometimes it's the beggar's, and later, it's his father's. Sometimes Elisha sees strangers. All he knows is that these are all the faces of dead people. Tonight, as he thinks about the beggar and the man he's going to kill, Elisha looks out the window and sees his own face taking shape in the darkness.

One hour ago, Gad told Elisha what the Old Man has decided: the execution is going to take place at **dawn**. A month ago, a Jewish fighter named David ben Moshe was injured, captured, and sentenced to death by the British. At this, the Old Man decided that reprisals would begin: each time a Jewish fighter is hung, an Englishman will be killed in return. To show they meant it, the fighters took an English captain hostage. The captain's name is John Dawson.

Ever since Dawson's kidnapping, Palestine has been on edge. The British have been arresting suspects, setting up armed barricades, and even warning the populace that if terrorists kill Dawson, *everyone* will be held responsible. This brings the terrible word *pogrom* into everyone's mind. Though some doubt that the world would tolerate such an action on the part of the British, others point out that Hitler's actions were tolerated for years.

When Zionist leaders appeal to the Old Man, the Old Man replies that if David ben Moshe is hanged, Dawson will die. The Movement can't give in, he argues, because violence is the only thing that will get through to the British; surrender would be interpreted as weakness. Soon, the international press descends on Jerusalem, and John Dawson's mother asks the colonial government to pardon David ben Moshe. The government assures her that the Jews won't follow through on their threat to kill Dawson. But after Cabinet debate, the British government decides that a pardon might inflame rebels in other parts of the Empire. The hanging will proceed.

Jerusalem radio announces that David ben Moshe will be hanged in the prison at Acre the next morning. Though the broadcast doesn't mention it, everyone knows that means Dawson will die, too. Gad informs Elisha that the Old Man has ordered Elisha to carry out the execution. Elisha feels sick. Gad reminds him, "This is war," but Elisha can only repeat to himself, "Tomorrow I shall kill a man."

*For Elisha, the faces of the dead herald the arrival of night. The dead are never far from Elisha, or indeed from anybody—it's just a matter of learning to see them. But the night before he's supposed to kill someone, Elisha sees his own face in the window—suggesting that part of him will die, too, or has already died.*



*The Old Man is the mysterious figure who commands the Jewish revolutionary forces in post-World War II Palestine. He takes a hard line against the British forces occupying Palestine—British killings of Jewish soldiers will be met with swift revenge. Carrying out such tactics falls on ordinary fighters like Elisha and his enemy and victim, Dawson.*



*Pogroms were violent, destructive outbreaks against Jewish populations—an atrocity periodically carried out in Eastern European history, and more recently leading up to and during World War II. The occupying forces' threats stir up this fear among Palestine's Jewish population. The overall fear—that even the British might instigate a pogrom without censure from the wider world—suggests that, in wartime, people are capable of repeating even the worst acts of history.*



*In light of the Jewish people's recent history of being violently oppressed throughout the Holocaust, the Old Man argues that clemency isn't an option. From his perspective, the Movement must demonstrate that they are merciless in revenge, or else the Jews will be victimized yet again. The execution of David ben Moshe also occurs against a broader backdrop of British colonialism, showing how individual lives can become political pawns in war and empire.*



*Having filled in the historical circumstances leading up to the executions, Wiesel returns to Elisha's personal torment. The contrast between Gad's flat assertion that "This is war" and Elisha's fixation—"Tomorrow I shall kill a man"—shows that bigger historical forces like war always have an intimate effect on human lives.*





## CHAPTER 2

Elisha is 18 years old. Gad recruited him, brought him to Palestine, and “made [him] a terrorist.” They’d met in Paris, where Elisha had gone directly from the Buchenwald concentration camp. He could have gone home, but he knew his parents were dead and that his hometown was in Russian hands. Instead, a rescue committee sent him to a youth camp in Normandy and then set him up with an apartment and French lessons in Paris.

Elisha’s goal was to study philosophy at the Sorbonne. He wanted to understand what he’d experienced at the hands of God and man in the concentration camp. After those experiences, he was driven to understand where God can be found—“in suffering or in rebellion?” And what makes a person most human—submission or refusal? Elisha hoped that the study of philosophy would answer his questions and set him free from his memories.

However, Elisha’s plans are never realized. One evening there’s an unexpected knock on his door, and he opens it to find a tall, tanned young man in a raincoat. He has unruly hair, a firm mouth, and warm **eyes**. The man lets himself into the apartment and tells Elisha that he knows everything about him. He asks Elisha if he is “attached” to his future. Elisha is unsettled and asks the man to identify himself. The man says he is Gad. His utterance sounds “cabalistic,” like the voice of God.

Gad tells Elisha that he would like him to “give me your future.” Having grown up Hasidic, Elisha heard stories about a mysterious divine messenger called Meshulah. Frightened, Elisha asks Gad who he is, and Gad confirms Elisha’s suspicions by saying, “I am a messenger.” Elisha believes he must sacrifice whatever Gad asks of him. When he asks Gad what he will do with Elisha’s future, Gad replies that he will make it “an outcry [...] of despair and then of hope.”

Gad declines a seat and, smoking nonstop, talks throughout the night while staring intently at Elisha with fiery **eyes**. It reminds Elisha of being a child, listening to the grizzled master tell stories from the Cabala. But Gad talks about the effort to create an independent Jewish homeland in Palestine. A group he calls “the Movement” is struggling against the British colonial government—it’s only a hundred Jewish freedom fighters against 100,000 British. It’s the first time Elisha has heard a story about Jews being unafraid, even causing *others* to fear.

*The novel now backtracks to show how Elisha finds himself in the position of killing a man. With this, the book implies that a terrorist has to be formed over time. For Elisha, this occurs following the devastation of the concentration camp and the loss of his parents and everything he loves.*



*The Holocaust challenges Elisha’s once-fervent belief in God. Afterward, he hopes to find answers to his beliefs about God and humanity by studying philosophy—an abstract pursuit. However, he will soon be forced to contend with these questions in a far more immediate, tangible way.*



*Elisha’s abstract, academic plans for his future are interrupted in an urgent, palpable way. Gad enters Elisha’s life as mysteriously as the beggar once did. Cabala (or Kabbalah) interprets Jewish sacred texts mystically in order to explore the relationship between God and humanity. Gad’s unsettling, Godlike voice interrupts Elisha’s plans, reorienting his search for answers.*



*Elisha’s Hasidic background continues to shape the way he interprets his present, no matter his religious doubts. Here, his feeling that Gad is a divine messenger compels him to dedicate his future to the stranger who claims to know his past.*



*Gad reminds Elisha of his childhood religion instructor, except that Gad is inducting Elisha into a different sort of mystery—a less mystical, more palpable political effort. Gad’s invitation compels Elisha because it’s different from anything he has experienced before—in his lifetime, Jewish people have never possessed power and have always been afraid.*



Gad asks Elisha to join this struggle for the freedom of Israel. Elisha's family weren't Zionists, so the concreteness of Gad's stories fascinates him. Gad seems like a messenger summoning Jewish people into a promising future, where they won't be persecuted or exiled. As a gray **dawn** breaks outside, Elisha accepts Gad's offer.

In the present, the Radio Jerusalem announcer talks about David ben Moshe's impending execution. Though many around the world have protested and petitioned, the hanging is going forward. Gad paces in agitation, then searches the radio dial for the Voice of Freedom broadcast. Palestine's Jews always stop what they are doing at a quarter past eight to listen to the young woman's mysterious, riveting voice. Only Gad, Elisha, and a few others know that the voice belongs to Ilana, Gad's girlfriend.

Ilana speaks of David ben Moshe's and John Dawson's executions tomorrow at **dawn**. Though the two men will die at the same moment, there will be a wide gap between their experiences—David will die as a hero and John as a victim. When Ilana speaks of John Dawson, Elisha feels she is speaking of him, too. He had wanted to understand human nature, he reflects, and instead he is taking part in causing another's death. When Elisha glances in the mirror, he is frightened by the sight of his own **eyes**. When he was a child, his grizzled master had told him that the creature Death "is all eyes."

## CHAPTER 3

Elisha has probably killed before, but the circumstances were very different. He has participated in various actions against the British occupiers, like ambushing military convoys and setting an army encampment on fire. Ever since he arrived in Palestine a few months ago, he's been trained in terrorist techniques, the use of various weapons, and the Movement's ideology. In the basement of the Movement's hideout, John Dawson is securely imprisoned right now.

Gad tells the recruits that once the British learn that the occupation will cost lives, they will leave. While this is cruel, he says, the Movement has no choice. For centuries, Jews have tried to be better than other people, but this only led to the death camps. Now they've learned that they can only rely on themselves. Therefore they must be like everyone else and "kill those who have made us killers."

*Growing up, Elisha learned more spiritualized interpretations of his people's future, so Gad's offer to fight for a new nation is like a new religious awakening for Elisha. The breaking of dawn further symbolizes this, although the grayness makes it ambiguous—how hopeful is this new beginning, really?*



*Months after Gad first recruited Elisha, Elisha has been plunged directly into the heart of the Palestinian Jews' conflict with the British occupiers—the struggle is becoming ever more personal and less abstract.*



*Listening to the radio broadcast, and then catching an unsettling glimpse of himself as an agent of death, Elisha realizes that his search for answers about human nature has been unexpectedly detoured. It's possible, though, that his questions—about where God is to be found and when a person is most human—will be found through his actions and not in spite of them.*



*The varying circumstances of war create very different experiences of killing. In turn, those experiences impact one's conscience in different ways. Previously, Elisha was mainly involved in group actions that allowed his enemies to remain anonymous. This time, it will be a face-to-face action, just him against a helpless prisoner.*



*The Movement's ideology is based on revenge. In the past, Gad explains, Jewish attitudes have backfired: their refusal to kill has made them victims. Now, at last, the Jews must stand up for themselves, fighting according to the terms imposed on them by the rest of the world.*



On the last day of training, a masked man—Elisha thinks it was the Old Man himself—lectured on “the eleventh commandment,” which is “Hate your enemy.” The man’s gentle voice filled Elisha with emotion, and his masked **face** reminded Elisha of the beggar. Elisha felt part of “a Messianic world” where every action has meaning.

Once, when Elisha was a young boy, the grizzled master had taught him the reason behind the sixth commandment: it’s wrong to kill because, in doing so, a person takes one of God’s jobs into their own hands. Now, Elisha reasons that it’s necessary for the Jewish people to “become God” in order to change the course of their history.

The first time Elisha participated in a terrorist action, it made him sick. Imagining himself in an S.S. officer’s uniform, Elisha found himself “hateful.” He remembers how the ambushed British soldiers ran helplessly like drunken rabbits. Six terrorists carried out this attack against about 20 British soldiers; it was accomplished in under a minute, with everything going according to plan. When Elisha returned to the training school and saw Gad’s pride, he was overcome with nausea, remembering S.S. guards casually mowing down Jewish prisoners.

That first operation wasn’t easy, but at least Elisha had been with a group. When he executes Dawson, however, Elisha will be alone. Gad turns off the Voice of Freedom broadcast and reminds Elisha not to torture himself. Elisha wonders if God wears a uniform. Then he reminds himself that God is a terrorist.

A short time later, Ilana arrives, accompanied by her bodyguards Gideon and Joab. She looks exhausted and reports that today she saw the Old Man crying. Joab adds that there’s unrest and anxiety everywhere as people appeal for Dawson’s execution to be called off. Gad frets that Jews still have a mindset of persecution and don’t yet have the courage to strike back. He feels especially bitter about David ben Moshe’s execution because they were childhood friends. He’d even been commanding the operation when David was wounded and captured.

*The “eleventh commandment” is a play on the Ten Commandments, the core of Jewish belief, and it’s intentionally subversive—implying that the Ten Commandments are obsolete, at least where the Movement’s goals are concerned. The Movement has plainly religious overtones that take the place of Elisha’s abandoned childhood beliefs.*



*The Movement’s teachings go directly against what Elisha was taught as a child. Whereas Elisha once regarded it as wrong to take God’s prerogative into one’s own hands, now he accepts that it’s necessary in order for Jewish people to have a better life.*



*Even though Elisha accepts the Movement’s teachings, that doesn’t mean he finds them easy or pleasant to follow in practice. In fact, doing so makes him feel like one of the guards who once terrorized him and his fellow camp prisoners. This suggests that when someone participates in acts of revenge, they will end up taking the place of their oppressor to one degree or another.*



*Elisha continues to struggle with what shooting Dawson will entail. Elisha’s thoughts about God wearing a uniform show that he believes God is on his side (or tells himself that); terrorists didn’t wear uniforms, whereas Nazis did.*



*Dawson’s execution stirs up anxieties because it represents a turning point in the Movement’s actions—the willingness to commit vengeful acts of terrorism. If they execute Dawson for vengeance’s sake, will they ever be able to turn back? Gad argues that his people must reconcile themselves to vengeance if they are going to survive.*



During the nighttime operation, a British army truck pulled into a paratroopers' camp and resupplied their arms, citing an expected terrorist attack that evening. The truck was actually filled with Movement terrorists, not British soldiers. Just before the British sentry figured this out, Gad knocked him senseless. However, the sentry recovered in time to start shooting at the fleeing terrorists, and he wounded David ben Moshe while David was providing cover for his comrades. Elisha understands Gad's pain over the whole incident. Yet he almost envies Gad's ability to mourn his friend. Elisha himself has no more friends to lose—that's why he became a terrorist in the first place.

*The flashback to Gad's terrorist operation sheds light on his personal bitterness and regret: his friend was injured and captured on his watch and will now be executed by the enemy. This personal element colors Gad's feelings about the Movement as a whole. But Elisha is the one who must execute Dawson in retaliation for ben Moshe's hanging. For Elisha, the personal element is not present to the same degree; everyone he loved has already been killed. In a way, this makes him especially susceptible to Movement thinking—he doesn't have anything else to lose.*



## CHAPTER 4

As the Movement fighters sit around drinking tea and thinking about David ben Moshe, Elisha thinks instead about John Dawson. To pass the time, the group starts swapping memories related to death. Joab, nicknamed "the Madman," a young, innocent-faced man with white hair, says that death saved his life. When reported to the police as a terrorist, he claimed insanity and took shelter in an asylum, pretending he believed he was dead. When the police tracked Joab down and interrogated him for two days, he just stayed unresponsive to their questions and abuse. Eventually, he was returned to the asylum. After that, his hair turned white, which Elisha calls "death's little joke."

*All the Movement fighters have had opportunities to become acquainted with death. Though their stories of death differ, they share a mindset of being ready to surrender everything for the sake of the Movement's ideals. Joab's experience of pretending to be dead exemplifies this mindset—once a person embraces the reality of death, they are more dangerous because they don't have anything left to lose.*



Next, Gideon, called "the Saint," claims that God saved him from death. Gideon, a rabbi's son, wears a beard and side curls and prays constantly. He says that when he was arrested and tortured, he kept quiet because he could feel God's **eyes** watching him, and he didn't want to disappoint God by admitting guilt. God's eyes, Gideon says, are always "drawn to human pain."

*Though not all of the Movement fighters share Gideon's devout religious faith, they all share a sense of being accountable to something much bigger than their individual selves. Gideon believes that God watches everything he does, which emboldens him to resist torture for the Movement's sake.*



Next it's Ilana's turn. She says that a head cold saved her life. One day the British brought her in for questioning, along with a group of other women, and each woman's voice was compared to a recording of the Voice of Freedom. But since Ilana's cold distorted her voice, she was quickly eliminated from suspicion and released.

*Sometimes the circumstances of someone's brush with death are incredibly mundane—like a simple cold. In every case, whether it's a cold or an encounter with God, escaping death strengthens a person's resolve and their willingness to keep fighting.*



Gad shares his memory next. He says that he owes his life to three English sergeants. They were hostages that the Old Man had ordered to be taken; he'd left it up to Gad to kill one of the three. Gad recoiled from playing the role of judge. Finally, he told the prisoners that the choice was up to them. They drew lots, and Gad shot the unlucky prisoner. He admits that if the sergeants had refused to choose, he would have killed himself instead, because he was "young and very weak."

*Like Elisha, Gad once had to face the situation of killing a hostage. The situation hardened him, which explains why he keeps encouraging Elisha not to torture himself about having to shoot Dawson. This suggests that Elisha, too, could wind up like Gad, a hardened killer.*



Finally it's Elisha's turn. He tells the group that he owes his life to a laugh. One cold winter morning in Buchenwald, Elisha felt so sick that he hid in his barracks when ordered to leave. When he was found and brought to a barracks leader, the leader coldly decided to choke Elisha to death. Elisha was so tired that he didn't even resist. Yet when Elisha's head swelled during the choking, the barracks leader burst out laughing at the ludicrous sight and forgot his original intention. Elisha owes his life to the man's twisted sense of humor.

After a long stretch of silence, Gideon suggests that they give John Dawson something to eat. Elisha says he can't imagine that a condemned man would have an appetite. The others stare at him. Finally Gideon tells him that Dawson doesn't know he's about to die. He offers to go downstairs and tell him. Elisha is relieved—he finds it easier to be the one to kill Dawson than to have to break the news. Joab mentions that it's midnight. Elisha knows that's the hour when the dead rise from their graves to pray.

Ilana tearfully calls Elisha "poor boy," which disturbs him. Slowly, Ilana disappears from before him, and Catherine appears. Catherine is a woman he once knew who liked to talk to young boys about love. Elisha thinks she appears because she transcends everything in the room—life and death, past and present. Elisha met Catherine in France in 1945, soon after Buchenwald was liberated. He was spending his summer in a camp sponsored by a rescue committee in Normandy, and Catherine was one of the only German-speakers he came across. She was a small, blonde woman in her late 20s and the first woman Elisha looked at up close.

One evening, Catherine approached Elisha as he was walking in the woods near the camp. They walked together in silence for a while and studied the night sky. Shy at first, Elisha eventually told Catherine the grizzled master's legend of the open sky. According to the legend, the night sky clears in order to make room for children's prayers. Once, a little boy prayed for his sick father, and in exchange, the little boy was turned into a prayer and carried to heaven. Elisha always looks for the child on nights like this. But there's nothing there. In response to this story, Catherine exclaims, "Poor boy!" Elisha thinks she's referring to the child in the legend.

*Elisha's experiences in the Buchenwald concentration camp are seldom described in the story; they are simply assumed as the horrifying history that constantly looms over Elisha's present actions. The story Elisha tells is especially horrifying because his survival relied on the laughter of someone who seems to have become hardened to suffering and death. One implication, again, is that the same could happen to Elisha.*



*Ironically, as the friends sit around discussing death and anticipating the executions at dawn, the condemned prisoner sits beneath them unaware of what's about to happen. Elisha's reluctance to tell Dawson shows that he's far from a hardened killer yet himself. It also seems fitting that Dawson would learn of his approaching death at the hour when Elisha believes the dead roam freely.*



*Catherine is the first "ghost" who appears to Elisha in the hours leading up to Dawson's death. He thinks it is because she stands apart from the rest of his history—she doesn't really belong to his childhood, his time in the camps, or the present. Because Elisha grew up devoutly observant in his religion, he generally would not have had firsthand contact with women outside his immediate family. Therefore Catherine's appearance in his life indicates the deep rupture in Elisha's religious beliefs after the camps.*



*Even though Elisha claims to have lost his religious faith during the war, he still hangs onto a shred of the innocence of his religious childhood—he keeps looking for the legendary little boy in the sky, even though he's repeatedly disappointed. In Elisha, Catherine seems to see the innocence of the little boy in the rabbi's story. The exclamation of "Poor boy!" and the presence of a little boy will crop up again in the story, which is perhaps another reminder that the past deeply affects the present.*





After that night, Catherine and Elisha often walk together. Catherine asks Elisha questions about his past. Eventually, she starts speaking about love. She tells him that a man is most alive when he's in the presence of a woman he loves. One evening, she starts kissing him, and over the coming days, Elisha gets familiar with her body. The night before Elisha returns to Paris, Catherine tells him they're going to make love and gets undressed. Elisha is so stunned by this first sexual encounter that Catherine has to undress him and encourage him. Before going any further, Elisha insists on telling Catherine that he loves her. She tries to stop him from saying this and bursts into tears, saying, "You poor boy!"

Then Elisha grabs his clothes and runs away. He realizes that Catherine thinks of him as that poor little boy in the sky, and that she is drawn to sorrowful young boys who think about death. Brought back to the present, Elisha hears Ilana say again, "Poor boy!" She begins to cry as if she'll never stop.

## CHAPTER 5

All of a sudden, the room becomes very stuffy. Since midnight, "visitors" have been entering the room, and it's become crowded. Elisha realizes that the visitors are people who've helped form his identity—people he knows well or simply people whose paths he's crossed at some point. His parents, the beggar, and the grizzled master are there; so are the English soldiers he helped ambush, and people he knew in Buchenwald and Auschwitz. He even sees a smiling little boy who resembles himself as a child, before the war.

Elisha approaches his father and asks what all these people are doing here. Beside his father, Elisha's mother says repeatedly, "Poor little boy!" His father gazes at him but gives no answer; when Elisha asks the grizzled master, the same thing happens. Finally, the beggar says that it's "a night of many **faces**." He gently squeezes Elisha's arm and tells him to speak to the little boy, who will answer all his questions. Elisha feels certain that the beggar is not truly a beggar.

Elisha pushes his way through the crowd of ghosts; the effort is exhausting. He asks the little boy what he's doing here and who all these people are. The little boy looks surprised that Elisha doesn't know. The answer, he says, is very simple: they're here to watch Elisha carry out the execution at **dawn** tomorrow. They want to witness Elisha becoming a murderer—it's only natural.

*Catherine's intentions are never completely clear, but it does appear that she takes advantage of Elisha's innocence and vulnerability after his terrible experiences in the camps. Because this is Elisha's first romantic experience, he readily believes he's fallen in love, whether that's really the case or not. Catherine appears to feel shamed by Elisha's innocence and refrains from going through with the consummation of their relationships at the last moment.*



*Elisha realizes that Catherine just sees him as a vulnerable little boy. This incident from Elisha's past, and Ilana's echoing of it, suggests that he always carries that innocent little boy with him, even the night before carrying out a terrorist execution.*



*Since Elisha has already stated that all of his loved ones are dead, the novel implies that these figures are ghosts. Catherine is just the first of this sudden influx of ghostly figures from Elisha's past—everyone from his younger self to his childhood authority figures to those he's been partly responsible for killing himself. As it has done throughout the story so far, the past constantly intrudes on the present and therefore on Elisha's thoughts about the future.*



*Strangely, the ghosts do not speak when they are directly addressed. Elisha's mother's ghost picks up the refrain of the other women (Catherine and Ilana) in the story, mourning a young boy's loss of innocence. The beggar offers indirect guidance, confirming Elisha's suspicion that he is someone more imposing in disguise, like the Angel of Death or the prophet Elijah.*



*Though they appear insubstantial, the ghosts' presence is weighty enough that dealing with them wearies Elisha, suggesting the heaviness of the past as Elisha considers his future. The ghost of Elisha's past self confirms that they're here because of the impending execution.*



Elisha is still puzzled—what does Dawson’s killing have to do with them? The little boy says that Elisha is the “sum total of all that we have been.” Therefore he can’t kill Dawson without them. Elisha begins to understand. In becoming a murderer, he also makes all of *them* murderers. His mother keeps repeating “Poor boy!”

Gideon emerges from downstairs and reports that John Dawson is, in fact, hungry. Everyone looks at Elisha. Elisha asks if Dawson knows his fate. Gideon says yes, and that Dawson smiled when he was told—he said his stomach had told him the truth, but he still wants a good last meal. Ilana goes into the kitchen and makes Dawson a sandwich and coffee. But nobody volunteers to take the meal downstairs, even when the little boy stares pointedly at Elisha. Elisha tells the little boy that although he’s never denied food to the hungry, he doesn’t want to be alone with Dawson tonight.

The little boy acknowledges that things will be very different after tonight, but that for the time being, a hungry man is alive and needs to eat. The other ghosts nod in agreement. Elisha, resigned, agrees to carry the food downstairs. First he asks the little boy if the dead are hungry, too. The little boy says that of course they are; in fact, when the dead rise from their graves at midnight, they go to the synagogue not to pray, but to eat. The ghosts whirl around Elisha, and he wishes he could close his **eyes**.

Elisha starts to take the food to Dawson, but Gad intervenes and does it instead. It’s only two o’clock in the morning; Ilana says it feels like this night will never end, and it’s so stuffy and hot. Elisha looks out the window at the sleeping city. Elisha imagines that someday, his son will notice Elisha’s sudden, sad expression, and Elisha will tell him he’s thinking of Dawson.

After a little while, Ilana stands beside Elisha. She knows he’s thinking of Dawson. She wonders why Elisha is afraid after living through so much, and Elisha says he’s afraid that Dawson will make him laugh. Ilana says he’s torturing himself too much; someday, this will all be over, and he’ll get married and be happy with his children. Her voice and gestures remind Elisha of his mother.

Ilana begins to understand Elisha better. Stroking his neck as they stand at the window, she tells him that they call this a holy war that’s being fought for an independent Palestine, but those are just words. Truthfully, though, their actions “have the odor and color of blood.” This is war, and they must win in order to survive.

*The little boy—whose speaking suggests that he’s telling Elisha things he already knows deep down—explains that everyone who has contributed to making Elisha who he is now becomes implicated in his acts as a terrorist.*



*Elisha shrinks from facing Dawson. He doesn’t want to confront Dawson’s humanity hours before having to shoot him—it might confuse his sense of duty and cause him to waver. Yet the little boy’s pointed stare suggests that deep down, Elisha does want to see Dawson, and even wants to see Dawson as a fellow human being who needs something—just like he wanted to serve the beggar he met when he was a boy before the war.*



*The little boy’s argument suggests that, before Elisha commits the irrevocable act of becoming a killer, he must show his fellow human this small, simple respect of enjoying a final meal. The little boy also suggests that ghosts carry a kind of hunger beyond the grave that the living cannot understand. This shows that there is a chasm between the living and the dead that defies Elisha’s understanding.*



*Elisha reflects that what he’s about to do isn’t just an extension of his past, but an anticipation of his future, too. His descendants will have to bear the weight of his actions just as his ancestors do.*



*Elisha fears Dawson’s humanity—something more frightening for him than the act of killing in itself. Ilana tries to brush off his fears by suggesting that the future will heal them, but the presence of the ghosts already teaches Elisha that the past can’t be so easily escaped.*



*Ilana reminds Elisha of his mother and also seems to represent his conscience—she’s the only one present who acknowledges that, no matter what justifications they offer for their actions, the fighters are waging a cold-blooded war for survival.*



Elisha believes that Ilana is right. Someday the means will be forgotten; the end, victory, is all that will last. But even if Elisha does forget this night, the dead will remember, and in their **eyes**, Elisha will always be a killer. It doesn't matter if he kills once or dozens of times, or if he someday moves on to a different occupation. The war has made him a killer, and that will never change, even if the backdrop of his life changes.

Elisha fears the silence of the ghosts in the room. He always feared the dead, and now he knows that the dead are judging him. Yet he can't keep his back to them, not wanting to disrespect his parents. He turns around and walks among the familiar **faces** of the ghosts. His father looks especially sorrowful. Elisha begs his father to judge God, not him. It's God who made the universe, after all, and decreed that freedom would be built on a pile of dead bodies. His father doesn't react. He tries to reassure his mother, who murmurs "Poor boy" endlessly, but her pain is too much for Elisha to bear.

Next Elisha speaks to the grizzled master, arguing that he hasn't betrayed him; he's acting for the sake of the living. He also speaks to his childhood friend Yerachmiel, who'd studied Cabala with him under the master. They two of them tried to bring Messiah to earth by fasting, praying, and purifying themselves. But then war broke out, and he and Yerachmiel were sent to different concentration camps. Elisha tells Yerachmiel that he's trying to "force God's hand," like they used to do. But Yerachmiel doesn't respond.

Finally Elisha tries speaking to the little boy. The little boy tells Elisha that the dead aren't judging him. They're just here because Elisha is here, and they are present wherever he goes and for whatever he does, whether he sees them or not. When Elisha does see them, he assumes they're judging him, but the truth is that Elisha's "silence is [his] judge." Then Elisha sees the beggar and thinks that he isn't the Angel of Death after all, but the prophet Elijah. The beggar tells him Gad is approaching.

*Though Elisha tries to accept that, in war, the ends justify the means, the presence of the dead makes him doubt this. The dead will witness his killing, so the identity of "killer" can never be removed no matter how his circumstances change; it will change his humanity in some way while also implicating those who've shaped him so far.*



*Elisha longs for the ghosts to speak, but they remain silent, making Elisha feel their judgment. Elisha tries to convince his father that the unfolding of history—especially the necessity of war—is God's fault, but his father remains impassive, and his mother continues to bear the grief his actions bring. Neither figure reassures him, suggesting that it's up to those in the present to act according to their best judgment. Again, it's unclear which boy Elisha's mother is pitying—whether she pities Dawson for being sentenced to death, or if she pities her own son for having to become a murderer or for shedding his moral compass.*



*Elisha further tries to convince those who have been nearest to him religiously—his old rabbi and fellow student—that his actions are justifiable. He's trying to make things better in the world, he argues, by being proactive instead of passive. But they, too, remain impassive.*



*Elisha's younger self finally responds that the ghosts' presence isn't necessarily indicative of judgment. They are with Elisha no matter where he goes and no matter what he does. He further suggests that Elisha is ultimately his own judge. Perhaps this is why the beggar, in Elisha's mind, seems not to be a condemning sign of the Angel of Death, but of the biblical prophet. In the Bible, a man named Elisha is the pupil of the prophet Elijah, which adds to this interpretation.*



Gad comes in and says that Dawson ate his meal with a good appetite, although he wasn't hungry. Elisha doesn't know what to make of this. Ilana wants to know what Gad and the prisoner spent all this time talking about. Gad says the prisoner told him stories. Elisha wants to know what kind of stories, but he's reluctant to ask more questions. It's four o'clock in the morning, and **dawn** is in an hour. Gad hands Elisha a revolver, and Elisha reluctantly accepts it. Elisha asks Gad if Dawson made him laugh. Gad finally laughs bitterly and says that Dawson's stories were funny, but that he didn't laugh. He was thinking of David the whole time.

Elisha thinks that he, too, will focus on David and that David will therefore protect him. He decides to go downstairs and get to know Dawson. He claims he wants to get to know the man before he kills him—to avoid this would be cowardly. Gad looks at him with pride. The beggar asks if Elisha wants company. Elisha declines, though he knows the crowd of ghosts must join him later. The beggar gives him a searching, kind look.

Elisha looks around at his talking, yawning comrades and realizes that in an hour's time, everything will be different—except for the dead, who never change. He checks for the revolver in his pocket, takes one last gaze around the room, and heavily heads downstairs.

## CHAPTER 6

John Dawson is handsome and distinguished. He is in his 40s, seemingly a professional soldier. He has searching **eyes** and a firm chin. He sits up when Elisha enters the room and stares at him for a long time. Then he asks what time it is. Elisha tells him it will be **dawn** in about an hour. Yet to Elisha it feels as if this hour of waiting will last forever and will never be joined to the past. As Elisha stands before Dawson, it also feels as if he and Dawson are alone in creation. God is here somewhere, but it's unclear where—perhaps in Elisha's lack of hatred for Dawson.

As the two men continue to stare at each other, Elisha feels that he simply likes Dawson. He feels no hatred or pity. Dawson asks Elisha's name. Elisha doesn't understand why Dawson would want to know this, but he tells him anyway. He explains that Elisha was a biblical prophet, known for restoring a boy to life by breathing into his mouth. With a trace of humor, Dawson observes that Elisha is doing the opposite.

*With dawn approaching, Elisha grows increasingly anxious. He is still wrestling with the reality of Dawson's humanity—wanting to draw closer to it (wondering, for example, why Dawson eats before dying and what stories he has to tell) but fearful of getting too close. Thinking of his condemned friend David, Gad is only able to see Dawson as the enemy. Elisha, though, is still able to think of him as a person.*



*Elisha tries to believe that vengeance—anger over David's execution—will harden him against Dawson's humanity and that he's mainly approaching Dawson for bravado's sake. Gad seems to accept this justification and take pride in it, but the beggar seems to be proud for a different reason—that Elisha is taking the initiative to meet his victim face to face and acknowledge Dawson's humanity..*



*When Elisha rejoins the others, he will be different—not just changed from his current self, but implicitly set apart from the others in the Movement, too. It remains to be seen whether the change will be for the worse or better.*



*The most striking thing about Dawson is that he is old enough to be 18-year-old Elisha's father. This adds to the sense of unreality and even absurdity in the scene; Elisha, still new to terrorism, has been arbitrarily put in the position of executing a professional soldier who, under other circumstances, he'd be inclined to respect and defer to. Elisha feels as if they are suspended within time, adding to the sense that this is a major turning point in his life. That Elisha knows God is present in this moment also points back to his consuming question of where God can be found.*



*Despite his best efforts, Elisha instinctively likes the man he is supposed to kill. Dawson, in turn, shows a fatherly warmth and even humor toward Elisha despite being just an hour away from death. He identifies an irony about Elisha's name, suggesting a deeper incongruity in Elisha's attitudes about killing and serving the Jewish people.*



Dawson asks how old Elisha is and looks at the boy with pity when he hears the answer. Elisha then asks him for a story, preferably a funny one. Again Dawson tells Elisha he's sorry for him. Elisha says that isn't funny, but as they smile at each other as if they're lifelong friends, he wonders if there is something funny about the moment and the unlikely situation that's been imposed on them both.

Dawson invites Elisha to sit down with him. He says he has a son Elisha's age who's studying at Cambridge; his son loves to go to the movies and date girls. He tells Elisha that his son "has none of your anxiety, your unhappiness." Elisha tries not to listen to Dawson's stories; he's the enemy, after all, and the enemy doesn't have a story. But Elisha can't think of anything else, not even David ben Moshe, whom he only knows by name. So he tries to pretend that Dawson is David, and that the rabbi has come in to pray with him and hear his last confession before death.

Dawson says that he isn't worried about his son; he's worried about Elisha. He paces in the small cell and smokes. Elisha gives Dawson a notebook so that he can jot a last note to his son. Elisha watches Dawson's slender, elegant fingers as he writes. The fingers remind him of a German sculptor he'd known in Buchenwald, Stefan. Stefan had been part of the German resistance movement and refused to give up the names of others, even under torture. Eventually, a mild-mannered Gestapo chief, a former surgeon, cut off the fingers on Stefan's right hand, explaining that Stefan's silence forced him to do this.

After Dawson finishes writing his letter, he studies Elisha's **face** sadly and asks, "You hate me, don't you?" Elisha *wants* to hate John Dawson. He imagines explaining the execution someday—he would have to explain that Dawson was his enemy and that he was acting under orders. If he could claim to hate Dawson, though, it would make further questions unnecessary. Yet, so far, this conversation has given Elisha nothing to hate.

Elisha thinks that someone hates an enemy in order to hate one's own hate—the other person is responsible for stirring up that hatred. So it's John Dawson's fault that he is a murderer; he deserves Elisha's hate. In thinking this way, Elisha knows, he's drawing on the propaganda technique of projecting all evil onto his enemy. That's why he tries to see in John Dawson the same man who condemned David ben Moshe and the one who killed Elisha's parents.

*Dawson finds Elisha's situation sad, perceiving that the young Elisha is being put in this position in order to harden him. Their shared smile shows that it's possible to discover common humanity even in such an extreme moment. Their position is arbitrary, and there's no reason for animosity.*



*Dawson makes a remarkable effort to humanize Elisha even though Elisha will soon kill him. He sees his own son in Elisha, except that where his son enjoys a hopeful future, Elisha appears to be trapped in a hopeless situation. Elisha, meanwhile, tries to keep objectifying Dawson, but finds that with Dawson right in front of him, this is impossible. Even David ben Moshe, with whom Elisha has more in common, is just in his imagination.*



*Elisha thinks of a friend in the concentration camp who was cruelly maimed for his resistance to tyranny. The memories of Stefan have the effect of blurring reality somewhat. As a career British soldier, Dawson fought against such Nazi cruelties himself, even within the last few years. Yet now Elisha is in the position of killing Dawson—showing the strange, arbitrary moments that history and ideology create.*



*Elisha has been unsuccessful so far in hating Dawson, which he'd expected to be so easy to do. Hating Dawson would have made it easier for Elisha to justify his actions in the future. Yet he can no longer think of Dawson as an abstract, faceless enemy.*



*Perceptively, Elisha sees that part of hating an enemy is simply projecting one's own hatred onto that person and blaming them for it. He's well aware that he's simply parroting the propaganda he's been taught. He continues trying to objectify Dawson by viewing him as interchangeable with other enemies, but this has become much harder now that Dawson and Elisha are face to face.*





Elisha tries again to think of David ben Moshe. He knows exactly what will happen: around five o'clock in the morning, the rabbi will guide David out of the cell. The other prisoners, seeing him pass by, will begin to sing the *Hatikva* louder and louder. Elisha imagines that John Dawson's words are drowning out the sound of David's footsteps and the *Hatikva*. But it isn't working.

Dawson's **eyes** are filled with tenderness, and he asks Elisha again if he hates him. Elisha says he's trying. He's trying because the Jewish people have never succeeded in hating those who've humiliated and killed them; now they must learn to hate in order to survive. He tells Dawson that he must try to hate him "in order to give my action a meaning which may somehow transcend it." Dawson says he is sorry for Elisha.

Elisha grips the revolver; there are less than 10 minutes to go until **dawn**. His mind clears, and there's no more doubt, only the certainty of his duty. He thinks of the rabbi, right now assuring David ben Moshe that God is with him. Dawson asks Elisha if he'll make sure the note is sent to his son, and Elisha promises to mail it today. Elisha pictures David entering the execution chamber and seeing the hangman, who is "all **eyes**." He knows David would refuse to die with his eyes covered, wanting to look death in the face. Dawson, too, refuses a handkerchief.

A minute before five, the cell door silently opens and the dead enter, filling the narrow space with their heat. The beggar tells Elisha, "day is at hand." The little boy says uneasily that this is the first time he's seen an execution. Elisha's father and mother, the grizzled master, and Yerachmiel stare silently at him.

John Dawson suddenly smiles. He tells Elisha it's because he's just realized that he doesn't know why he's dying. Elisha tells him not to smile. There are 10 seconds to go. Elisha raises his revolver. Still smiling, Dawson says, "Elisha." By the time Dawson repeats his name, Elisha has fired. "Elisha" was on Dawson's lips as he died.

*Elisha tries to stir up hatred for Dawson by imagining what's happening in the moments leading up to David ben Moshe's execution. (The *Hatikva*, "The Hope," is the anthem of Israel.) But Dawson's presence persists independently of what's happening to David.*



*Dawson continues to feel fatherly kindness toward Elisha. Elisha frankly admits that he's trying to muster up hatred toward Dawson because his people have historically failed to do this and have been victimized as a result; he also does so in order to justify what he is about to do.*



*In the final moments, Elisha summons focus and resolve. Notably, David ben Moshe will be assured of God's presence in these final moments; Elisha will get no such assurance, denying him an answer to the question of where God is to be found. Dawson's request that Elisha mail the letter creates an unlikely link between the young terrorist and the young Cambridge student. The hangman being "all eyes" refers back to the rabbi's teaching that Death is a creature who's made of eyes—perhaps Elisha, too, looks this way.*



*The ghosts arrive to witness the execution. Once again, it's unclear if the beggar is the prophet Elijah or the Angel of Death—because the beggar prophesies Dawson's approaching death, he could be seen either way. The little boy's discomfort anticipates Elisha's own loss of innocence as he becomes a killer.*



*In his last moments, Dawson thinks of the absurdity of his position—something brought about by the arbitrary nature of terrorist reprisals. Though Dawson spends his last moments humanizing Elisha by speaking his name, this doesn't divert Elisha from his course.*



Dawson sinks to the ground in a sitting position. Elisha stays beside him for a moment, deafened by the gunfire and feeling heavy. "It's done [...] I've killed Elisha," he thinks. The ghosts begin to leave, and they take Dawson with them, the little boy at his side. His mother keeps crying, "Poor boy!"

Elisha climbs the stairs. The ghosts aren't there. Gideon is praying, Ilana looks at him sadly, and Gad smokes. Elisha walks to the window to watch the **dawn** break over the still-sleeping city. He hears a baby crying. As night fades, the light turns a grayish color. There's a dark shape beyond the glass; it has a **face**. Fearfully, Elisha recognizes that the face is his own.

*In becoming a killer, Elisha feels as if he, too, has died—undergoing a kind of moral death. Dawson's spirit joins the company of the ghosts, suggesting that, in death, everyone is on the same side. Elisha is therefore left alone. It's again unclear whether he's mother's "poor boy!" refers to him or to his victim, but the fact that Dawson departs with the ghosts adds weight to the possibility that Elisha's mother has been pitying Dawson all this time.*



*When Elisha rejoins his friends, everything looks and sounds the same as it did several hours ago, but everything has changed. Though dawn is breaking, darkness lingers, and Elisha sees his own "dead" face reflected in the window. By closing on this image, the novel leads readers to question whether daybreak bring new hope, or if Elisha's dark night will continue indefinitely. It's left ambiguous, but it's clear that Elisha's future path is up to him.*





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