Year of Wonders

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GERALDINE BROOKS

Born to an American father and an Australian mother, Brooks grew up in a suburb of Sydney. After attending the University of Sydney, she wrote for newspapers in Australia and eventually moved to New York, where she graduated from the Columbia School of Journalism. She subsequently began working for American publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New Yorker*, and spent the 1990s covering political events in Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East, often in conjunction with her husband, a fellow journalist. Brooks published her first non-fiction book, *Nine Parts of Desire*, in 1994 and her first novel, *Year of Wonders*, in 2001. Many of her novels are based on historical material Brooks discovered in the course of her work as a journalist. Brooks lives in Massachusetts with her family.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The late seventeenth century was a tumultuous time for England. *Year of Wonders* is set in 1666, the same year as the famous Great Fire of London that decimated much of the city. 1651, just fifteen years before, marked the end of the English Civil War, one of the bloodiest conflicts ever to take place on English soil. The war pitted Parliamentarian "Roundheads" (who wanted to establish a constitutional government under the Puritan Oliver Cromwell) against Royalist "Cavaliers" (who supported the king, Charles I). After winning the war and beheading Charles I for treason, Cromwell ruled the country, attempting to remold cultural and religious practices to reflect austere Puritan ideals. When Cromwell died in 1658, the heir to the crown, Charles II, returned from exile in France to rule the country, bringing with him more relaxed Anglican customs and fostering a decadent and elaborate cultural life in his court. While Eyam is too isolated and poor to be much involved in political events, its important to note that religious practices, which form the basis of community life, have been in upheaval for a decade prior to the story's beginning, with people uncertain as to which church and which leaders they owe loyalty. Thus, even at the outset of the novel, the apparently dreary village of Eyam is not as stable as it seems.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Set in the seventeenth century but addressing themes that are still relevant today, *Year of Wonders* has much in common with other literary works that refer to the past in order to illuminate the present. For example, Brooks' novel shares many features with Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*. Set during the 1692 Salem Witch trials, the play explores a catastrophe's social consequences on an isolated, highly religious community, but it can also be read as a meditation on the anti-Communist "witch hunts" that gripped America during the 1950s, when Miller was writing. The true story of the 1665 plague outbreak and voluntary quarantine in Eyam has been the subject of numerous poems, paintings, books, and even musicals, including *God and the Wedding Dress*, a novel by Marjorie Bowen, *The Roses of Eyam*, a play by Don Taylor, and *Plague Upon Eyam*, an opera by John Drummond.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*
- **When Written:** 2001
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 2001
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Eyam, England
- **Climax:** Aphra, driven mad by grief and rage, murders the innocent Elinor Mompellion during a religious gathering.
- **Antagonist:** The bubonic plague; religious fanaticism; misogyny
- **Point of View:** Anna Frith, first-person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Annus Mirabilis. "Year of Wonders" is the English translation of "Annus Mirabilis," the title of a poem by John Dryden commemorating 1666, a year marked by catastrophes including the Great Fire of London and the plague that is the focus of this book. While the word "wonder" or "wonderful" has a strongly positive connotation to the modern reader, for Dryden and his seventeenth-century audience it would have had a more oblique meaning, describing things that were extraordinary or beyond comprehension, whether a miracle or a tragedy.

True Story. While most of the novel's characters, including the protagonist Anna Frith, are fictional, Michael Mompellion is based on a real person, William Mompesson, a charismatic local vicar who persuaded the plague-stricken villagers of Eyam to voluntarily quarantine themselves.

PLOT SUMMARY

Year of Wonders opens in the autumn of 1666. The protagonist, Anna Frith, watches the half-hearted harvesting process as farmers bring bruised **apples** to the rectory. Anna is the housekeeper to the vicar Michael Mompellion. She reflects that while autumn used to bring successful harvests and security for the winter, now it only reminds her how much the village has lost the rhythm of its ordinary life. While she doesn't mention the plague by name, she hints at the nature of the disaster that has decimated the population, threatened her own sanity, and catalyzed a breakdown in Mompellion, towards whom she is fiercely loyal and protective. Elizabeth Bradford arrives at the rectory and haughtily demands that Anna and Mompellion come to the aid of her mother, who is suffering from a "tumor." They are incensed by her behavior, given that her family fled the plague with no regard for the fate of the town, and they refuse to help. Mompellion suggests ironically that Elizabeth pray for divine assistance but says that she will find God a "poor listener." Then he deliberately drops a Bible on the floor, shocking Anna with his blasphemous behavior.

The narrative goes back in time a year and a half, to the spring of 1665. With finances tight after the recent death of her husband in a mining accident, Anna takes in the apprentice tailor, George Viccars, as a boarder. George turns out to be kind and interesting, entertaining Anna with tales of faraway London and playing with her sons, Jamie and Tom. Eventually, he proposes marriage to Anna, and she considers accepting, but before she can make a decision, he falls ill with a mysterious and powerful fever that kills him in just a few days. Suspecting he has contracted the plague from bolts of cloth shipped from London, George exhorts Anna to burn the cloth and all his possession. But the villagers refuse to part with the clothes they have commissioned from George, ensuring that the plague quickly spreads throughout the town. Meanwhile, while serving a dinner at Bradford Hall, Anna hears a visitor from London callously describing a deadly outbreak of the plague in London.

After a few weeks of calm, the children of Anna's neighbors, the Hadfields, catch the plague and die, quickly followed by Jamie and Tom. Devastated by their loss, Anna stumbles through her daily tasks, oblivious to the fact that the plague is spreading throughout the town. One night, chasing after a lost sheep, she comes across a mob of villagers assaulting Mem Gowdie, whom they are convinced is a witch responsible for the plague. Anna tries to defend Mem, but can't prevent the mob from "dunking" her in the lake, a superstitious practice used to determine whether a woman was a witch. Anys, Mem's niece, arrives and saves her from drowning, but the hysterical mob turns on her and hangs her. Mompellion arrives and excoriates the mob for their wrongdoing, but the damage is done: Mem and Anys, the only citizens with any medical knowledge, are dead.

As more people catch the disease, Mompellion worries that it will spread to other villages and become a regional or even national epidemic. In a moving and charismatic sermon, he convinces the villagers to voluntarily quarantine themselves until the plague has run its course, telling them that the catastrophe is a test from God. The only people who don't agree are the Bradfords, who use their resources and position to flee Eyam.

As the vicar's wife, it is Elinor Mompellion's job to tend to sick parishioners, and as the plague spreads and this task grows more draining, she makes Anna her assistant. With little experience in **childbirth**, Anna delivers Mary Daniel's baby, after which she becomes the town midwife and nurse. However, almost everyone who catches the plague dies, and Anna and Elinor can do little besides try to ease their pain.

Overtaxed by panic and grief, the villagers become irrational. Anna discovers that some people are buying charms from someone claiming to be Anys's ghost. Meanwhile, Anna herself takes dangerous doses of poppy oil (an opiate) to numb the pain of losing her sons. She returns with Elinor to Anys and Mem's garden with the hope of rediscovering some of their herb knowledge in order to treat the plague more effectively. As their friendship deepens, Elinor confesses to Anna that, as a teenager, she had a premarital affair that resulted in an illegitimate pregnancy, which she ended with a self-induced abortion. As a result, she is now unable to have children. Only her husband knows the full story of her transgressions, and she finds it very gracious of him to have married her despite what others would surely see as a sordid history.

Meanwhile, the town sexton dies, over-exhausted from digging too many graves. Anna convinces her father, Josiah (or Joss), to become the new grave-digger. However, he charges his desperate neighbors exorbitant fees to bury the dead, and sometimes takes advantage of the chaos to steal household goods. Eventually, he attempts to bury the plague-stricken (but relatively healthy) Christopher Unwin alive in order to rob his house. The miner's association (Eyam's only formal government organization) tries him for theft and sentences him to be impaled by the hands to Unwin's mine. This is a harsh but customary punishment, and it's expected that after a few hours of pain someone from the criminal's family will come to remove the knife. However, Josiah's wife Aphra is too busy nursing her sick children to fetch him or send for help. Josiah dies a horrible death of exposure to the elements. Aphra blames Anna for her husband's death and makes Anna accompany her to reclaim his disfigured body.

Anna notes that more than half of Eyam's population has died, and community life has all but fractured. Many tasks and trades are unattended, and people avoid meeting in public because of contagion. More and more villagers are buying fake charms from the mysterious "ghost," and John and Urith Gordon begin flagellating themselves in order to allay God's wrath. Mompellion acts quickly to stop the Gordons from spreading

what he sees as fringe extremism to the rest of the villagers, even as he himself fiercely castigates a young woman named Jane Martin for assuaging her grief by drinking and "fornicating," calling her a whore and a "sinner" against God.

Mompellion decides that the town needs to burn most of their material goods, in order to make a sacrifice to God and to remove sources of contagion from their midst. While everyone is assembled for the bonfire, Brand Rigney and Robert Snee arrive with Aphra, whom they have discovered selling the fake charms. Everyone is enraged at her for taking advantage of their panic, and agree to try her formally the next day. However Brand and Robert throw her in a sewer pit overnight and she goes completely insane from the ordeal, after which it seems pointless to hold a trial. Aphra's one remaining child, Faith, dies of the plague and Aphra, having lost her mind, refuses to surrender the body for burial.

New cases of plague cease to appear, and at his wife's urging Mompellion holds a Thanksgiving service one Sunday. While everyone is assembled in a field, praying for deliverance, a completely deranged Aphra appears wielding a knife and carrying her daughter's decaying corpse. When Mompellion and Elinor try to comfort her, she cuts Elinor's throat, killing her.

The narrative skips forward to autumn, where the prologue left off. As a result of his wife's death, Mompellion has lost his faith in God and, seemingly, his will to live. Anna tries to distract herself from her own grief by taking care of him. Eventually, both of them lonely and seeking comfort, they have sex. However, afterwards he confesses that, in order to make Elinor atone for the "sins" of premarital sex and abortion, he refused to have sex with her throughout their marriage. Anna thinks that this behavior is insane and deeply unkind to Elinor, prolonging her undue feelings guilt and regret.

Running out of the rectory, Anna runs into Elizabeth Bradford, who confesses that her mother doesn't have a tumor but is actually about to give birth to an illegitimate child and is in danger of dying. Anna goes to Bradford Hall and successfully delivers the child, saving its life along with Anne Bradford's. Elizabeth tries to kill the baby to hide the family shame of a child conceived out of wedlock, but Anna stops her and agrees to leave town with the baby and conceal its origins. Before she leaves Eyam she meets Mompellion, who pleads unsuccessfully for forgiveness but gives her his horse to aid her getaway.

In the epilogue, Anna has settled in the Muslim city of Oran, Algeria. She locates a famous doctor, Ahmed Bey, and convinces him to take her on as an apprentice and (in name only, so that she can live with him) his wife. Since the Arab world is more scientifically and medically advanced than English society, Anna becomes a trained midwife and gains a medical education, as well as personal autonomy and a sense of purpose to replace her lost faith in God. She names Anne Bradford's baby Aisha, the Arabic word for "life," and raises her alongside her own biological daughter, a child conceived with Mompellion whom she names Elinor, in memory of her friend.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Anna Frith – Anna is the novel's protagonist and narrator. A young widow and housemaid, during the plague she becomes Eyam's doctor, nurse, and midwife alongside her mistress, Elinor Mompellion, the vicar's wife. While she lacks any formal education, she's extremely intelligent and thoughtful, learning to read and acting as a voice of reason when those around her succumb to panic and hysteria. Anna is defined by her altruism, frequently risking her life to help others. This altruism is caused in part by an indifference to her own fate following the death of her sons at the plague's outset, a loss from which she never fully recovers. While her community is deeply moralistic and superstitious in many ways, Anna has a very progressive perspective on many philosophical and social issues. She objects to the unequal treatment of women and the highhanded behavior of the gentry toward the poor. She's also one of the only characters who doesn't believe in witchcraft, and she concludes that the plague is a problem that should be approached scientifically rather than as a matter of divine castigation. While working to preserve her community, Anna battles her own personal traumas, namely the untimely death of her husband, her childhood memories of abuse at the hands of her brutal father Josiah, and her intense longing for a life that isn't so limited by her gender and class. By the end of the novel, both the plague and the actions of the people affected by the plague has shaken, if not destroyed, Anna's belief in God and the stability of human society. However, her faith in her own capabilities is strengthened by the ordeal, and her openness to love and to helping others results in her once again having children—a daughter she bears on her own and another she adopts. By then moving to Arab-controlled Andalusia, she secures a life of far greater autonomy, education, and purpose than she ever expected.

Elinor Mompellion – The young and beautiful wife of Michael Mompellion, Elinor is Anna'a employer, her comrade in fighting the plague, and by the end of the novel her confidante and friend. Elinor acts as a big sister to the lonely Anna, teaching her to read, encouraging her to develop her powers of scientific reasoning, and helping her come to understand the events of her troubled past, such as her mother's death and her father's violence. In turn, Anna loves Elinor and regards her as a paragon of goodness. In fact, because of her physical fragility and generous attitude towards others, the whole town sees Elinor as the embodiment of innocence and purity, but it turns out she has a more complicated past. As a teenager she had a premarital affair and illegitimate pregnancy which she ended with a self-induced abortion, leaving her unable to bear

children. Because of this, she considers herself forever marked by sin. While Michael Mompellion marries her, and seems to lover her, he also punishes Elinor for that sign throughout the entirety of their marriage. Ultimately, the deranged Aphra Bont kills Elinor in an act of senseless violence, but Elinor lives on through Anna's daughter, whom Anna names after Elinor.

Michael Mompellion – Michael Mompellion is Eyam's vicar, an Anglican preacher who was appointed to the position after Charles II returned to England and ousted the Puritan clergy. In a town that is too small to have any governmental organization, he's also the unofficial leader, especially once the plague breaks out and the local gentry flee. Mompellion is generally liberal and altruistic: he combats superstition among the townsfolk, disdains the nobility for their greed and selfishness, and embraces modern ideas like class equality and a scientific approach to problems like the plague. He's also highly charismatic: he convinces the town to voluntarily quarantine itself, and only his strong leadership prevents people from completely succumbing to panic during the plague. His firm leadership and generous behavior make him an inspiration to Anna. However, after his wife Elinor is killed, he suffers a breakdown and loses the faith in God that has sustained him spiritually and guided his actions. Moreover, after sleeping with Anna (an act that ultimately leads to Anna bearing a child), he reveals to Anna that because Elinor had long ago sinned by having a premarital affair that led to an abortion, throughout their marriage he imposed a bizarre penance on both of them by refusing to ever have sexual relations with his wife. This admission causes Anna to repudiate him and shows that he (as well as the supposedly Christian values he promotes) is far less rational and progressive than Anna once thought. By the end of the novel, it is Mompellion who is inspired by Anna, as he sees her devotion to helping others despite her lack of religious faith to be a model for how he too should try to live.

Josiah Bont – Josiah (or "Joss") is Anna's father. He's drunk and shiftless, often unable to provide for his wife, Aphra, and their many children. He's also greedy and amoral. He capitalizes on the disorder caused by the plague to take advantage of his neighbors in any way he can, charging exorbitant sums to bury the dead and eventually attempting to bury one man alive in order to seize his household goods. While Anna no longer lives with her father, she is embarrassed by his behavior and often reflects on her unhappy, abusive childhood at his hands, which has shaped her cautious worldview and made her hesitant to trust others. However, eventually Anna concludes that her father abused her because of the traumas he himself suffered as a child conscript in the Navy, and is able to forgive him. Moving past this troubled relationship shows Anna that it's best to seek justice not through revenge or retribution but through compassion and reason.

Aphra Bont – Aphra is Josiah's wife and Anna's stepmother. Smarter than her husband, she's just as amoral as he is, supporting his greedy behavior and refusing to stop him from abusing Anna as a child. She's very superstitious and mistrusts the local healers, Mem and Anys Gowdie, but she's also eager to capitalize on the superstitions of others, selling her neighbors fake charms that she claims will protect them from the plague. After the death of her husband and most of her children, Aphra becomes completely deranged. She abandons even the most basic social conventions, dismembering her dead children instead of burying them, and eventually kills Elinor in front of the entire town. Her behavior shows the extent to which a catastrophe can erode personal sanity and community norms.

Anys Gowdie – Anys is Eyam's midwife and healer, who works alongside her aunt, Mem Gowdie. Although the Gowdies are the only citizens possessing any scientific knowledge, most people fear their power to cure illnesses, and they live on the margins of society. Anys further alienates the townspeople by flagrantly conducting affairs with many men, including other women's husbands. However, Anna comes to like and admire Anys, both because of her ability to help others and because of her attitude toward men, which allows her to embrace her sexuality and maintain a sense of autonomy. Ultimately, both Anys and Mem are killed by a hysterical mob who believe they are witches responsible for the plague. This episode shows the power of superstition even when science is most needed.

Elizabeth Bradford – Elizabeth is the daughter of the Colonel and Anne Bradford, the local gentry who haughtily preside over life in Eyam. Elizabeth is pretentious and unpleasant towards everyone of lower social standing, but she's somewhat redeemed by her gentleness toward her timid mother, and her efforts to protect her from her father's abuse. When Anna works as a maid in the Bradford house, Elizabeth takes pleasure in bossing her around, but ultimately it's Elizabeth who has to beg for Anna's help in delivering her mother's illegitimate baby, demonstrating how much class dynamics have shifted as a result of the plague.

Colonel Bradford – Colonel Bradford is the head of Eyam's local family of gentry. Prideful and arrogant, he scorns the common people for whom he is supposed to take care. When the plague strikes, he immediately flees with his whole family, ignoring Mompellion's pleas to embrace altruism and a sense of social duty.

Anne Bradford – Anne Bradford is Colonel Bradford's wife. She is timid and cowed by her husband. After the plague has subsided and the Bradford have returned to Eyam, Anne successfully gives birth to a child when Anna intervenes at a critical moment and saves both Anne and the baby. Because the child is the product of an affair and not actually the Colonel's, its life is in danger as long as it stays in Eyam. So Anna offers to adopt Anne's child and take it far away. Anne says she would have loved the child if allowed to, and allows Anna to take it.

Mem Gowdie – Mem Gowdie is a healer and midwife,

alongside her niece, Anys. While Anys is flamboyant, often seeming eager to attract attention and perpetuate rumors, Mem is staid and quiet. She has an immense store of herbal knowledge and a large supply of kindness. Anna remembers Mem caring for her after her mother's death, a rare moment of comfort in a harsh childhood. Like Anys, Mem is killed by a hysterical mob who believe she is a witch responsible for the plague.

Sam Frith – Sam is Anna's husband and father of her sons, Jamie and Tom. He is killed in a mining accident before the opening of the book, widowing Anna and forcing her to fend for herself. While Sam was a good husband who loved and respected Anna, he wasn't nearly as intelligent as her. While she was married to him, Anna sometimes wished for someone with more experiences and knowledge, and a broader view of life's possibilities.

George Viccars – George Viccars is Eyam's apprentice tailor, Anna's lodger, and eventually her suitor. Having lived in London, he seems experienced and cosmopolitan to the villagers, which makes him attractive to Anna. He's also kind to her sons and could introduce them to the lucrative tailoring trade. Anna's incipient sexual desire for George helps rouse her from the emotional lethargy into which she drifted after the death of her husband, Sam, but their courtship is cut short when the plague arrives (carried in bolts of cloth George ordered from London) and makes him its first casualty.

Jane Martin – Jane is a local girl Anna hires to watch her sons while she's at work. She's notable for adhering to Puritan customs even after the town has officially reverted to Anglicanism, showing the tensions that lurk under the town's supposed religious homogeneity. However, after her family dies in the plague, Jane breaks down and abandons her religious practices, becoming a drunk and a "loose woman." Her abrupt transition shows how the horrors of the plague can distort and degrade personal character.

John and Urith Gordon – The Gordons are a farming couple who live on the outskirts of Eyam. Believing that the plague is a punishment from an angry God who must be appeased by acts of penance, the Gordons begin flagellating themselves, an extreme form of self-castigation. Although Anna and Mompellion act quickly to stop this extremism from infecting the entire town, the Gordons' behavior highlights the thin line between Christian orthodoxy and self-destructive superstition.

Barber-surgeon – When Edward gets sick, the Hadfields send for an expensive barber-surgeon who incorrectly diagnoses him and administers a harmful treatment of leeches. Barber-surgeons were highly respected and considered knowledgeable, but much of the time they did more harm than good, as opposed to herbal healers like Mem and Anys Gowdie, who were suspected of witchcraft but could provide real help.

Lib Hancock – Lib is Anna's childhood friend. At the outset of the novel, they often stop to gossip together, but Anna feels betrayed when Lib succumbs to hysteria and is complicit in the mob killing of Mem and Anys Gowdie. When Lib catches the plague and dies before Anna can visit and reconcile with her, Anna realizes the importance of forgiveness.

Thomas Stanley – Thomas Stanley is the Puritan pastor who presided over Eyam during Anna's youth. When Charles II returned to England, bringing Anglicanism with him, Stanley was ousted from his job and forced to live at the edge of the parish. Stanley and Michael Mompellion get along unusually well for members of competing sects. However, Stanley's presence in the village and dissenting views demonstrate the tensions lurking beneath Eyam's supposed religious homogeneity.

Charles – Charles is a young nobleman who lives next to Elinor in her youth. Eventually, he convinces Elinor to elope and have sex with him, but subsequently abandons her after he impregnates her. For fear of having the child out of wedlock, Elinor performs an abortion on herself that leaves her unable to bear children.

Seth and Charity Merrill – Seth and Charity are the young children of Jakob and Maudie Merrill. Too young to take over their father's farm, they are at risk of becoming penniless orphans when he dies, but Mompellion arranges for one of the Bradfords' former servants, Brand Rigney, to steward the farm and take care of them.

Earl of Chatsworth – The Earl of Chatsworth is a nobleman from Eyam's neighboring district. He undertakes to provide Eyam with supplies and money during the quarantine. While Aphra points out that this generosity probably stems from his wish to keep the plague away from his own lands, his behavior stands in stark contrast to the neglect of Colonel Bradford and his family.

Aisha Aisha is Mrs. Bradford's illegitimate daughter, whom Anna adopts and takes away from Eyam because her life is in danger as long as she stays there. Her name means both "life" and "bread," in Arabic, showing how she "sustained" Anna during a difficult time and helped her recover from the traumatic experience of the plague.

The young man A Londoner who leaves the city when an outbreak of the plague strikes it. He ends up at a dinner party in Eyam (before the plague strikes the town) at the Bradford's house at which Anna is serving the food. He mocks anyone who reacted to the plague in London by trying to help the sick rather than fleeing in order to protect their own lives. Mompellion reacts to this argument with consternation.

Brand A young man who is among the servants fired by Colonel and Mrs. Bradford when the Bradfords flee from Eyam. Brand's own home town refuses to allow him to return out of fear of the plague, and brand ends up living with a farmer named Jakob Merril. Brand is unfailingly kind to Jakob and Jakob's children,

and ultimately when Jakob dies of the plague he leaves Brand part-ownership of the farm.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Alexander and Mary Hadfield – Eyam's tailors, the Hadfields are Anna's neighbors and George Viccars' employers. Their house is the first to be stricken by the plague, and their children the first to die.

Edward Hadfield – The son of Alexander and Mary Hadfield, about Jamie's age. Edward is the first child to die of the plague.

Martine Milne – Martin Milne is Eyam's mason, who dies fairly early in the progress of the plague.

Kate and Richard Talbot – The Talbots are Eyam residents. Richard Talbot is the village blacksmith. Anna first discovers Aphra's fake charms in the Talbot's cottage.

Sally Maston – A young child, Sally is one of Anna's neighbors, and dies of the plague along with her entire family.

Margaret Blackwell – Margaret is an Eyam citizen, and the first person in the village to survive the plague.

Jakob and Maudie Merrill – The Merrills are Eyam residents. On his deathbed, Jakob confesses his guilt over his bad treatment of Maudie, and Mompellion absolves him of his sins.

George and Cleath Wickford – The Wickfords are Eyam citizens who die of the plague, along with all of their children except one, Merry. As Quakers, they are one of the few families with dissenting religious beliefs.

Merry Wickford – Merry is the orphaned daughter of George and Cleath Wickford, an engaging and well-mannered girl. Her father bequeaths her his valuable mine claim, and Anna and Elinor prevent it from being "nicked," or stolen, by another miner, David Burton.

David Burton – David Burton is a local miner who tries to steal Merry Wickford's mine claim, and is foiled by Anna and Elinor.

Sexton – The sexton is a local official whose job it is to dig graves. However, overtaxed by the exhaustion of digging graves for all the plague victims, he dies of heart failure, forcing Mompellion to take over his work.

Christopher Unwin – Christopher is an Eyam resident and one of the first plague survivors. He survives Joss Bont's attempt to bury him alive and instigates the trial and punishment that lead to Joss's death.

Widow Brown – Widow Brown is an Eyam resident. Joss Bont extorts a valuable bale of wood from her in exchange for burying her husband and son.

Albion Samweys – Albion is a young miner. One night, Mompellion and Anna catch him drunkenly having sex with Jane Martin in the middle of the road.

Andrew Merrick – Andrew is an Eyam resident who responds to the panic of the plague by building a shack on the moors and living in complete isolation. He demonstrates one of the ways in which social order collapses in the face of catastrophe.

Mary and Randoll Daniel – The Daniels are Eyam residents. Anna delivers Mary's baby, her first experience as a midwife. Later, Randoll Daniel becomes convinced that flagellation is the only way to keep the plague at bay, and scourges himself publicly.

Mr. Holbroke – Mr. Holbroke is the rector of the neighboring town of Hathersage, as well as Mompellion's trusted confidant.

Lottie and Tom Mowbray – The Mowbrays are Eyam residents. Characterized by Anna as foolish and gullible, they buy a number of fake charms from Aphra posing as the ghost of Anys Gowdie, showing how quickly superstition takes hold in a time of fear and danger.

Ahmed Bey – Ahmed Bey is Anna's mentor, employer, and husband (in name only) once she arrives in Oran. A wise and talented doctor, he helps her develop her skills and find purpose in a life of science.

Baby Elinor – Elinor is Anna's daughter by Michael Mompellion. Anna's choice to name her daughter after her dead friend, Elinor, shows that she considers that relationship far more important than her brief romance with Mompellion.

Jamie and Tom The sons of Anna and Sam Frith. When the plague comes to Eyam, the boys die quickly. Their deaths shatter Anna, though she nonetheless continues to work to help and support the rest of her afflicted town.

Maryam The oldest wife of Aphram Bey. She is friendly to Anna.

Maggie Cantwell A cook for Colonel and Mrs. Bradford. When the plague strikes Eyam, The Bradfords flee the town and fire Maggie as well as all of their other staff. However, when Maggie returns to her home town, she is run out by residents who fear she might carry the plague.

Barmester A local judge, who adjudicates over everything from mining claims to the trial dealing with Josiah's act of thievery.

Faith Anna's young step-sister, and the daughter of Josiah and Aphra. Anna seeks to protect and care for Faith. However, an insane Aphra insists on keeping the girl with her. Anna can do nothing as Aphra locks the girl in her house. Faith dies from the plague.

James Mallion An old man who wonders why the plague more often strikes the young rather than older people who are ready to die.

Robert Snee A town resident who helps Brand to haul Aphra before the rest of the town when they catch her selling charms. When charged with keeping Aphra overnight before her trial the next day, Robert keeps her in a cave filled with pig manure. The experience drives Aphra insane.

Martin Miller A man who lives in Eyam. He takes to self-flagellation out of the superstitious belief that such religious penance will allow him to survive the plague.

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.

COMMUNITY AND CONVENTION

Year of Wonders depicts a tiny community that is both isolated and under tremendous pressure. The advent of the plague is a catastrophe no one is prepared or qualified to face, and the voluntary quarantine completely separates the village of Eyam from the stabilizing presence of a wider society. Because of these two factors, the people of Eyam gradually begin to abandon social conventions, both practices that are unnecessarily restrictive and principles that uphold order and civility. The Eyam community's gradual slide into anarchy and disorder helps its characters—especially the astute and adaptable Anna—discover that society doesn't have to be as rigid and restrictive as it once was. However, it also creates the impression that virtues and principles are a result of social pressure rather than something innate to human character. Thus, the novel creates a fundamentally ambivalent sense of human nature and raises the question of whether it is possible for humans to live together without strong social restrictions.

Under pressure of the plague, class distinctions break down fairly quickly, and Brooks presents this as an unequivocally positive development. When the first patients, the children of her neighbors, are dying of plague, Anna is so concerned for them that she questions the barber surgeon's inaccurate diagnosis. This is a huge breach of social convention, but the situation is so dire that Anna doesn't notice her gaffe until the surgeon upbraids her as an "ignorant woman." This early episode shows that established methods of problem-solving, like formal medicine, are inadequate to the grave situation and that fulfilling conventions is far less important than confronting the incipient epidemic. The Bradfords, an obnoxious family of local gentry, leave the town when the plague breaks out, selfishly refusing to commit to the quarantine even though, as members of the upper class, they are supposed to set an example for the rest of society. The Bradfords' escape shows the blatant inequities of class privilege, but without their presence society becomes much more egalitarian, with villagers adjudicating affairs among themselves rather than deferring to the despotic leadership of Colonel Bradford. A similar disruption of hierarchy occurs after Mem and Anys Goodwin are killed, Elinor and Anna have to step into the role of doctor and nurse for the entire town. Even though Anna is officially Elinor's servant, they quickly begin to exist on terms of complete equality. Elinor defers to Anna in matters where she has more expertise, such as childbirth, and Anna begins to refer to her friend as "Elinor," rather than the formal "Mrs. Mompellion." The similarities of their brave and altruistic characters prove stronger than the differences in their class and education. Following Mompellion's breakdown at the end of the novel, Anna, a mere housemaid, is arguably one of the most powerful figures in the town. Although Mompellion is still the leader, Anna controls access to him and helps direct his actions. This reversal of the class hierarchy is underlined by the Bradfords' return to Eyam. Once rude and scornful to Anna, Elizabeth Bradford is reduced to begging her former servant to deliver her mother's baby. While Anna does provide the help she needs, Brooks presents this episode as evidence that class distinctions can and should be questioned.

However, many of the community's positive values, like justice, charity, and altruism, also turn out to be conventions reinforced by habit and social pressure, and are therefore just as easily eroded as the negative ones. The behavior of Anna's parents is the most obvious example of the decline in social values. Joss immediately starts capitalizing on the tragedies of his neighbors, extorting money to bury the dead once the sexton dies and, in one absurd episode, trying to kill a sick miner in order to rob his house. Aphra demonstrates uninhibited greed, dressing up as a ghost in order to swindle her neighbors out of their money. Eventually, she goes insane and abandons even those conventions which seem most basic, like burying the dead. Her grotesque, senseless dismemberment of her daughter's body shows the extent to which a community's customs can disappear under pressure. Another example of the decline in social values is the mob killing of Anys Goodwin. While Anys always existed on the margins of society and people always whispered that she was a witch, Anys's usefulness as a healer prevented her from even superstitious townspeople like Aphra. The community's reliance on her balanced the community's suspicion. However, in the frenzy to assign blame for the plague, that balance disappears and the community resorts to savage measures like witch-hunting. So while it allows for the decline of some harmful social conventions, the plague also brings to harsh light the worst tendencies of human nature.

By the end of the novel, Eyam's trajectory from order to disorder paints an ambiguous picture of human nature, suggesting that all human behaviors are dependent on social context, and that therefore neither positive nor negative qualities are innate. In one sense, this vision of human nature is hopeful and liberating. Principles that had been unquestioned at the beginning of the novel, like class privilege, reveal themselves to be harmful and unnecessary. Anna's sense of the

possibilities for someone of her class and status are radically altered by the social catastrophe of the plague. By eventually gaining an education and settling in a completely different culture, Anna pursues a life vastly different and arguably better than she had expected. However, this vision is also deeply disturbing. Humans like to think of their positive qualities as innate, but the novel opens up the possibility that humans don't have a definitive nature, or that if they do it's one that is easily susceptible to degradation by fear and greed. The plague completely alters Eyam's community norms and the characters of the individuals who live there. In this way, it is an example of the extent to which society can devolve under the pressure of catastrophe. It also helps characters like Anna explore the validity of her society's core principles. In the end this experience liberates the community from some of its traditionally restrictive practices and conventions, but it also casts doubt on the fundamental values it took for granted.

FEMALE SEXUALITY AND FRIENDSHIP

Like all of England at the time, the village of Eyam is an intensely patriarchal community. The values and customs of the community and the men who are in charge of it restrict women's personal agency and their ability to participate in public life independently of male family members. Female sexuality is particularly frightening and taboo, and social punishments for women deemed sexually transgressive are high. However, despite social restrictions, important female characters like Anna and Anys embrace their sexuality, and in doing so find both personal fulfillment and a sense of power denied to them by their patriarchal community. Moreover, this change helps these characters deepen their relationships with other women and clarify their understanding of themselves.

Through institutionalized customs and personal actions, the community polices and punishes any displays of female agency, from independent thought to the expression of sexuality. In one of Anna's earliest memories, her father, Joss, angry that her mother chastised him publicly, parades his wife through town in the "branks," a torture device like a muzzle that prevents its wearer from speaking. The branks was used specifically for women designated as "scolds" by the community, and its existence shows just how anxious the community was about the possibility that women might step out of their place. Harming the body and limiting the possibility of speech, the branks is a visceral expression of male dominance over the female body and mind. Even Michael Mompellion, who is comparatively progressive when it comes to other social issues, is frightened to the point of fanaticism by female sexuality. He objects to the use of public punishments like the stocks and hopes to lead by kindness rather than fear, but when he discovers Jane Martin drunk and having sex with Albion Samweys, he flies into a rage and excoriates her as a "sinner."

Later, Anna discovers that, because Mompellion's wife Elinor had extramarital sex and ended the resulting pregnancy with a self-induced abortion, he has refused to sleep with her for years in order to punish her for her sins. In Mompellion's eyes, Elinor has acted independently twice and thus sinned doubly: first by having sex for pleasure, and secondly by rejecting motherhood, which is supposed to be the only reason women have sex. His drastic attempt to quell his wife's sexuality shows that even progressives are extremely troubled by the idea of female independence.

In order to maintain the charade that women aren't sexual beings while still allowing the men to have sex for pleasure, the community responds to women who display any kind of sexuality by oversexualizing them and excluding them from community life. This is most evident in the case of Anys Goodwin. She is ostracized partly because people fear she is a witch, but also because she is known to have sex without regard to her marital status or anyone else's, and women fear her effect on their husbands. By blaming her for everyone's errant sexual impulses, the community is able to uphold restrictive sexual principles while still allowing people (at least men) to transgress them.

However, despite the social premiums on at least appearing to comply with these draconian sexual mores, many female characters embrace sexuality as a means of achieving personal fulfillment and some limited personal agency. When Anna finds out that Anys has been sleeping with her suitor, the tailor George Viccars, she is initially hurt and suspicious. But when she talks to Anys, she admires the openness of her approach to sex. She is enticed by Anys's frank admissions about her sex life and her insistence that she won't surrender her "freedom" to become "any man's chattel." To Anna, Anys's sexuality is evidence that she "listens to her own heart rather than having her life ruled by others' conventions." While Anna herself is comparatively chaste, sexual desire helps her defeat depression in multiple instances. At the beginning of the novel, she's been a state of lethargy since her husband's death, thinking only about getting by rather than what will make her happy. When she considers the possibility of sex with George Viccars, she describes herself as "one who forgets to eat all day until [remembering] she is ravenous." In other words, her sexual desire helps stir up the strong emotions and zeal for life that have been dormant since Sam's death. Similarly, Anna's brief fling with Mompellion dispels the fog of grief into which she descended after her sons' death. Just as she's beginning to notice her desire for him, she thinks to herself, "I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive." In this way, sex reminds her of the possibility not just of fulfilling duties but of achieving happiness.

These characters' frank sexuality does not lead, as the reader might expect, to romantic happiness. Rather, the sexual encounters in the book almost always promote a woman's independence or strengthen the emotional bonds between two

women. This pattern is most evident through the motif of maternity. According to the patriarchal framework under which Eyam operates, maternity should be a manifestation of female submission to male power. After all, the reason female sexuality has to be suppressed is so that men can feel sure their wives are giving birth to children that are theirs. When men are involved, childbirth inevitably goes wrong; Anna remembers watching a barber surgeon saw apart both her mother and baby sister, while her drunk father looked on. By contrast, with no prior experience Anna and Elinor are able to deliver a breech baby and save the mother's life, using only their intuition and Anna's "mother hands." After this experience, Anna becomes an informal midwife, and all the women prefer to have her assist them in labor instead of a more "qualified" man. In childbirth, women are able to subvert male power.

Anna's brief happiness with Mompellion is immediately eclipsed by the horrifying realization that, while he's happy to take advantage of Anna's sexuality, he has been punishing his wife for her own sexuality for years. After learning of Mompellion's twisted relationship with his wife and abandoning him, Anna gives birth to one child by Michael Mompellion and gains custody of another, Mrs. Bradford's. Both children are "illegitimate," thereby subverting the logic of male property transfer, and both are expressions of love and solidarity between women. Anna prevents Anne Bradford from dying after a male surgeon abandons her, then takes the baby to save it from Colonel Bradford's wrath. In a particularly poignant scene, Anna assures Anne she will "cherish" the baby as if she were its biological mother. Thus, the love and responsibility for the baby are shared between Elizabeth and Anna, and the actual father becomes irrelevant. Later, Anna names her own daughter Elinor. This choice shows Anna's continuing devotion to her dead friend, and emphasizes that this friendship was much more important to her than her brief romance with Mompellion. The infant Elinor, whose appearance closes the novel, is a representation of a life-altering female friendship, one in which a man has no place.

As the novel progresses, Anna comes to better understand her own sexuality and subverts the sexual mores of her community, having an extramarital affair and bearing an illegitimate child. However, she also frees herself from dependence on men, leaving her society for one in which she can achieve greater (although still limited) independence. Perhaps paradoxically, for Anna sex doesn't result in entanglement with men but rather allows her to disentangle herself from the patriarchal forces which have previously dominated her life. Thus, sexuality proves to be a highly liberating and powerful force for women.

FAITH, SUFFERING, AND GOD'S WILL

At least at the outset of the novel, the citizens of Eyam operate under the assumption that their lives – including random or everyday events – are part of a divine plan. The townspeople interpret good or bad developments as God's rewards or punishments. The most powerful person in the town is the minister, who is supposed to be the closest to God and who explains to the people how the difficulties they encounter in ordinary life – from bad harvests to illness to stillbirths – are the work of a God who may be strict sometimes but ultimately loves them all. The advent of the plague shatters this worldview, as its unremitting horrors and the extremes to which it drives the community make it increasingly difficult for them to attribute worldly events to divine intervention. Eventually, Anna concludes that even if God exists, it's impossible to make any definitive interpretations of His will. As a result, she's forced to find her own explanations about the meaning of suffering, which ultimately leads her to devote her life to helping others tangibly through science.

Faith and religious practices are the center of Eyam community life, although the nature of that faith can change according to politics or worldly events. Church attendance is obligatory and the few families who belong to dissenting sects, like the Quakers, are generally excluded from community life. The vicar, Mompellion, is the only citizen with any kind of formal education. His job is both to keep the townspeople from straying too far from Christian values, and to explain to them how the events and adversities of their daily lives are part of a divine plan, thereby making them feel connected to God. His spiritual proximity to God makes him the dominant authority figure in Eyam, which has no formal government besides the negligent Bradfords, and his leadership is rarely questioned. The fact that Mompellion can convince the community to quarantine themselves by framing it as a test from God shows how strong his position is as the interpreter of divine will.

Still, faith isn't inflexible. Brooks notes that it's only a few decades since the English Civil War ended and Charles II returned to power, breaking the Puritan stranglehold over the country and restoring Anglicism as England's official religion. Religious practices have changed significantly in Eyam during this time. People are no longer restricted to wearing the Sadd colors (black, brown, and gray) and are allowed to play music and dance. The old Puritan minister, Mr. Stanley lives on the fringes of the town, while the Anglican and liberal Mompellion has ascended to power. Although there are a few holdouts, like the Puritan Jane Martin, most people's faith proves adaptable. Under normal social conditions, they are able to both believe that God has a plan and that those in charge of religious institutions can interpret it, and allow those institutions to evolve according to worldly events.

However, the community's faith (and Anna's in particular) declines as a result of the suffering caused by the plague, which they struggle to fit into any notion of a divine plan, suggesting in turn that faith is based partly on the ability of religious institutions to provide reassuring interpretations of life's twists

and turns. Brooks emphasizes Anna and her community's intense experience of suffering by saturating her novel with gruesome descriptions of the plague, as well as the violence people inflict on each other in the growing chaos. Even though characters like Anna are used to the hardship and misfortune inherent to 17th-century life (for example, she accepts the death of her husband, Sam, stoically and without surprise), the increased scale of this suffering is evident through her gory descriptions of the messy way the plague claims its victims. While people often say that the plague is a divine punishment, and Mompellion more gently interprets it as God's test of his chosen people, these narratives prove flawed because there is neither any concrete sin for which the people of Eyam are being punished nor any reward for passing the "test."

This flawed logic is especially evident when children, who are clearly too young to either sin or be tested, die. The descriptions of Anna cradling Jamie and Tom in her lap as they die, some of the most poignant passages in the novel, recalls the imagery of the Pieta, or the Virign Mary holding Christ after his crucifixion. However, while Christ died (according to scripture) to save the souls of Christians, Jamie and Tom's deaths are simply tragic, with no greater purpose. These similar but dissonant images underscore the inadequacy of religion to help the characters cope with the suffering of the plague.

The power of religious institutions declines similarly. Mompellion finds it harder to force people to obey his directives (for example, he's ineffective in persuading Joss Bont to abandon his grave digging extortion scheme). Eventually, Aphra kills Elinor Mompellion, who was previously a respected and unassailable member of the religious establishment. The plague causes the people of Eyam to have a collective existential crisis. Previously, they had a set of restrictive but clear principles which helped them make sense of a way of life already characterized by frequent suffering. Now, with that faith almost obliterated, people have to find a new reason for living and a new way to interpret life's occurrences.

Anna ends the novel by abandoning her attempt to justify the plague as a divinely inspired event. She instead begins to build a worldview that doesn't rely on God's presence in the ordinary world. Mompellion's breakdown following Elinor's death mirrors the complete breakdown of the community's faith. While he can't bring himself to doubt the existence of God, he does proclaim bitterly that God isn't a good "listener." After this he completely neglects his duties as vicar, and those who remain in the town cease to observe many of the customs that were once of such importance. When Mompellion tells Anna about the penance he forced on Elinor as a result of her previous sexual transgressions, she instinctively realizes that he was wrong and acted out of misplaced religious zeal. Her disgust with Mompellion's actions makes her question all his teachings, to which she had previously subscribed wholeheartedly, and abandon the kind of faith that he had once exemplified for her.

Anna concludes that Mompellion is no more qualified than anyone else to explain why suffering exists. At the end of the novel, she tells her new mentor, Ahmed Bey, that she no longer has faith, only "hope." In other words, she prefers to focus on ameliorating suffering through rational means like medicine than to try to justify it ideologically. Settling in the Muslim world, she accepts Muslim practices without adopting the religion or worldview. The conclusion that pain and suffering don't follow any logical scheme or divine plan is profoundly unsettling, since it rips away a spiritual framework that provided reassurance to most of the novel's character, including Anna. However, it also proves liberating and empowering, because it inspires Anna to move to a new society and make a new life for herself as a midwife.

SCIENCE AND SUPERSTITION

In Anna's world, scientific knowledge is almost non-existent and most people believe that supernatural forces, both benevolent and malign, are active in everyday life. Christian institutions affirm God's presence in every human event, and characters like Aphra assert the existence of a whole host of spirits, fairies, and demons, some of which might help cure an illness or attract a lover, but some of whom are working for the Devil. Meanwhile, most people are suspicious of the few scientific practices to which they have access, like herbal medicine. As she becomes a bona fide doctor, Anna begins to disentangle beliefs which are spurious superstitions from those which have a basis in rationality and science. Eventually, she asserts that even the accepted customs of organized religion are no different from superstitions. By the end of the novel, Anna is committed to pursuing a highly rational, scientific worldview at the expense of cultural and religious superstitions.

The residents of Eyam give credence to a multitude of supernatural practices. Some of these practices are considered contestable superstitions, while others are completely accepted because they are associated with religious practice. As the novel progresses, Anna finds it harder and harder to distinguish between these two groups. Because Aphra is afraid that Anys Goodwin is a witch, she arranges various charms in her house when Anys comes to bring an herb tonic. Anna scolds her for this and says the charms are ridiculous. Later, after Anys is murdered, Aphra poses as her ghost, selling fake charms that purport to kill the plague. While many people buy them, Anna, the Mompellions, and the more astute townspeople immediately realize it's a hoax, and eventually catch Aphra in the act.

However, other superstitions are more powerful because they are closely tied to accepted religious doctrine. For example, most people believe that putting women in water to see if they float is a good way to identify witches. Mompellion is radically

progressive in trying to eradicate this belief, although he doesn't do so fast enough to save the Goodwins. Mompellion also treats the craze of flagellation as misguided and superstitious, but he recognizes that many people might believe it works, which is why he treats it seriously and acts quickly to stamp it out in the town.

Anna grows to suppose that, if commonly-held superstitions and widely-accepted religious practices are equally devoid of meaning, then the actual teachings of organized religion might be invalid as well. Anna immediately realizes that although Mompellion's treatment of Elinor was based in Christian teachings, he twisted religious teachings into a fanaticism that scarred her friend's life – not so different from John Gordon's insistence that his wife flagellate herself. As a result of this episode, Anna begins to question all the previously unexamined practices and customs of her community.

As she is learning to question both superstition and religion, Anna develops an admiration for the scientific practices that most people fear. While most people are wary of the Goodwins, whom they suspect of witchcraft, Anna always has a soft spot for them. She admires their practical manner and the fact that they can often solve medical problems that elude the trained and expensive barber surgeons. Anna notes that when she was pregnant, she consulted Anys about what plants to eat. Thus, even at this early point she values their scientific knowledge, even if she can't quite distinguish it from superstition. When the plague strikes, many believe that the Goodwins caused it, and a mob eventually kills both of them. Ironically, the townspeople are so blinded by superstition that they kill the only medical providers who might have some knowledge to alleviate the disease. Anna's instinctive realization that the accusations are nonsense and her horror at the killings shows that she's moving away from common reliance on superstition.

After this, Anna and Elinor inherit the Goodwin's mantle. Using the herbs from their garden, they develop a two-pronged medical plan to treat plague victims and strengthen healthy people with appropriate herbs. Elinor even maps out the spread of the plague from house to house in order to understand the rational nature of the disease. Anna concludes that they should treat the plague with "the tools and the method and the resolve" that a farmer might use to "rid his field of unwanted tare." Science is shown to be a far more effective and rational way to combat the plague than superstition.

Ultimately, science replaces both superstition and faith as the guiding force of Anna's life. She moves to an Muslim society, which at the time were exponentially more scientifically advanced than European ones. Although society is organized around religion here as well, Anna is removed from the superstitious practices that have dominated her life for so long and which she has come to fundamentally mistrust. Ultimately, she decides to only give credence to those beliefs that can be demonstrated or proven. While the modern reader may be able to easily distinguish between superstition, science, and religious practices, for Anna this process requires a radical change of thought.

JUSTICE AND JUDGMENT

An uneventful town with few inhabitants, Eyam has very few governmental structures in place. Law and order are safeguarded by the vicar and the landed gentry. However, when plague arrives, the Bradfords abandon the town and Mompellion becomes much too preoccupied with tending the victims to handle affairs of justice. Meanwhile, the town must decide how to adjudicate crimes and transgressions it hasn't faced before. Throughout the novel, two methods of administering justice are at odds with each other: communal judgment, in which a group of citizens tries to establish facts and then applies a punishment, and individual action, in which one person acts to avenge a perceived wrong. Alone, each of these methods proves insufficient to achieve true justice. However, in addressing her own personal traumas, Anna eventually arrives at a sense of justice through a combination of the two methods.

In Eyam, semi-formal tribunals of citizens administer communal justice. In many cases, this tribunal is made up of the members of the miners' guild, the only organization of any kind in the town. In other cases, Mompellion publicly adjudicates disputes with input from the involved parties and other witnesses. For example, in order to secure Merry Wickford's mine claim, Anna and Elinor have to appeal to the miners' guild. This is perhaps the most notable example of the success of communal judgment.

However, communal tribunals can acquire a mob mentality very quickly. As the plague starts to escalate, a group of citizens convince themselves, based on a twisted interpretation of the facts, that the Goodwins are witches responsible for the disease. They stage a "trial" by throwing Mem Goodwin in the pond, and eventually hang Anys as well. This perversion of community justice shows that this system is vulnerable to the community's superstitious mentality and can't hold up under pressure of events like the plague.

Community tribunals execute justice through harsh and traditional punishments, of which the community has no shortage. Stocks are used to publicly shame people for minor offenses, witches are ducked in water and deemed guilty if they float, and thieves have their hands stapled to the property they tried to steal. Once the punishment is administered, the criminal is considered to have atoned for his actions and can return to society (this is important, since everyone lives together in such close quarters).

However, as crimes become more extreme, the traditional system of punishments starts to fail. For example, neither the community nor Mompellion can shame Joss Bont out of

extorting his neighbors' goods as a gravedigger. When he is eventually convicted of stealing, the punishment (the stapling of his hands to a miner's claim) turns out to be too severe; while a family member normally rescues the stapled person discreetly, neither Aphra nor Anna has time to do so and Joss dies as a result. Although it follows traditional practices, this punishment ends up being a miscarriage of justice.

When people feel that communal methods of judging crimes are inadequate, they turn to vigilante justice, or personal acts of revenge. While this method allows for more flexibility than the community's prescribed stable of punishments, it almost always goes too far and fails to achieve a sense of justice and equilibrium. For example, enraged to discover that Aphra has been selling fake charms to cure the plague and profiting off the distress of her neighbors, two men leave her in a sewer pit for the night without consulting the rest of the community. The ordeal, clearly out of proportion to her crime, drives her insane, and the men feel a sense of guilt over what they did.

Aphra is the victim of two flawed punishments: the misguided communal judgment that led to her husband's death and her own ordeal of vigilante justice. As a result, she loses her mind and slits Elinor's throat in the middle of a communal assembly. This is a senselessly violent, completely misplaced act of revenge – Elinor did nothing to Aphra and is the novel's embodiment of innocence. Aphra's actions show that when communal justice fails, individual acts of retribution escalate until they reach the height of chaos and irrationality.

In her own life, Anna must address the injustice of the abuse she suffered at her father's hands during her childhood, a trauma that haunts her even as an adult. She does so by combining the two forms of justice she sees applied in the community: communal and individual. Growing up motherless, Anna was constantly abused by her alcoholic father and neglected by her stepmother, Aphra. She relives memories of her brutal childhood frequently and retains a lingering sense of injustice that isn't solved by any action toward her father (she mentions that her husband, Sam, punched him in the face after seeing her scars, but that action felt like a futile attempt to address the wrongs of the past).

Anna tries to pretend that this sense of injustice doesn't affect her adult life, but eventually realizes that it leads her into unjust behavior herself. After her father is stapled to the mine claim as punishment for stealing, she knows that either she or Aphra must take responsibility to free him, but she is too disgusted with her father, so she doesn't go. As a result, he dies and she feels intensely guilty. Eventually, she discusses both her horrific childhood and her role in her father's death with Elinor. Elinor helps her rethink all these events in order to achieve a rational "understanding" of her father and the childhood abuse he himself endured. Anna finally achieves a sense of justice by balancing "my guilt in the matter of his death and the debt he owed me for the manner of my life." In other words, she sees his death as a natural consequence of the pain he caused her.

Here, her thinking process combines both methods of applying justice. While Anna rationally evaluates her father's own character and history, she takes a more flexible, individualistic approach to assigning punishment, deciding that her and her father's condemnable deeds balance out. Ultimately, this allows her to heal and move past the trauma of her past.

In a community as small and close-knit as Eyam, the prompt application of justice to any crime is essential for morale and cohesion. Because it prompts new kinds of transgressions, the plague challenges institutionalized forms of justice and causes people to adopt harmful, vigilante-style justice. However, while both systems are flawed, they can be combined into a more compassionate and merciful system of evaluating guilt and justice. Moreover, especially regarding her father, Anna realizes that justice often prevails naturally, without any human intervention at all.

SYMBOLS

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

APPLES

Year of Wonders begins during what Anna calls "apple-picking time," the fall harvest. In a town that depends on the crops it grows to survive through the winter, harvest time is almost sacred. Normally, when Anna walks through the orchards, she feels a mingled sense of sensuality and security, reveling in the strong smell of the fruit and feeling safe in the knowledge that there would be "food and warmth for the babies" during the snowy winter. On the other hand, plague victims develop pus-filled sores that, when they burst, give off a revolting smell of rotting apples. Thus, from her first days of tending her ailing tenant, George Viccars, Anna associates the plague and its horrors with this smell. At the end of the novel, Anna describes the harvest a year later, when most of the apple crop rots on the ground because no one is left to pick them. She isn't even sorry for the loss, because she can no longer stand the smell of apples. For Anna, apples become a bitter reminder of the safety and stability she lost when the plague struck the village. All the things she considered strong and healthy – the village's crops, the people around her, the community and its values – quickly succumb to rot and decay in the face of catastrophe. Recurring throughout the novel, apples and their smell become a reminder of the disturbingly thin line between bounty and decay, life and death, survival and destruction.

CHILDBIRTH

In the seventeenth century, it was still extremely common for women to die as a result of complications during childbirth. Medical knowledge and trained professionals were in short supply. Meanwhile, most women underwent several pregnancies in their lives because they lacked contraception, because they were under pressure to produce male heirs to inherit the property of their husbands, and because misogynist mores held that a woman's primary role in society was procreation and childcare. Over the course of a lifetime, the average woman was equally as likely to die in childbirth as not to. Death in childbirth is a common fate even in pre-plague Eyam, as is evident from Anna's stoic description of witnessing her mother's gruesome death as a result of a primitive Caesarean section performed by an uneducated barber surgeon. In many ways, the dangerousness of childbirth epitomizes the harshness of life in Eyam and the omnipresence of death, but it also emphasizes the ways in which this harshness applies particularly to women, whom society forces to reproduce frequently even though it's extremely dangerous for them. However, as Anna becomes an amateur nurse and midwife during the plague, she assists with many births and finds a sense of renewal in bringing new life into the world even in the midst of so much death. Childbirth is symbol of hope during a hopeless time, evidence that the community will persevere through the plague.

Childbirth is also an arena in which female characters assume a certain power and autonomy which their patriarchal society otherwise denies them. In stark contrast to the barber surgeon's rough handling of her mother, Anna safely delivers a baby with no prior experience, using only her firsthand knowledge of "women's bodies" and what Brooks describes as the innately female power of her "mother-hands." Later, Anna delivers Anne Bradford's illegitimate daughter and adopts her, preventing Anne's enraged husband from having her killed. In both cases childbirth is difficult and dangerous, but mother and baby survive because they are attended by a sympathetic woman rather than an unskilled man. By the end of the novel, childbirth becomes an intimate transaction between women, a rare event that excludes male involvement. It is a demonstration of female power and resilience in the face of constant oppression, and is an symbol for female empowerment and agency rather than submission to male authority.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *Year of Wonders* published in 2002.

Part 1: Apple-Picking Time Quotes

❝ I used to love this season. The wood stacked by the door, the tang of its sap still speaking of forest. The hay made, all golden in the low afternoon light. The rumble of the apples tumbling into the cellar bins. Smells and sights and sounds that said this year it would be all right: there'd be food and warmth for the babies by the time the snows came. I used to love to walk in the apple orchard this time of the year, to feel the soft give underfoot when I trod on a fallen fruit. Thick, sweet scents of rotting apple and wet wood. This year, the hay stocks are few and the woodpile scant, and neither matters much to me.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

The narrative opens in autumn, with Anna comparing the season and the harvest to those of previous years. Anna's sensual evocation of the sights and sounds of harvest emphasizes her town's isolation and self-sufficiency; to the people of Eyam, who depend for survival on the food they produce, a successful harvest is an almost sacred event. Accordingly, this year's lackluster harvest is an ominous sign that something has gone fundamentally awry in the community. Even before Anna launches into her account of the plague, the importance of community rhythms and rituals is apparent, and the consequences to communal survival if those rhythms are abandoned is becoming clear.

It's worth pointing out that here, for the first time of many, Anna mentions apples. While apples once symbolized the abundance of harvest, they have come to remind her of the grotesque plague sores, which smelled of rotting apples. Apples will recur as a symbol throughout the novel, reminding the reader how quickly both natural and human life can shift from vitality to decay.

Part 2: Ring of Roses Quotes

❝ There was something in her that could not, or would not, see the distinctions that the world wished to make between weak and strong, between women and men, laborer and lord

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Elinor Mompellion

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Arriving at the rectory for her morning's work, Anna finds her employer, Elinor Mompellion, weeding the garden—manual work that many of her social status would think beneath them. On top of this, Elinor greets Anna with kindness and interest. Thus, Elinor's first appearance in the novel characterizes her as someone who doesn't place stock in the traditional, rigid class distinctions that govern society. Elinor's egalitarianism causes her to altruistically devote herself to treating plague victims, and it permits her to befriend Anna, forming the novel's defining female relationship.

In explaining class distinctions for the first time, Anna makes a meaningful word choice in describing them as "distinctions that the world *wished* to make" rather than distinctions that inherently exist. The validity of conventions like class distinctions will be a central question for Anna in the novel. From the beginning, she expresses a deep ambivalence toward them.

Part 2: The Thunder of His Voice Quotes

❝ Why would I marry? I'm not made to be any man's chattel. I have my work, which I love. I have my home…but more than these, I have something that very few women can claim: my freedom. I will not lightly surrender it.

Related Characters: Anys Gowdie (speaker), Anna Frith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

After George Viccars dies, Anna discovers the scandalously low-cut dress he made for Anys Gowdie and visits Anys to ask if the two had been involved, whereupon Anys breezily admits that they slept together casually. Anna is shocked by this flagrant breach of strict mores surrounding women's sexuality, and she's just as surprised when Anys says she had no aspirations to marry George. However, while Anna doesn't question the conventional conception of marriage as the only viable path in life for a woman, Anys explains that marriage is inherently destructive for women. Anys describes her refusal to marry as a choice of freedom over servitude, prizing her liberty over the romantic or social benefits of marriage. Her brief friendship with Anys alerts Anna to the manifold ways in which her community oppresses women, and teaches her to make her own life choices based on personal freedom rather than social conventions.

❝ Dark and light, dark and light…that was how I had been taught to view the world. The Puritans who had ministered to us here had held that all actions and thoughts could be only one of two natures: godly and right, or Satanic and evil. But Anys Gowdie confounded such thinking. There was no doubt that she did good: in many ways, the well-being of our village rested more on her works, and those of her aunt, than on the works of the rectory's occupant. And yet, her fornication and her blasphemy branded her a sinner in the reckoning of our religion.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Anys Gowdie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Social and religious mores at the time prohibited women from having sex outside the confines of marriage, or even from seeming to enjoy the act too much. However, Anys admits freely that she slept with George Viccars purely for her own pleasure. Raised under the draconian moral teachings of the Puritans, Anna knows she should condemn Anys both for her actions and her lack of repentance. However, she instinctively admires Anys and feels her good works balance out her sins, even though she can't justify this with any religious doctrines. Through Anys, Anna begins to question the restrictions that govern women's behavior, eventually abandoning them herself. She also begins to doubt the cut-and-dry manner in which religious doctrine approaches complex moral issues.

Part 2: Sign of a Witch Quotes

❝ "The man who sent it is a well-esteemed physician, and he says it is a remedy much thought of among the Florentine doctors…"

"But what is it?" I asked again.

"It contains a dried toad," she said. I wept then, even though I knew her intentions were all of the best.

Related Characters: Elinor Mompellion, Anna Frith (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

Desperate to save her son Jamie from the plague, especially after the loss of her younger son, Anna tries every remedy she can recall. In a final attempt, Elinor doubtfully brings her a talisman suggested by one of her husband's colleagues, a famous doctor at Oxford. She's reluctant to inform Anna of its contents (a dried toad) and Anna breaks down when she finds out. Both women recognize immediately that the advice bestowed by these erudite doctors is no better than common superstition. This is one of the first instances in which respected institutional knowledge turns out to be useless and impractical, a pattern which will continue throughout the novel, especially regarding medicine. Moreover, Anna and Elinor begin to realize her that while society elevates male doctors and denigrates female herbalists and healers, the medical practices used by male doctors are usually ineffective at combating the plague. The women soon learn they will have to turn to practices developed and taught by women in order to stop the disease's ravages.

"I have lain with him. Yes! I have lain with the Devil, and he is mighty and cold as ice to the touch. His seed, too, is cold and abundant as a river running between our thighs. For I have not lain with him alone! No! I tell you now, I have seen your wives lie with him! Yours, Brad Hamilton, and yours, John Gordon, and yours too, Martin Highfield!"

Related Characters: Anys Gowdie (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

When a mob attacks Mem Gowdie, believing her to be the cause of the plague, Anys drags her out of the pond and resuscitates her with CPR. As a result, the suspicious crowd turns on her, accusing her of being able to raise the dead through witchcraft. In a final attempt to disorient the mob and save her own life, Anys admits to sleeping with the Devil. She delivers a screed reminiscent of misogynist tracts about witchcraft common at the time, in which writers accused witches of deriving their powers from obscene sexual liaisons with demonic forces.

Here, Anys plays on common male anxieties about female power and sexuality. She recognizes that men loathe and suppress female sexuality not just because they're worried about infidelity, but because it is an expression of independence, agency, and power in a social group that is supposed to be subservient and powerless. Because sexuality threatens the social mores that oppress women, men are quick to associate it with the Devil and to assert that all female independence derives from demonic forces. Anys' gambit is ultimately unsuccessful (the mob hangs her), but with these words she alludes to the twisted and oppressive origins of the restrictions that govern women's behavior.

Part 2: Wide Green Prison Quotes

That man was a ship's barber; he pulled teeth and amputated limbs. He knew nothing of women's bodies. But you do know. You can do this, Anna. Use your mother-hands.

Related Characters: Elinor Mompellion (speaker), Anna Frith

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after the Gowdies are killed, a villager, Mary Daniels, goes into labor. With no medical professionals left in the town, Elinor decides that she and Anna must deliver the baby. Trying to manipulate the baby into a better position for birth, Anna fears she will harm mother and child; as a girl, she witnessed a clumsy barber-surgeon saw her mother apart, killing her and the baby. When she panics, Elinor calms her, reminding her of the fundamental difference between Anna and the barber-surgeon: as a woman and a mother, Anna understands and cares more about female bodies than the barber-surgeon ever could. This is an instance in which female instinct trumps male knowledge in medical efficacy, leading Anna to become a confident healer even though she has no training. This moment also marks the emergence of childbirth not as a moment of female vulnerability and danger, but as an arena in which female powers and abilities come to the fore, crowding out male interference.

Part 2: Among Those That Go Down to the Pit Quotes

❝ For Mr. Stanley had commenced to attend Mr. Mompellion's services....and in the weeks since the Billings family and some others from among the nonconformists had begun to come as well. They did not join in all the hymns, nor did they follow the words of the Book of Common Prayer, but that they gathered with us at all was a wonder.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Thomas Stanley , Michael Mompellion

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

When England officially reverted to Anglicanism following the Civil War, Puritan preachers like Mr. Stanley were ousted from their pulpits, ordered to leave their towns, and replaced with Anglicans like Mompellion. At the time, most religious doctrines prohibited tolerance of any other sects, so that members of those sects couldn't live comfortably together. However, the exigencies of the plague break down social conventions to allow for greater religious tolerance. After the quarantine, Mompellion and Stanley begin appearing in public together as a sign of solidarity, and nonconformist families begin attending services with the rest of the congregation, who accordingly turn a blind eye to their nonobservance of some rituals.

The plague demonstrates that some long-accepted social conventions are harmful, preventing peace and cohesion rather than fostering it. It also shows that differences among religious sects, which the villagers once considered paramount, are actually much less important than they once thought. Changes like this allow the villagers to envision a community that is more inclusive and fair. In this sense, the plague is a "wonder," in the word's more ambiguous sense: it causes extraordinary events and changes, for better and for worse.

Part 2: The Body of the Mine Quotes

❝ I did not go, and for that I will forever reproach myself. Because out of our negligence and her loneliness came much rage. Much rage and some madness – and a surfeit of grief.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Aphra Bont

Related Themes:

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

The Miners' Court punishes Joss Bont for theft by impaling his hand to the mine claim owned by his victim. Traditionally, the criminal's family is supposed to free him before he suffers too much or dies. However, a combination of confusion, bad weather, and new plague cases prevents Aphra and Anna, Joss's only kin, from rescuing him, and he dies. In this case, institutional justice is carried much too far, resulting in a death which was not intended or merited. In hindsight, Anna understands that such miscarriages of justice have grave consequences, such as the revenge murder that Aphra will carry out because of her husband's death. Joss's death, and Aphra's unresolved sense of injustice, points out the extent to which the organized justice system is flawed and fails to mete out appropriate punishments.

Moreover, this episode demonstrates both how close-knit Eyam is and how vulnerable it is to disruption of its customs. Although it's the family's responsibility to rescue the impaled victim, Anna speaks of "our negligence," seeming to take the entire community to task for not caring enough about Joss and Aphra. Anna understands that the town can't disown one of its members – even such an objectionable one as Joss – without unleashing negative consequences for everyone.

❝ I saw that she had fashioned, instead, a figure that looked like a manikin. This she lay atop the cairn. I commenced to say the Lord's Prayer, and I thought she was saying it with me in a low, deep-throated murmur. But when I said amen, her muttering continued, and the sign she made at the end of it did not resemble the sign of the cross.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Aphra Bont

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

After venturing onto the moors to find Joss's mangled corpse, Aphra and Anna dig a grave and bury him. In lieu of a formal funeral, they begin to pray over the body. However, while Anna recites the Lord's Prayer, Aphra is chanting some sort of pagan verse. Moreover, instead of making a

cross to place over the grave, she makes a pagan effigy. Before the plague, behavior like this would've been considered witchcraft and harshly punished. However, this moment shows how much the community's old conventions have eroded because of the catastrophe; even important events like death, which used to be governed by formal religious customs, are relinquished to unorthodox non-Christian rituals.

Aphra's open embrace of paganism also highlights the extent to which formal religion is ineffective in fighting the plague or providing a sense of meaning to suffering people. While Aphra's muttering and chanting seems superstitious and meaningless, most religious justifications of the plague have proved to be empty as well. The increasingly blurry line between religion and superstition will eventually cause Anna to turn to science, finding it a better alternative for making sense of the world.

Part 2: The Press of Their Ghosts Quotes

❝ By gathering and sorting my own feelings so, I was finally able to fashion a scale on which I could weigh my father's nature and find a balance between my disgust for him and an understanding of him; my guilt in the matter of his death against the debt he owed me for the manner of my life.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Aphra Bont , Elinor Mompellion, Josiah Bont

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

Anna can't get Joss's horrible death out of her mind; she feels it was a miscarriage of justice and that by not thinking to rescue him from the moors, she was complicit in it. Seeing she's upset, Elinor soothes Anna and coaxes her into telling her both about her own brutal childhood and the traumas her father endured as a child. By evaluating her father's character more impartially, Anna is able to arrive at an understanding of him that isn't colored by resentment of his actions or remorse for his death. Thus, Anna is able to achieve a sense of peace which her relationship with Joss has always lacked. She's able to move past this traumatic event without hungering for retribution revenge. While requiring a lot of compassion and understanding, this is an innovative approach to justice compared to the punishment-based models the community usually employs. It stands in marked contrast to Aphra's method of achieving justice later in the novel, when, in an attempt assuage her grief over Joss's death, she commits a senseless murder, thus perpetuating a cycle of wrongdoing without resolving any previous crimes.

❝ Why, I wondered, did we, all of us, both the rector in his pulpit and simple Lottie in her croft, seek to put the Plague in unseen hands? Why should this thing be either a test of faith sent by God, or the evil working of the Devil in the world? One of these beliefs we embraced, the other we scorned as superstition. But perhaps each was false, equally.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Lottie and Tom Mowbray, Michael Mompellion

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

Anna is walking home from the Mowbray cottage, where she has just scolded Lottie for believing in the power of fake charms to cure the plague. On her way home, she mulls over the community's general tendency to interpret the plague as part of a supernatural plan, whether divine or demonic. People are encouraged to believe that the plague is part of God's plan, while they are admonished not to succumb to superstitions like seeking help from the Devil. However, Anna links both the accepted and the stigmatized explanations for the plague; neither of them has the power to reassure her. The rise of obviously false superstitions causes her to question long-accepted religious customs as well, and ultimately her experiences with superstition will lead her to lose her faith in organized religion altogether.

❝ For if we could be allowed to see the Plague as a thing in Nature merely, we did not have to trouble about the grand celestial design that had to be contemplated before the disease would abate. We could simply work upon it as a farmer might toil to rid his field of unwanted tare, knowing that when we found the tools and the method and the resolve, we would free ourselves, no matter if we were a village of sinners or a host of saints.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

Anna continues to contemplate the origins of the plague. Here, her distrust of religious and superstitious explanations of the plague leads her to champion a scientific approach to the problem. While religious leaders like Mompellion compare the plague to a test from a parental deity – something with logical structure and meaning – Anna starts to view it as something natural but lacking a higher philosophical meaning, like a problem in farming. This is a troubling thought, because it removes the ideological justifications that people use to reassure themselves and find meaning in their suffering. However, it also does away with the feelings of guilt and shame that arise when the plague is explained as a punishment. Moreover, it allows Anna to start thinking more scientifically about the plague, and to be more effective, in turn, in mitigating its effects.

But fear, as I have said, was working strange changes in all of us, corroding our ability for clear thought. Within a sennight, Martin Miller had girt his family in sack cloth and fashioned a scourge. Randoll Daniel did likewise, though thankfully he did not ask it of his wife and babe. Together, Randoll and the Millers went about the village exhorting others to join them in their bloody self-chastisement.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Martin Miller, Mary and Randoll Daniel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

When John Gordon learns about the extreme practice of self-flagellation in a tract from London, Mompellion intervenes right away to keep him from spreading it to the rest of the village, although his success is limited and some of the other men take up practice even after it leads to Gordon's death. Anna easily identifies flagellation as a useless superstition, self-destructive and pernicious to community order (Mompellion says flagellation leads to the development of mobs). However, flagellation has some things in common with orthodox religious practices: both ascribe the plague to a divine plan and seek to halt its progress through acts of piety and penance (although the ones Mompellion suggests are much less violent). Anna's quick conclusion that superstitions like flagellation are bad for the community eventually causes her to question the wisdom of organized religion as well.

I was jealous of them both at once. Of him, because Elinor loved him, and I hungered for a greater share of her love than I could ever hope for. And yet I was jealous of her, too; jealous that she was loved by a man as a woman is meant to be loved.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Michael Mompellion , Elinor Mompellion

Related Themes:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

Working more or less as equals to stop the tide of the plague, Anna has come to view Elinor and Mompellion as colleagues and friends rather than employers. However, when she sees the Mompellions conferring about village politics, speaking lovingly and respectfully, she's reminded both that they are of a much higher status than she is and that they have a close marriage from which she's necessarily excluded. Anna's jealousy is more focused on Elinor than Mompellion: she wants both to be Elinor and to be loved by Elinor. Anna imagines their bond as rivaling romantic love in its strength; this moment shows the intensity of the friendship developing between them and the possibility of strong female friendships to replace romantic attachments. While Anna still feels right now that she's missing out on a romantic part of life that women are "meant" to have, by the end of the novel she will have abandoned any ideas of romance in favor of strong platonic friendships.

Part 2: A Great Burning Quotes

To me, she had become so many things. So many things a servant has no right or reason to imagine that the person they serve will be. Because of her, I had known the warmth of a motherly concern – the concern that my own mother had not lived to show me. Because of her, I had a teacher and was not ignorant and unlettered still.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Elinor Mompellion

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

As Elinor languishes in bed with what Michael and Anna believe is the plague, Anna reflects on what she will lose if Elinor dies. Just as she did when Anna described her at the beginning of the novel, Elinor represents a kind of class mobility that is absent in the rest of the community; Anna always emphasizes that they don't have a normal servant-employer relationship, and that Elinor's friendship has taught her to expect things that might be considered above her station.

Anna describes her bond with Elinor as having a maternal character. Moreover, Elinor's mothering presence wasn't just of emotional comfort but helped Anna develop her intellect and become a more capable person. This follows the novel's pattern of equating maternity with female friendship and empowerment. Motherhood, biological or otherwise, is a force that both draws women together and strengthens them individually.

> To be sure, our stocks were nothing so fearful as the Bakewell pillory. In that market town, where people came and went without deep ties to another, to be pilloried was to be a target of rotten fruit or fish heads or any noisome thing the mob could lay a hand to. […] Even Reverend Stanley seldom called for sinners to be stocked, and Mr. Mompellion had actively discouraged it.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Thomas Stanley , Michael Mompellion , Aphra Bont

Related Themes:

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

When Aphra appears at the town green after her night in the sewer, the villagers are shocked and appalled at her battered condition. Anna reflects that Aphra looks like she's suffered punishment in the neighboring city of Bakewell. Because inhabitants of larger cities don't know each other as well, they tend to be crueler in their communal punishments, whereas the close-knit Eyam community tends to be more restrained. Brand and Robert's harsh treatment of Aphra shows that instead of drawing people closer together, the plague has dissolved community bonds and weakened people's capacity for empathy.

Moreover, this episode shows that the unnecessarily harsh punishment that Aphra suffers isn't an effective way of resolving a crime or establishing a sense of justice, even though it mimics methods of justice that are accepted in other places, like Bakewell. The villagers will continue to resent Aphra's actions, and Aphra will still feel aggrieved because of the death of her husband. These simmering grievances will eventually lead Aphra to commit an act of consummate injustice when she murders Elinor Mompellion, emphasizing the need to find a new method of evaluating and judging crimes.

> She plunged and leapt, barking out a nonsense chant that rose in pitch to a piercing cry: "Arataly, rataly, ataly, taly, aly, ly….." She darted then toward the fire, seizing out the ends of an iron that had lain in the blaze, and placed them on the earthen floor so as to form an X. She prostrated herself four times, in each notch of the figure, and then reached up her arms as if in supplication.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Aphra Bont

Related Themes:

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

After Aphra's ordeal in the sewer, Anna is worried that she won't be able to take care of her daughter, Faith, and goes to her cottage in the middle of the night to check on her. She finds Aphra chanting nonsense and performing a dance ritual which she has evidently invented to appeal to satanic powers. Aphra's wholehearted submission to these cultish rituals shows just how appealing superstition is in a time of crisis. Even Anna, who doesn't believe in witchcraft, is shocked enough to momentarily worry that Aphra really does have supernatural powers.

It's notable that while Aphra's behavior is easily identifiable as wrongheaded and superstitious, it's about as effective as orthodox religious doctrine in combating the plague – that is, neither one can satisfactorily account for the catastrophe or prevent people from dying. The implicit comparison between organized religion and pagan superstition doesn't necessarily mean that people need to abandon their faith, but it does show how dangerous it is to rely on supernatural forces to remedy worldly problems. Rather, characters like Anna will find a better way forward by relying on scientific

methods.

Part 3: Apple-Picking Time Quotes

> His wife had been hacked down in front of him. My olive shoots had been blighted. *Why?* His unasked question roared in my head. Just such a *why* had nagged at my unquiet mined through too many sleepless nights. But that he, too, should be asking it…*Let her speak direct to God to ask forgiveness…but I fear she may find Him a poor listener, as many of us here have done.* Could he really have come to believe that all our sacrifice, all our pain and misery, had been for nothing?

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Michael Mompellion

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

When Elizabeth Bradford returns to Eyam to demand Mompellion's spiritual help for her dying mother, he disdainfully tells her to pray to God while suggesting it won't do her any good. Here, Mompellion shows an astonishing lack of faith. For the entire novel he has been trying to reassure everyone that the plague is a test imposed by a loving God on his chosen people, but now he implies that God is an indifferent presence, if not an outright malevolent one. Anna has been struggling with the same doubts, and hearing Mompellion voice them weakens her connection to organized religion even further. However, it's important to note that Mompellion's loss of faith leads him to conclude that his actions don't matter and he's free to behave irresponsibly and immorally. By contrast, even after she loses her faith Anna finds a renewed sense of purpose by turning to science and doing good works as a doctor. Mompellion and Anna showcase alternative reactions to a crisis in religious faith.

> *We live, we live, we live,* said the hoofbeats, and the drumming of my pulse answered them. I was alive, and I was young, and I would go on until I found some reason for it. As I rode that morning, smelling the scent of the hoofcrushed heather, feeling the wind needle my face until it tingled, I understood that where Michael Mompellion had been broken by our shared ordeal, in equal measure I had been tempered and made strong.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Michael Mompellion

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

Seeing Mompellion's stallion Anteros neglected and restless in the stable, Anna decides to take him out for a ride. The exhilaration of galloping through the moors on the horse breaks through the lethargy and numbness that has gripped Anna for most of the novel. For the first time since her sons died, she takes an acute pleasure in being alive, rather than seeing her existence as a matter of duty and obligation. Anna's sudden hopefulness underscores her realization of her own strength at this moment: she understands that while she has always considered Mompellion to be wiser and more powerful than her, she has emerged from the plague much more capable and competent than him.

It's notable that Anna's feelings of personal liberation and power come on the heels of her very sensual experience shaving Mompellion (so intense she couldn't finish the task) and right before their first sexual encounter. Although the stirrings of sexual desire are only implicit here, the passage contributes to the novel's argument that female sexuality isn't a submission to immoral impulses but rather a force for women's liberation and empowerment.

> "I thought I spoke for God. Fool. My whole life, all I have done, all I have said, all I have felt, has been based upon a lie. Untrue in everything. So now," he said, "I have learned at last to do as I please!"

Related Characters: Michael Mompellion (speaker), Anna Frith

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

After Anna and Mompellion have sex, Anna questions him about his relationship with Elinor and Mompellion reveals that he'd imposed celibacy on their marriage as penance for Elinor's premarital affair. However, since he no longer believes in God, Mompellion regrets this decision, since he made himself and his wife suffer for nothing. In Anna's eyes, the first part of Mompellion's realization is spot-on: it's

impossible to know who, if anyone, speaks for God, and making drastic decisions (like Mompellion's regarding his marriage) based on a dubious interpretation of God's will is unwise and dangerous. However, for Mompellion this realization leads to thoughtless hedonism. He says that he will "do as [he] please[s]" and have sex with Anna, regardless of any moral or personal considerations. Mompellion's loss of faith in organized religion leads to a loss of principles in general. Anna too has lost faith in religion, but she doesn't take this path. By rejecting Mompellion, she rejects his bleak new worldview as well, finding a new purpose and new set of principles to guide her through the world.

❝ In lying with him, I had sought to bring her closer to me. I had tried to become her, in every way that I could. Instead, in taking my pleasure from his body, I had stolen from her – stolen what should have been hers, her wedding night.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Michael Mompellion , Elinor Mompellion

Related Themes:

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

After Mompellion's horrifying revelation about his twisted marriage, Anna stumbles out of his bed and runs to the graveyard, where she lies sobbing on Elinor's grave. She feels guilty toward her friend and sad that she didn't know about her suffering during her lifetime. More importantly, although she never explicitly thought of Elinor while she was with Mompellion, she recasts their entire brief dalliance as a subconscious attempt to get closer to her dead friend. In Anna's new evaluation, the sexual encounter becomes a transaction between her and Elinor. She speaks of Mompellion in terms of his body, thereby reducing him to a position of unimportance. Rather, she was using him to seek spiritual proximity to Elinor. Here, Anna suggests that sexuality is inextricably linked to the strong bonds of female friendship. Moreover, she shows that strong bonds between women outweigh in importance transitory sexual links with men.

❝ Why, I wondered, had the surgeon abandoned this case as hopeless? Had he persevered here he could easily have done what I was about to attempt. It came to me then that he must have arrived under instruction to be negligent.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Colonel Bradford, Anne Bradford

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

When Anna arrives to Bradford Hall she expects to find Mrs. Bradford in life-threatening conditions. Even though the patient is frightened and in pain, Anna quickly realizes she's just suffering from a simple breach birth, something which the surgeon could have remedied himself; thus, she concludes that Colonel Bradford must have told the surgeon to let his wife die. This barber surgeon is one of many in the book who are ignorant and unscrupulous. Through the behavior of such men, the novel argues that male-dominated, institutionalized medicine is not only inadequate but actively pernicious to women, part of a world order in which men harshly punish women for transgressing restrictive mores. Anna will go on to save Mrs. Bradford and her baby, turning the situation from a tragedy of women's oppression to an instance of female strength and resilience.

❝ This little girl seemed to me, at that moment, answer enough to all my questions. To have saved this small, singular one – this alone seemed reason enough that I lived. I knew then that this was how I was meant to go on: away from death and toward life, from birth to birth, from seed to blossom, living my life amongst wonders.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Aisha

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

In Mrs. Bradford's case, Anna has the satisfaction of replacing a negligent male surgeon and using her hard-learned medical skills to save two lives. When she sees the baby, Anna is filled with a renewed sense of purpose that she hasn't felt since her sons died. Delivering babies has always cheered Anna in dark times, making her aware of her

capabilities as a woman and the instinctive bonds that draw different women together. This sense is heightened in the Bradford birth, because Anna saves a baby whom powerful male forces – Colonel Bradford and his barber surgeon – would happily have seen dead. Anna finds purpose not only in her work as a midwife but in helping other women in the face of male oppression.

The word "wonder" also resurfaces in this passage. For most of the novel, "wonder" has been used to describe events believed to be supernatural or beyond human comprehension. Now that Anna has lost her faith and resolved only to focus on worldly problems, she finds wonder in the events of everyday life, without attributing them to some sort of divine plan. For Anna, tasks like these, which require her developing medical skills, are the most wonderful of all.

> As hard as I willed it, I could not draw up anything to follow: no formal supplication, no Bible verse, no scrap of liturgy. All of the texts and Psalms and orisons I had by rote were gone from me, erased, as surely as hard-learned words written with painful effort onto a slate can be licked away with the lazy swipe of a dampened rag.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Aisha, Elizabeth Bradford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

After preventing Elizabeth from drowning her baby sister, Anna pleads to be allowed to adopt the baby. As Elizabeth coldly considers the proposition, Anna resorts to prayer, as she normally would in such a tense situation. However, she finds all the familiar texts have escaped her. This is especially notable since she lives in a community dominated by religious liturgy, and said earlier that she's always savored the beautiful texts. This sudden blankness highlights that organized religion has failed Anna as a guiding support, and that she can no longer rely on it in moments of crisis.

Here, Anna's lack of faith stands in contrast to Elizabeth's. The Bradfords have never been particularly pious; Colonel Bradford mocked Mompellion when he suggested that they had a Christian duty to stay in Eyam and fight the plague. But while Elizabeth's disregard for religion makes her cold and narcissistic, eager to sacrifice others for her own well-being, Anna's loss of faith doesn't alter her strong principles; after all, at this moment she's fighting for a baby she has no obligation to protect. Anna is living proof that, even without a strong religious faith, people can proceed with strong morals.

Epilogue Quotes

> We have spoken much since then about faith: the adamantine one by which the doctor measures every moment of his day, and that flimsy, tattered thing that is the remnant of my own belief. I see it like the faded threads of a banner on a battlement, shot-shredded, and if it once bore a device, none could now say what it might have been. I have told Ahmed Bey that I cannot say that I have faith anymore. Hope, perhaps. We have agreed that it will do, for now.

Related Characters: Anna Frith (speaker), Ahmed Bey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

After Anna moves to Oran, she develops a close friendship with her mentor, the noted doctor Ahmed Bey. Besides discussing their daily work together, Anna shares her experiences during the plague year and they ruminate about whether God really is present in worldly events. Removed from Eyam's religious homogeneity, Anna is able to contemplate faith (and lack thereof) with more flexibility than she could before. Ahmed Bey's status as both a respected doctor and a devout Muslim shows that science isn't necessarily at odds with religious faith. Conversely, Anna has lost her faith but retains "hope" and a sense of purpose in the world, thereby demonstrating that t turn away from religion doesn't have to be a traumatic event or lead to a mental breakdown, as it did for Mompellion. Overall, the novel suggests that faith should be a matter of deep personal reflection, rather than something governed by social or institutional laws.

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.

PART 1: APPLE-PICKING TIME

Anna Frith, a housemaid in the English town of Eyam, remarks that she used to love autumn. The season produced rich sights, like the "golden" hay, and smells, like sap and ripe apples. All these things signified that the harvest was successful and the town will make it safely through the winter. This year, no one has harvested hay or cut wood, and farmers harvested the **apples** so late that many of them are rotten. However, Anna feels too exhausted to worry about what this might mean for their survival.

The novel's opening passage confronts the reader with two markedly different communities: the orderly, productive village Anna remembers and the eerie scenes she sees today—where tasks are left undone and there are no people in sight. The juxtaposition of the Eyam of the past and the Eyam of the present lets the reader know immediately that a catastrophe has occurred, and it frames the catastrophe in terms of its consequences to community order.

Anna cuts up an **apple** and takes it to her employer, the rector Michael Mompellion, who spends all his time sitting silently in an upstairs room. She offers to read the Bible to him, but he declines. After tidying his room the best she can, she returns to the household chores. She's the only servant left at the rectory and is responsible for all its upkeep, from cooking meals to feeding Mompellion's horse, Anteros. She brings an apple to the proud stallion and plans to make the rest of the **apples** into cider, since she "can't stand" their smell when they rot.

Although Anna is nominally a servant, it's clear that she's in charge both of her household and of the rector Mompellion, who seems to be incapacitated in some way, since he has turned away from the Bible, the symbol of his vocation. This reversal in class distinctions is another indicator that something very disruptive has happened in Eyam. Readers also learn here that Anna is committed to maintaining order as much as possible. She is determined to put the harvested apples to use, recalling the community's days of prosperity, instead of letting them rot and remind her of the town's current state of decay.

Leaving the rectory for the night, Anna walks home through the orchards to avoid meeting anyone. The trees make her remember good things from the past, like the night her husband, Sam Frith, asked her to marry him. Anna had two sons with her husband and was content, even though "it was not a time when we were raised up thinking to be happy," because the austere Puritans controlling the town at the time discouraged anything they saw as frivolous enjoyment.

Anna marks the passing of time by which religious group controls Eyam, showing how foundational religion is to the community. She informs the reader obliquely that Eyam has recently undergone a profound religious shift, from Puritan to Anglican control. Although the town presents an image of religious homogeneity, in fact there are many conflicting viewpoints about what it means to be a Christian and how one should approach the divine.

However, after three years Sam was killed in a mining accident. Anna remarks that Sam's was the first of dozens of dead bodies she has prepared for the grave in the last few years. She compares his death in the dark mine to Mompellion's habit of spending all day in a dark room, and says that she tends to him as she would her husband. She tells herself that she does this for the sake of Elinor, her friend and Mompellion's dead wife, but seems to doubt this stated motivation for her loyalty.

Anna's stoic reference to her husband's death shows that even in the past Eyam life was marked by tragedy and hardship. Moreover, her comparison of her husband and her employer shows how closely Anna feels herself tied to her employer. Although she's their servant, Anna thinks of the Mompellions as family or close friends. Still, she can't quite understand the nature of her relationship to them or the reasons for her loyalty.

Anna spends a lonely night in her cottage and returns to the rectory in the morning with a bucket of milk from her cow, which she intends to make into a sweet dish that will tempt Mompellion to eat. She describes the village, which consists of one small street on the side of a hill. All the buildings are made from local materials, just as the villagers only eat what they can grow. These days, instead of being dirty and muddy from too much traffic, the road is "grassed over" from disuse. Anna is amazed that while it took the villagers hundreds of years to carve out a small community, nature only needs a few seasons to "reclaim its place."

The reader gets a sense of Eyam's isolation and the ever-present anxiety about survival, since the villagers have only the materials and crops around them to rely on. Anna also shows her awe of "nature," which she describes as a powerful but impersonal force, not necessarily related to the divine. Anna respects nature but fears it, too, noting its tendency to obliterate rather than nurture human presence.

At the rectory Anna finds Elizabeth Bradford, the daughter of a local family of landed gentry. Elizabeth demands to see Mompellion, pushing aside Anna's excuses that he is too unwell to perform pastoral tasks and resenting that a servant even dares to speak back to her. Anna makes an ironic comment that the village didn't expect to be "graced by your presence" after the Bradfords fled from the plague the year before. Elizabeth is so proud that she believes Anna is speaking in earnest.

Elizabeth, who has been absent during whatever disaster has occurred, still operates by the old social conventions which privileged her desires above all else. But her behavior is so outmoded now that she looks silly and delusional. Anna, a servant, doesn't even bother to be deferential to her. Their exchange shows that events in Eyam have had profound consequences for class dynamics.

Elizabeth pushes past Anna and ambushes Mompellion on the rectory stairwell, demanding that he come to her mother, who is dying of a "tumor" at Bradford Hall. However, Mompellion is unmoved. He says that since the Bradfords have been absent for the last year when the town had need of them, they shouldn't expect him care about their needs now. He suggests sarcastically that Elizabeth and her mother pray for God's forgiveness, but says He will probably prove "a poor listener."

Mompellion's sharp words alert Elizabeth to her new place in the community; her class privileges can't overcome the Bradford's callous exodus from Eyam in its hour of need. Even more shockingly, Mompellion demonstrates an embittered ambivalence toward God. As the rector, he's supposed to assure the townspeople that God is a constant presence in the world, caring for his people, but here he characterizes God as impersonal, if not outright malicious, in much the same way that Anna described "nature" before.

In the kitchen, Elizabeth breaks down in weeping so pathetically that Anna can't help consoling her. Elizabeth confesses that Mrs. Bradford doesn't actually have a tumor, implying that she has become pregnant out of wedlock and that Colonel Bradford has disowned her as a "whore."

According to the mores of the day, women's sexuality must be contained within the bonds of matrimony and controlled by their husbands. Transgressions of these oppressive customs are likely to have harsh consequences. Disowned by her husband and powerless without him, Mrs. Bradford is likely to die in childbirth. This pregnancy is associated with the stigmatization of female sexuality and its life-threatening results.

Anna is concerned by the sudden turn in the Bradfords' circumstances, but even more so by Mompellion's blasphemous speech to Elizabeth, which she sees as evidence of mental instability. She returns to his room, picks up the Bible, and reads from Psalm 103, about God's forgiveness. Mompellion counters with Psalm 128, which says that "your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house," a bitter reference to his own dead wife, Elinor. Then he deliberately drops the Bible on the floor.

In a society organized around religion, religious doubts are almost synonymous with insanity. Anna attempts to rationalize current events through a literal interpretation of the Bible, the way she has always been taught to approach religion. However, Mompellion points out the unreliability of such interpretations. His final desecration of the Bible shows the profound religious shift that has taken place in Eyam.

PART 2: RING OF ROSES

The narrative turns back in time to the spring of the previous year. After the financial hardships of the first winter of her husband's death, Anna is thankful when George Viccars, a journeyman tailor new to town, becomes her paying tenant, supplementing the meager living she ekes out from raising a flock of sheep and working part-time as a maid at Bradford Hall. George works for Anna's neighbor, Alexander Hadfield, and turns out to be kind and polite; he immediately takes to Anna's sons Jamie and Tom, and spends a lot of time playing with them. At night, he works by the fire and tells fascinating tales of faraway cities like London, York, and Canterbury. As their friendship becomes more intimate, Anna notes that she never had evenings like this with her husband, Sam, who worked all day in the mines and was too tired to talk when he got home.

This passage tells the reader a lot about Anna's character. She's highly independent, figuring out resourceful ways to support herself as a widow rather than relying on others or turning to a second marriage. She's also very intelligent and, even when she's most content, chafes at the tiny sphere in which she lives. Intellectually, she has much more in common with well-traveled outsiders like her tenant, George, than the simple villagers like her husband, among whom she's lived her entire life.

The towns is greatly excited when Mr. Hadfield orders a box of cloth from London, which he and George store in Anna's cottage. Even though he's inundated with orders for clothes from the villagers, George finds time to make Anna a beautiful green dress. Anna is reluctant to accept the gift, worried that others will think it evidence of an improper relationship between tenant and landlady, or that it will make her feel beholden to George. But she has almost no possessions and only one dress, so she tries it on and is surprised by how beautiful and womanly she feels while wearing it. George kisses her and says that he wishes she would let him "provide for you in all matters," hinting that he would like to marry her. But when Anna touches his face, she realizes he has a fever and orders him to bed, saying they will talk about this later.

This passage lays out Anna's complex relationship with her sexuality. The beautiful dress shows George's desire for her. One the one hand, it's exciting and alluring to feel desirable. Still, she knows that accepting the dress has consequences. Any public demonstration of sexuality from an unmarried woman will bring disapproval from the community. On a personal level, she worries that even an implicit sexual entanglement threatens the independence she's carved out for herself. Here, Anna characterizes female sexuality as fundamentally at odds with a woman's social position and her independence.

Anna sleeps poorly, mulling over the possibility of marrying George. Preoccupied since her husband's death with the survival of her small family, she realizes that she is still young (only eighteen) and wants to experience life and love again. She does her morning chores and leaves the house before George or her sons awake. As she kisses Jamie's head, she reflects that although Christians are warned not to love "any earthly thing" more than God, her love for her sons is stronger than anything she has ever known.

Anna is ambivalent about her romantic feelings for George, especially compared to her incredibly strong bond with her sons. But she knows she's attracted to him, and this attraction reminds her of her youth and potential, which she's forgotten since her husband's death. This is the first instance of sexual desire rescuing Anna from emotional lethargy and prompting her to action.

Arriving at the rectory, where she works as a housemaid in the mornings, Anna finds Elinor Mompellion working in the garden. Elinor is a rare example of a well-born woman who doesn't think herself too good to work the land, or to be kind to her servants; Anna characterizes her as inherently good, saying that she "could not" perceive "the distinctions the world wanted to make" between those of high or low status. Elinor has been teaching Anna to read; although almost everyone in Eyam is illiterate, Anna has always been smart and hungry for knowledge, making letters in the dust as a child and loving church because it provided her access to literature.

Elinor nurtures Anna's intellectual growth, teaching her more than is socially acceptable for a servant or a woman. This passage emphasizes Anna's intelligence but also the fact that her friendship with Elinor is grounded in education and the sense of empowerment Anna derives from obtaining knowledge. Elinor's inherent goodness is linked to her disregard for class distinctions, which suggests that such distinctions are inherently bad.


However, Anna doesn't want Elinor to teach her herb knowledge, lest other people begin to think she is a witch. While Elinor is protected by her class from such suspicions, the town healer, Mem Gowdie, was once accused of witchcraft; people believed that because her teas and salves could cure illnesses, she could also cause miscarriages or bad harvests. The villagers still look "aslant" at Mem's neice, Anys, who also works as a healer; Anna notes that her stepmother, Aphra, relies on Anys to cure her children's minor ailments but fills the house with charms against witches when she visits. Aphra insinuates that Anys uses supernatural means to make herself more attractive to men.

Just as she emphasizes how much she loves learning, Anna reflects on the danger of seeming too educated or knowledgeable as a woman. The women in Eyam with the most knowledge, the Gowdies, are feared and ostracized, even though everyone else relies on them for medical care. The Gowdies show how hostile society is to any kind of female power, even if that power is manifested through knowledge that benefits everyone. Mem Gowdie's accusation of witchcraft is a testament to the punishment waiting for any woman who seems suspiciously smart.

After completing her morning's work at the rectory, Anna returns home to nurse Tom. She's surprised her sons are sitting in the kitchen with Jane, the girl that watches them, rather than playing with George. Going upstairs, she finds George lying in bed, moaning with fever and disfigured by a huge sore on his face that smells like rotting **apples**. George, recognizing that he has a contagious and fatal disease, urges Anna to take her children and leave the house; but Anna stays to nurse him, fetching Mompellion to console him spiritually. Before George dies, he exhorts them to burn all his possessions and the cloth that came from London.

While apples used to symbolize prosperity and safety for Anna, they quickly come to remind her of the grotesque sores that appear on plague victims. Here, apples begin to represent the precariously thin line between vitality and decay. This passage also shows Anna's instinctive altruism. Even though George tells her repeatedly that her own survival is at stake, she refuses to leave him to die alone. Her bravery and compassion are similar to Mompellion's.

PART 2: THE THUNDER OF HIS VOICE

The morning after George's death, Anna begins scrubbing the house and prepares to burn all his possessions. However, Anys Gowdie arrives to claim her gown. She shocks Anna by saying offhandedly that herbal medicine might have helped George more than the "empty mutterings of a priest," which is blasphemous, even criminal speech. Moreover, the gown she ordered unsettles Anna; a vivid scarlet, it defies the erstwhile Puritan laws about somber dressing and even the more relaxed conventions in effect since the return of Anglicanism. It also has a scandalously low neckline, which Anna thinks suggests an improper intimacy with George. In the end, all George's customer's follow Anys's example, unwilling to surrender goods they've already paid for. Only Anna burns the green dress George made her.

When Anys appears to collect her gown, she flouts convention in two ways. She offhandedly denigrates religion and asserts that her own scientific remedies have more power than faith. This is an attitude Anna will come to share, but she'll never be so cavalier about announcing it, careful not to be accused of witchcraft. Moreover, Anys is not embarrassed by her gown, which exudes sexuality. This contrasts with Anna's anxieties about the sexual implications of a much more modest dress. Anna is shocked by Anys's disregard for social customs she considers absolute, but she's also fascinated and allured by her independence.

In the afternoon, Anna walks to Bradford Hall, where she staffing a large dinner that evening. On her way, she stops at the Gowdies' cottage to ask Anys about her relationship with George. Anys airily confesses that she slept with George but that it meant nothing to either of them. This freewheeling, guiltless attitude toward extramarital sex is totally foreign to Anna, but she ends up admiring Anys' determination to enjoy herself without getting married and becoming "any man's chattel."

Speaking openly of her relationship with George, Anys introduces Anna to a new type of female sexuality: she sees sexual fulfillment as inherently positive and seeks it on her own terms, without submitting to marriage or any other manifestation of male power. For Anys, while sex liberates women, romance and marriage confine them and are antithetical to the independent life she craves.

Leaving the cottage, Anna reflects that Anys defies the black-and-white concept of sin the Puritans taught her as a child. While Anys undoubtedly sins by committing "fornication and blasphemy," she performs good works as a healer every day, and the health of the village rests on her.

Anna's fascination with Anys leads her to question the Puritan moral scheme with which she grew up. As the novel progresses, this train of thought will grow into a conviction that severe religious paradigms are inadequate as frameworks for rationalizing all the complexities of human nature.

As she walks Anna passes the Riley farm, where her friend Lib Hancock lives with her husband as tenant farmers. They sit for a minute to catch up and discuss George's death; in the spirit of friendship, Anna confesses that she was considering marrying George and that she had just learned of Anys' affair with him.

Following her conversation with Anys, Anna is feeling open-minded about issues of sexuality, enough to discuss Anys's and her own sexuality with Lib. But when Anys is accused of witchcraft, Lib will use her sexuality against her. While sex can be personally empowering, it can be catastrophic to one's social position and safety.

Anna continues reluctantly to Bradford Hall. She dislikes and fears the Bradford family. Colonel Bradford orders everyone around mercilessly and seems to especially enjoy tormenting his wife, who is "cowed and nervous" from his constant abuse and always mistreats the servants. Elizabeth Bradford is "proud and sour," only slightly redeemed by her genuine concern for her mother, whom she endeavors to protect from her father.

The Bradfords are a nasty family, and their faults derive from an overblown sense of their class superiority. Even within their own marriage, the Bradfords mimic a destructive class dynamic: Colonel Bradford abuses his wife because he has power over her, and Mrs. Bradford takes out her resentment on the only people she can, her servants. The Bradfords show that a rigid embrace of class dynamics doesn't make anyone happy.

Anna waits on the Bradfords and their dinner guests. While most of them behave as though she is invisible, Elinor Mompellion stops to ask after Anna's well-being, a breach of convention that shocks the others. A foppish young man from London catches Anna's attention when he tells the guests about a recent plague outbreak in London and the chaos it has caused. Those who catch the disease are locked up in their houses without treatment or even food, and everyone with money or resources (including him) has escaped to the countryside. Anna immediately wonders if George's fever was in fact the plague.

Elinor's generous and egalitarian behavior stands in contrast with that of the man from London, who gloats about the fact that the well-born and affluent are able to protect themselves from the plague while the poor are not. Unfortunately, his description of the upper-class exodus from London shows that Elinor's behavior is an eccentric exception rather than a rule.

The young man belittles as fools everyone altruistic enough to stay in London to fight the plague, and Mompellion takes issue, asserting that if "all who have the means" flee the plague, they just spread contagion. Rather, people should accept the plague as a "scourge" from God and remain to fight it where it appears. The young man and Colonel Bradford smirk at what they see as unnecessary selflessness, but Mompellion sticks to his convictions. When Anna returns home, she rushes to Jamie and Tom and checks them for fever, feeling profoundly relieved to find their foreheads cool.

The London man says that because class distinctions do *exist, they* ought *to exist; this may seem odd to the modern reader but would have been conventional at the time. Rather, it's Mompellion's embrace of altruism and submission to God's will that would have seemed odd. While the Bradfords have to observe religious formalities, especially in public, it's clear that they don't think Mompellion's pieties apply to people of their class and resources.*

PART 2: RAT-FALL

After George's death are three uneventful weeks of lovely fall weather, and Anna stops expecting disaster at every turn. She takes Jamie and Tom on long rambles through the fields, pausing to help one of her sheep deliver a lamb and bathing naked in the creek. She runs into Mompellion, who is out enjoying the weather with a book and, to her astonishment, stops to sit with her. He says that nature and its beauty is a better expression of the divine than man-made churches and reads to her from his book, a treatise by Augustine of Hippo about miracles in nature. Anna is honored and intimidated that someone so educated and above her in status shares his thoughts with her.

In this brief, halcyon period, Anna enjoys her own independence. Even though she doesn't have a husband, as a woman is conventionally supposed to, she loves her children and has some economic means, represented by the flock of sheep. Her conversation with Mompellion shows her intellectual capabilities. It also emphasizes Mompellion's optimistic view of the divine as something positive and approachable, like a beautiful fall day. Anna will come to share this view – at least for a while.

When they return home, Jamie plans a childish surprise for his mother, showering rose petals on her from the upstairs window. Anna says that that her love from her sons and the simple experiences she shares with them are "my miracles."

The word "miracle" has much in common with the titular "wonders," in that both describe events inspired by the divine. However, while "miracle" is an entirely positive word, "wonders," which will come to define Anna's life, are much more ambiguous, capable of describing happy or calamitous events.

Anna continues the work of the fall harvest, helping her neighbors, the Hadfields, butcher their hogs in exchange for some of the bacon. While they are working, Mary Hadfield catches her son, Edward, and Jamie playing with dead rats they found in the woodpile.

The suggestion in this passage is that the dead rats may be the origin of the plague. However, it will be a long time before Anna investigates the scientific origins of the epidemic, and most villagers will never accept the plague as a phenomenon of nature, seeing it instead as divine castigation.

Rain comes and brings fleas which cover Anna and her sons in bites. Anna meets Mem Gowdie, on her way to treat Edward Hadfield, who is sick with a fever. However, the Hadfields have sent for an expensive barber-surgeon who dismisses Mem as uneducated and unknowledgeable. Anna asks the surgeon if Edward could have the plague, and he arrogantly answers that it's impossible, since there hasn't been plague in the region for decades. Defying conventions of womanly obedience, Anna argues that the surgeon hasn't seen any plague cases to judge against, and tells him that George had sores and "rosy rings" on his body before he died. At this revelation, the surgeon tells her to pray for salvation and not to call on him for treatment anymore, before making a hasty escape.

In the 1600s, male barber surgeons were the only respected medical professionals; but they were often ignorant or ineffective. Even the uneducated Anna can deduce that this one has made the wrong diagnosis. The novel also portrays them as callous and unscrupulous, as this one is. It is Mem, feared as a witch, who has real medical knowledge. The contrasting treatment of the two characters shows how respected institutions can be based on superstition, while helpful science goes unrecognized.

Within a week, Mary Hadfield loses her husband and her two sons to the plague. At the same time, Tom catches the fever. Knowing immediately that he stands no chance of survival, Anna tries to savor her last hours with her son, holding him and soothing him to sleep. Aphra visits and berates her for expending so much love on a child who, even in ordinary circumstances, might reasonably die before he grew up. Elinor proves a much more soothing presence, reading to Anna from the Bible. As Tom finally dies, Anna collapses on the bed in exhaustion; but in the middle of the night she finds herself "howling" deliriously in the street, until all her neighbors wake up and watch her.

In this extremely poignant passage, the most important moments come when Anna is alone with Tom, savoring their intimate bond for the last time. By contrast, she hardly notices when Mompellion comes to perform the rites or Elinor reads from the Bible. At important moments, formal rituals are much less important to Anna than human connection.

PART 2: SIGN OF A WITCH

The Plague, Anna says, is especially cruel in that it inflicts gratuitous grief, letting "its blows fall and fall again upon raw sorrow." She compares its ravages to the repeated and malicious whippings her father experienced as a conscript sailor. She has barely buried Tom when Jamie catches the fever, and since he's an older child he suffers much more intensely.

The first thing Anna notes about the plague is her inability to understand it. Since the villagers believe that all suffering is part of a divine plan, Anna expects to be able to justify the plague in some way, but as the epidemic causes more and more senseless damage, she will have trouble believing it to be the work of God or meaningful in any way.

Elinor helps Anna nurse Jamie. She brings letters from Mompellion's colleagues at Oxford, doctors who recommend complex poultices that do nothing to help Jamie's growing sores. One particularly well-known doctor sends a talisman containing a dried toad, but neither woman has any confidence in its efficacy. Anys brings a herbal salve that quiets him and eases his pain. However, Anys realizes that he has no chance of survival, telling Anna that her "arms will not be empty forever."

Anna has at her disposal remedies from both the respected medical establishment and the widely denigrated herbal healers, but it's Anys' tonic which has the positive effect. Notably, the women can tell immediately that the talismans sent by famed doctors are worse than useless. This demonstrates their scientific acumen and resistance to superstition. It also shows that they're on their own fighting the plague, and can't expect much wisdom from the institutions others trust.


After five days, Jamie dies, attended by Anna and both the Mompellions. He is buried alongside a growing number of plague victims. In a fog of grief, Anna spends most of her time wandering through the churchyard, wondering why her tenant, her children, and many of her neighbors have perished while she has been spared. As she looks at stone crosses that date back to the arrival of Christianity in Britain, she reflects that there seems to be no significance to these deaths and that God seems to desire human suffering.

Anna's idea of God as parental and desiring of human betterment is already challenged by the plague's caprices. Meanwhile, her focus on the early Christian monuments shows an implicit awareness that religious customs are transient and depend on sociopolitical circumstances, rather than an eternal bedrock on which to safely base opinions and action.

One evening three weeks after Jamie's death, Anna is retrieving an errant sheep from the moors when she comes across an inebriated and hysterical mob of villagers, including her friend Lib and neighbor Mary. The mob is attacking Mem Gowdie, accusing her of witchcraft and, convinced that her blood can cure the plague, smearing it on the bodies of their sick relatives. Anna tries to defend Mem, pointing out that no one has seen her do any suspect, but the mob is impervious to logic. Instead, they decide to dunk Mem in the flooded mine; common superstition stated that if a witch was dunked, she would float. In the chaos, Anna falls on the ground and faints.

The mob shows how quickly community customs have failed in the face of the plague's ravages, and it also shows how quickly violence fills the vacuum when customs come to seem inadequate. Throughout the novel, superstition will be linked with panic and violence, as it is here, but superstition will also prove more attractive than rationality, as it does when Anna's attempt to reason with the mob falls on deaf ears.


When Anna wakes up, Mem is sinking, which means she is "innocent" but likely to drown. No one is brave enough to jump in and rescue her until Anys arrives with a rope and hauls her aunt out of the pond. Anys performs a primitive form of CPR to revive Mem, but the crowd views this as evidence that she has "raised the dead" and is therefore the witch culpable for the plague. When Anna tries to defend Anys, Lib points out that Anna herself said Anys "consorted with" George, the first plague victim. The mob screams that Anys is a "fornicator" and attacks her, knocking Anna down in the process.

The community accepts harmful superstitions (like the practice of "dunking") as rational fact while denouncing helpful science (like CPR) as the work of the devil. Later, this tendency will hinder efforts to fight the plague scientifically. Moreover, when Anys divulged her relationship with George to Anna, it was a moment that highlighted female power and independence—but when such information is publicly known, it imperils her life, showing how sexuality can both liberate and threaten women.

The mob puts a noose around Anys' neck, but before they hang her she yells that she is in fact "the Devil's creature." She says that she has slept with the Devil, that she has seen all the other women do so as well, and that he is much more sexually satisfying than any of their husbands. The men hang her.

More than anyone else, Anys understands the dysfunctional roots of the community's sexual mores. She knows that men repress female sexuality because they see it as potentially powerful, threatening to undermine their control over the women in their lives. By playing on those fears, Anys attempts to create a distraction that will allow her to escape, but ultimately this effort to subvert male power structures backfires.

Warned by Mary, Mompellion arrives and excoriates the villagers for killing Anys. When they argue that she confessed to witchcraft, he says that she was just trying to sow dissent among the mob in order to save her life. Mompellion says that there is enough suffering and death in the town without people inciting the wrath of God with further misdeeds. Everyone begins crying and praying for God's forgiveness.

Mompellion immediately dispels claims that Anys is a witch, understanding that her "confession" was a desperate ploy to save her life. Here, he appears remarkably progressive, resistant to superstition and to hysteria about female sexuality.

PART 2: VENOM IN THE BLOOD

Anna and Elinor try to nurse Mem, but she dies of her beating five days after Anys. Anna notes that with them dies the medical knowledge the town relied on to cure normal ailments and to prevent women from dying in **childbirth**.

By killing Mem, the town fundamentally harms itself and probably causes more people to die of the plague. However, the vacuum left by Mem and Anys will allow Anna to develop her own identity as a healer.

There is no official punishment for the murder; the justice of the peace won't risk contagion by visiting the town and no jails will hold prisoners form Eyam. Instead, Mompellion makes the members of the mob attend church barefoot and wearing penitents' robes. Anna notes that the plague's growing death toll is evident through the empty pews in the church.

Eyam's pariah status as a plague-stricken town means that the usual systems of justice no longer apply. The community has to find their own means to identify and punish criminals. As the religious leader, it falls on Mompellion to do so, although the punishment he inflicts is relatively light.

Anna is expecting a harsh sermon from Mompellion, since he's been working diligently all week, as well as conferring with the old Puritan pastor, Thomas Stanley. Refusing to use the Anglican Book of Common Prayer after Charles II returned to England, Stanley had to leave his post and live on an isolated farm far from the village. Stanley, who is "uncommonly gentle for a Puritan" and Mompellion get along better than most members of the rival sects. Anna sees the transition between Stanley's Puritanism and Mompellion's Anglicanism as one of the few ways in which the great political events of the world touch the village life of Eyam.

Religious customs are presented as fixed and ordained by God. However, they have a lot to do with politics, as the clerical transition after the English Civil War shows. Mompellion and Stanley's willingness to cooperate in a time of crisis is evidence of their progressivism. They're both willing to form new conventions when the existing ones are inadequate to handle current problems.

In fact, Mompellion gives a charismatic sermon about God's powerful love, saying that God sometimes requires people to "return this love to our fellow humans" by setting difficult tests. He says that the plague is evidence of God's love, not his rage, and that God has singled out the village of Eyam to prove themselves and imitate the selflessness and bravery of Jesus. In order to pass the test, the villagers must agree to stay in the village until the plague has run its course, rather than trying to flee and bringing contagion to family or friends in other areas.

While he's not a completely orthodox preacher, Mompellion is incredibly firm in his religious belief. For most of the novel he will insist on explaining the plague as the work of a benevolent God, because his entire belief system rests on the assumption that everything on earth happens according to a divine plan. For Mompellion, this one belief is what makes sense of everything that happens in the world and which propels him toward altruism and his strong sense of morality.

Mompellion outlines an elaborate plan to impose a voluntary quarantine on the village; supplies will be donated by neighboring towns and organized by the nearby Earl of Chatsworth, all of whom have a vested interest in preventing contagion. The entire village confers in the church, with Mompellion and Stanley making their case to individuals. Although some, Josiah and Aphra, reluctantly agree only because it seems they have no other option, eventually everyone acquiesces to the quarantine except the Bradfords, who quietly leave the church and begin to pack their things for an immediate escape.

The voluntary quarantine is a pivotal point of the novel. At face value, it's an act of enormous altruism, and shows the community refusing to cave in to fear and paranoia. However, as Aphra points out, most people don't have any choice but to accept the quarantine, because they're too poor to travel or haven't ever left Eyam before, while those with resources (i.e., the Bradfords) immediately escape. In this sense, the quarantine reinforces not only values like selflessness and charity but also trends of class privilege. Moreover, Mompellion's rationale for the quarantine rests on the assumption that the plague is a test from God, and those who "pass" will be rewarded. As the novel progresses, this orthodox view of the plague as a divinely mandated event will be challenged.

PART 2: WIDE GREEN PRISON

Leaving the church and feeling good about the town's decision, Anna encounters Maggie Cantwell, the Bradfords' cook. The Bradfords have summarily fired her and ordered her to leave the house, meaning she has no livelihood or place to live. Anna agrees to go to Bradford Hall to help Maggie collect her belongings. When they arrive, everything is chaos; the Bradfords require their servants to pack up their many belongings, but they refuse to take anyone with them as they flee the plague.

This scene reinforces how awful the Bradfords are. Their refusal to care for the people who have always cared for them, and who have nowhere else to live, shows them at the height of callousness. Anna's poignant description of the distraught servants shows that while she is of low class status, she has an emotional refinement and sensibility that her "superiors" lack.

Mompellion arrives on his horse and excoriates Colonel Bradford for his cowardice. However, Colonel Bradford is totally impervious to Mompellion's rhetoric of selflessness and believes himself justified in "safeguarding what is mine," regardless of the consequences to others. He dismisses Mompellion's arguments that as the local gentry they have an obligation to aid the common people of the village, saying he doesn't want Elizabeth to "play wet nurse to a rabble." The Colonel says that the villagers have only agreed to the quarantine because they have no resources to flee, and the sermon was just empty rhetoric to make them feel better. Mompellion prophesies that in the future the Bradfords will suffer God's "terrible vengeance."

Even the most draconian class systems rely on the assumption that the elite will use their privileges to steward and take care of the lower classes. The Bradfords totally abdicate the responsibilities they have as gentry, showing how an unchecked embrace of class distinctions can lead to social disasters. Colonel Bradford's callous pragmatism is contrasted here with Mompellion's altruistic religiosity. At this point in the novel, it seems like a lack of religion corresponds with low morality.

The Bradfords leave, refusing even to allow their servants to take shelter in the empty house or the stables. The servants are taken into other households, except for Maggie and the pantry boy, Brand, who are from the neighboring town of Bakewell and decide to return to their families. Everyone else resigns themselves to their new isolation. Anna says that this is mostly a mental adjustment, since she rarely leaves the village boundaries. Mompellion supervises the construction of designated holes in which to receive supplies and send letters and news of the dead.

Although Anna says the town is effectively unchanged by the quarantine, some major shifts occur. Most importantly, the Bradfords' exodus means everyone is on a much more equal class footing. This will allow the villagers to experiment with forming a society less rigidly defined by class; but it also underscores the fact that there's no local ruler or government, and that it would be very easy to slip into chaos and anarchy.

When Anna arrives at the rectory the next day, Elinor greets her with the news that Mary Daniels is in labor. Since the Gowdies are dead, Anna and Elinor have to deliver the baby. Anna tells Elinor that when she was young, her mother suffered a difficult labor and eventually died at the hands of a barber-surgeon who dismembered her and the stillborn baby. With no experience except in **birthing** livestock, Anna is reluctant to undertake the job and perhaps hasten Mary's death, but there is no other option.

Anna performs her first act as a healer. This is enormously important for her, because it leads to a new occupation that gives her a sense of purpose after her sons' death. Anna associates medical procedures with superstition and brutality because of the traumatic event of her mother's death. However, she'll soon distance herself from the barber surgeons' brand of medicine in order to train herself in healing using science and reason.

Examining Mary Daniels, Anna realizes that the baby is crosswise, meaning the **birth** is dangerous and perhaps fatal. She starts to panic, but Elinor reminds her that unlike the surgeon from her youth, who "knew nothing of women's bodies," she has intuition, her own childbirth experiences, and her "mother-hands" to aid her. Cautiously, Anna manipulates the baby into a better position and it is born safely. Anna is glad to saved a life in a time marked by death, but she knows she has to return to her lonely cottage and the memories of her own dead children. As she leaves, she pockets a vial of poppy oil Elinor had brought for Mary.

Although she lacks the training and reputation of a barber surgeon, her intuition and experiences as a woman and mother allow her to reason her way through the situation. This episode sets up a paradigm wherein Anna and Elinor's "female" medicine is based on science and reason, while the male barber surgeons are ineffective butchers. In a male-dominated society, medicine and midwifery are one of the few areas in which women come to the fore and exercise a power which men don't have.

PART 2: SO SOON TO BE DUST

Maggie and Brand return bloody and bruised from Bakewell. While Brand was able to blend into the crowd, Maggie was recognized in the crowded market and townspeople, fearing she carried the "plague seeds," pelted her with rotten apples. Brand returned to rescue her and carried her away in a handcart. Mompellion praises him for his heroism, while Anna curses the Bradfords for making their servants homeless and driving them to desperation. Jakob Merrill, a farmer, takes in Brand while Anna agrees Maggie in her own cottage.

Brand and Maggie's return underscores how truly isolated Eyam is now. Besides the arranged delivery of food and money, they can't rely on their neighbors for any moral support. This is a logistical problem: Eyam no longer has access to medical services or the justice system, both of which will pose problems later. It's also a psychological quandary: without mores imposed on them from the outside, the norms that allow the community to live peacefully together are at risk of degrading.

Needing a cart in which to transport Maggie to her cottage, Anna goes to the Miner's Tavern and runs into Josiah, who can be found there drinking at all hours. Her father invites her for a beer and teases her for being a prude when she says no. Incensed, Anna quotes Ephesians, telling him to "let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth." Joss is angry at being shown up in front of his friends, and says he is going to put Anna in a branks – a painful, helmet-like cage that restricted speech and was used to punish women who "scolded" men in public. Anna remembers seeing her father apply this punishment to her mother, who couldn't speak for days afterward. In her fear, she urinates in her skirt and Joss lets her go. Anna returns home upset and shaking.

This is very disturbing incident. For one thing, it shows the kind of brutality that men inflict on wives and daughters and that society accepts (the other miners don't protest Josiah's actions). It's important to note that Anna's relationship with her father is based on violence and fear, as this dynamic will have drastic consequences later. It also shows the intense male hostility to female agency. Any action or speech that isn't explicitly submissive is interpreted and punished as outright subversion.

Anna is roused from fear and self-pity when she returns to the Merrill house to see Maggie. Maggie has suffered a stroke and it's clear that she won't survive long. Anna reflects on "the varied skills that reposed" in Maggie, from skinning a deer and cooking economically to making delicate pastries. She wonders why God allows people to become skilled and useful and then lets them die, while others like Joss, are greedy and intemperate and live long lives. That night, Maggie dies.

While others see Maggie as a simple and slightly ridiculous cook, Anna truly appreciates her abilites, describing her undervalued trade as sophisticated and artistic. To Anna, people like Maggie are worth much more than the Bradfords, who despite their class status are unintelligent and unskilled. These observations lead Anna to question not only class paradigms but religious orthodoxy. If she no longer takes the Bradfords' privileged status for granted, it's a short step to disputing the accepted fact that God has a plan for everything.

PART 2: THE POPPIES OF LETHE

Anna reflects on the prospect of slipping into sin, saying that the famous "Fall" of Adam and Eve must have begun with one wrong step, like falling down a hill. She is worried about her own actions; after stealing the vial of poppy oil, she felt remorse and meant to return it, but instead succumbed to the temptation to try a dose and forget her griefs. She has pleasant, hallucinatory dreams in which she sees her children playing, and when she wakes up her mind feels numb and serene.

Although Anna has funneled her grief into action, her drug use makes it apparent that she's suffering seriously from the death of her sons. This is completely justified, but she feels a lot of guilt, describing herself as a "sinner" deserving of punishment for taking the poppy, rather than trying to evaluate her own actions.

Leaving her house for the day, Anna sees a neighbor's child, Sally Maston, standing in the doorway and obviously stricken with the plague. When Anna enters the house, she finds that Sally's mother is long dead and her father is delirious. It turns out that many whole families have become sick in one day, and Anna and Elinor travel between houses nursing them, while Mompellion performs rites over the dead. One of the afflicted is Anna's friend Lib, to whom she hasn't spoken since Lib was involved in Anys' murder. Anna hurries to her house, hoping to reconcile, but Lib dies before she arrives. By nightfall, Sally Maston, her parents, and her baby sister have all died.

As the plague gathers steam, terrible sights, like dying children uncared for by anyone, start to become routine for Anna. Although they can't save anyone, Anna and the Mompellions try to give the afflicted a calm and peaceful death, in keeping with religious and social rituals from before the plague. However, Anna's inability to reconcile with Lib before she dies shows that it's impossible to retain a sense of normalcy completely in this time of catastrophe.

That night, instead of doing her chores or making dinner, Anna drinks the rest of the poppy oil and spends the night in blissful oblivion. When she wakes up, she feels unusually well-rested, but she realizes she has no more poppy left and no means of securing more. She decides to visit the Gowdies' abandoned cottage to see if she can find some poppy herb.

Although in public she's busy and useful, privately Anna is on the verge of succumbing to addiction. She's at a pivotal point in her life, and has to decide if she will find a new of coping or continue to seek oblivion from her grief in her use of this drug.

On her way, Anna passes untended farm fields whose owners have fallen to the plague. All the village harvest customs have been disrupted by the plague – the church bells are supposed to ring for three weeks before farmers bring the harvest in, but now the bells only ring to announce deaths. Anna notices that the blacksmith's forge, which should be pouring out smoke, is cold and silent; when she goes into the blacksmith's cottage, which smells of rotten **apples**, she finds Kate Talbot, heavily pregnant, nursing her husband, Richard. Richard has demanded that she cauterize his plague sores with a burning iron, but now the wound has become infected, and Anna sees immediately that he will die of "rot" if not of the plague.

Anna's descriptions of the eerily untended landscape show how community routines and norms are beginning to erode. The smell of rotting apples which she notices in the Talbot cottage reinforces this sense of decay. The plague's ravages are most jarring and disturbing when they're juxtaposed with images of erstwhile plenty, like the planted fields and the blacksmith's forge.

Anna begins to clean the cottage and haul wood for a fire. She discovers that Kate has laid a strange charm, a piece of paper reading "Abracadabra," over Richard's wound. She scolds Kate for believing in such "follies," which were seen as signs of witchcraft and consorting with demonic forces. Kate says that since prayers to God are of no avail, she had no choice but to appeal to the Devil. She reveals that she has bought the charm from a mysterious entity she believes to be the ghost of Anys Gowdie. Anna is unconvinced, telling Kate that it's probably a hoax perpetrated by some greedy villager.

The villagers, once convinced that the plague was caused by God, are no longer so sure. Kate's charm shows that religion no longer provides adequate moral or spiritual support for the people. Kate doesn't disavow God, but she makes an equivalency between blatant superstition, which Anna knows to be nonsense, and religious faith, the value of which she is uncertain about. The similarities between religion and superstition will destabilize Anna's religious belief as the novel continues.

Anna proceeds through snow drifts to the Gowdie cottage. She sees the silhouette of a person by the fire and, notwithstanding her disdain of superstition, instantly believes it's the ghost of Anys Gowdie, until the figure lights a match and reveals herself as Elinor. Anna wonders how she will justify her visit to the cottage, but Elinor assumes that they both had the same idea, to search the cottage for any clues as to what herbs and remedies might be helpful in fighting the plague. She eagerly enlists Anna's help in sorting and naming the plants, and Anna feels ashamed for seeking out drugs for herself while Elinor is so committed to tending to others.

While Kate turns to Anys's supposed witchcraft for help, Anna and Elinor will harness the real power of her science to fight the plague. Forthright and independent, Anys represented powerful womanhood, and the fact that Anna and Elinor's scientific exploration begins in her garden reinforces the sense that healing through scientific medicine is, at this time, a female field and a method by which women can obtain power.

Elinor insists that, since they are working together as equals, Anna call her by her Christian name, rather than addressing her formally as Mrs. Mompellion. Moreover, she knows why Anna came to the cottage, having noticed that the poppy was missing. She doesn't scold Anna but points out that while opiates like poppy give the relief of numbness, they will eventually make Anna forget the memories of her children which are now all she has left of them.

Elinor continues to disavow class distinctions, as her friendship with Anna is defined by its equality and the fact that it exists outside of restrictive social norms. Moreover, her calm reaction to the theft of the poppy shows that she doesn't have a dogmatic or punitive view of justice. By encouraging Anna to evaluate the situation and decide for herself, she demonstrates a more flexible method of mediation.

Elinor goes on to confess that she herself was once addicted to poppy. She began using the poppy during a painful episode during her adolescence, when she became pregnant out of wedlock. She says that while she hates to relive those memories, because she and Anna are undertaking an important and dangerous role of doctors, she wants Anna to truly "know" her.

Elinor and Anna are both restrained characters, so this confession is an act of openness that draws them even closer together. In Elinor's eyes, their scientific endeavor is inextricably linked with their blossoming bond as women; they cannot be doctors together without being women and friends.

Elinor grew up the beloved child of a rich widower in Derbyshire, sheltered from any knowledge of the world by her protective father and older brother. When she was fourteen, her twenty-year-old neighbor, Charles, began courting her, and although her father disapproved of the man's character and believed Elinor too young for romance, Elinor continued the relationship clandestinely and eventually eloped with her suitor.

Elinor grew up much richer than she lets on, making her disregard for class distinctions even more notable. Moreover, although she's demure and religious now, her early elopement aligns her with Anna and Anys, women whose sexuality is seen as being too strong and unruly by their repressive societies.

The lovers went to London, where it was possible to marry without parental consent. However, Charles kept putting off the wedding and even convinced Elinor to sleep with him, although premarital sex was a grave sin, especially for women. Eventually, Elinor realized that he never planned to marry her at all; but she was so infatuated she didn't care, until one day he abandoned her.

Elinor's romantic disaster underscores the perils of romance for women. Elinor was so uneducated and ignorant of men that she couldn't discern Charles's true character or intentions. On top of that, the social consequences for extramarital sex are much higher for her than for him.

Elinor's father and brother loved her despite her transgressions and rescued her as soon as she wrote to him. But when she arrived home, she found she was with child and, in desperation to hide her shame and put an end to an episode that had been so painful, she performed an abortion with a fire iron that almost killed her. Thanks to the care of a good physician, she survived, but her womb is "a mass of scars" and she will never be able to have children.

Elinor's tragic story links female sexuality with shame, moral ruin, and dangerous pregnancies, demonstrating that sex is likely to lead to disaster for any woman who embraces it outside the confines of marriage. However, Anna's later experiences will suggest much more positive possibilities for female sexuality and sex outside marriage.

The doctors medicated Elinor with poppy, first to relieve her pain and then to numb her emotional distress. Elinor was entranced by the "empty dreams" of the poppy and says she might be addicted today if she hadn't met Michael Mompellion.

Anna and Elinor are alike in that they both flirted with addiction after an emotional trauma. However, while Mompellion rescues Elinor from the poppy, Anna rescues herself (with Elinor's help) by finding purpose as a healer.

Elinor goes on to explain Mompellion's backstory, which is also much different than Anna imagined it. Rather than being the son of a well-off family of clergy, Mompellion was the son of a lowly curate who became involved in the English Civil War, fighting on behalf of the Parliamentarians. During the second phase of the war, when the Cavaliers were winning, he was killed. Even though he was still a child, to support his family Michael began working for the steward at Elinor's family estate. He grew up learning to farm, care for horses, and run a large aristocratic estate. Due to his intelligence, Elinor's father took an interest in him and sent him to school and eventually to Cambridge.

Mompellion is of uncertain class background. He had an educated father, but grew up poor and struggling. He moves in sophisticated social circles, but was trained as a farmhand. His patchwork background explains his progressivism and his kindness to people like Anna, who are far below him on the social ladder.

When Mompellion returned from Cambridge he befriended the fragile Elinor, recovering from her encounter with unrequited love and her disastrous pregnancy. He took her to visit her tenants' cottages, teaching her about the struggles and complexities of common life. He also instructed her spiritually, teaching her that it's useless to regret the sins of the past and that God allows even the greatest sinners to atone for their deeds. When Mompellion became a priest, they married. It was an unusually unequal match, given Elinor's higher social and economic position. However, given the stains on her sexual purity and her inability to have children, Elinor believes it is Mompellion who has "stooped" to marry her.

At this point, the Mompellions' marriage is an example of an ideal relationship between men and women. Unlike Colonel Bradford, who has complete power over his wife and abuses it, both Elinor and Mompellion have "compromised" socially in their marriage. Moreover, they are intellectual equals who developed a spiritual bond prior to getting married, unlike Elinor's unpremeditated teenage elopement. To Anna, Elinor's story represents the possibility of living with a man within social norms but on terms of relative equality. Later, however, she will make a discovery that causes her to see their relationship differently.

Anna reflects on how little she knew about Elinor and Mompellion before this. Although she thought she had insight into their characters, many of her judgments were based on assumptions about their class and social status. Now, she understands the origins of Mompellion's egalitarianism and Elinor's refusal to judge others.

Although she's the novel's most insightful character, even Anna makes judgments based on the conventions under which she has always lived. Now, she's learning how inadequate these social conventions are to explain most of life's complexities.

Elinor explains her ideas about how best to combat the plague. On a map of Eyam, she marks out the names and dwellings of everyone who has died of the plague. The map makes it clear that contagion spread like a "starburst" from Anna's cottage, where the infected cloth was stored, outward to surrounding houses. Elinor points out that the plague affects children more than adults or old people, and surmises that old people survive because they are "veterans…in the war against disease" – in other words, they have developed immunity over a lifetime of exposure to illness. Accordingly, instead of trying to cure the sick, which as proved impossible (only one person, Margaret Blackwell, has survived), they must try to strengthen the children enough to prevent them from catching the plague.

Without formal education or medical training, Elinor devises a surprisingly scientific approach to understanding the plague. While her conclusions may seem obvious to the modern reader, they contrast sharply with the villagers' belief that scribbled charms might invoke the Devil's assistance, or the Oxford doctor's ridiculous gift of a dried toad. She's the first person to think tactically about fighting the plague as a community, rather than haphazardly treating individual cases as they crop up.

Anna and Elinor spend the day sorting through the Gowdies' herbs, trying to match them to descriptions in medical books from the rectory. They rely on a text by Avicenna, a famous Muslim doctor and philosopher. They assemble an arsenal of herbs: nettle for strong blood, starwort to help longs, silverweed to cool a fever.

Elinor's science is an alternative to the inadequacies of the respected male medical establishment. Her approach draws on wisdom from people normally in the margins – women like the Gowdies and Muslims like Avicenna. The novel suggests that science is inherently opposed to the social and class distinctions promoted by the establishment, and inherently aligned with progressivism and tolerance.

Before leaving the cottage, Elinor hands Anna the small supply of poppy herbs and asks what should be done with them. Anna argues weakly that they might be useful to soothe pain in the dying, but Elinor points out that they only have enough for a few doses, and would have to decide who "deserves" the pain relief most. Anna knows that if they keep the poppy, she will end up using it herself; in fact, she can barely restrain herself from licking the sap as it drips onto her hand. However, she also knows that if she succumbs to "selfish oblivion" she won't be of any use fighting the plague. She throws the poppy onto the fire.

Looking at the poppy, Anna and Elinor are faced with a moral dilemma. Usually, the community adjudicates moral dilemmas through inflexible religious doctrine or harsh punishments. However, Elinor operates by talking through the situation and arriving at consensus. Her method of judgment and action is based on understanding and leaves all parties satisfied after the final decision.

As the walk home, Anna resolves to work towards becoming "the woman that Elinor wished me to be." However, in the back of her mind she notes that if all else fails, she knows where to look in the Gowdie garden for new poppy shoots in the spring.

Anna's growing devotion to Elinor leads her to emulate her friend. Their strong friendship as women is character-defining for Anna, more than any other relationship in the novel.

PART 2: AMONG THOSE THAT GO DOWN TO THE PIT

When Elinor and Anna return to the rectory, they find Mompellion in the churchyard, furiously digging one grave after another. He's exhausted, but he refuses to stop, since six people need to be buried right away and the sexton, whose job it is to dig graves, was overtaxed by the unceasing work and died of heart failure that morning. Anna worries that Mompellion suffer the same fate, since he spends all his time attending to the dead and dying and never sleeps. She suggests that they find another man to do the work, but Mompellion says there aren't enough healthy men to carry out the normal work of the village as it is.

As the plague claims more victims, more and more of the community's tasks are left undone. The problems posed by this trend are especially evident when it comes to burying the dead, which is both a spiritual and a public health necessity. Mompellion is determined to preserve community norms as much as possible – but there's only so much he can do.

Mompellion performs rites over the dead and immediately leaves to attend those who are sick that evening. Elinor worries aloud that the force of his will is greater than the strength of his body. She says that his will makes him "do what any normal man cannot do."

Elinor's comment foreshadows Mompellion's later revelation about the true nature of his marriage. While Elinor clearly admires his strong will, Anna will come to see it as something twisted and pernicious.

The next day, Anna accompanies Mompellion to the Merrill farm, where Jakob Merril is dying. Brand, still living at the farm, is distracting Jakob's son Seth while Anna relieves the ten-year-old Charity of the household chores, preparing food for their supper. Jakob confesses to Mompellion his guilt over his treatment of his late wife, Maudie; he says he was never kind to her and spent all their money on drink and prostitutes. Now, he worries that God is inflicting punishment for his sins on his children, who as orphans will be destitute and vulnerable to exploitation, likely to end up married too early or languishing in a poorhouse.

Jakob interprets his death and his children's fate as divine punishment. The assumption that God is an active participant in worldly events can be a comforting belief, because it rationalizes otherwise horrible events. However, it can also be deeply disturbing, as when it leads Jakob to conclude that God wants his innocent children to suffer for his own misdeeds.

Mompellion comforts Jakob, telling him that even sins and "low ways" originate with God. Even the lustful King David was favored by God, who gave him the Psalms. God has taken Maudie away to a better life in heaven, and when Jakob dies they will be able to reconcile.

Mompellion handles the situation expertly, assuring the dying man that his children aren't being punished while leaving his religious faith intact. Here, Mompellion appears to have a thoughtful and compassionate concept of sin and punishment.

On a more earthly note, Mompellion says that God has sent Brand to Jakob as a gift, to protect and take care of his children. He arranges for Jakob to leave his farm jointly to Brand, Charity, and Seth. When they leave, the children are comforted and Jakob is ready to die, finally at peace with himself.

As the only leader left in Eyam, Mompellion performs a lot of public services, like deciding what happens to orphans. His careful arrangements for Charity and Seth show a deep commitment to maintaining the community's norms in the face of catastrophe.

That night, Mompellion has to dig two more graves without even a pause for dinner, and Anna knows he can't go on like this. Reluctantly, she visits Josiah's cottage, where she finds her many stepsiblings ill-fed and bearing bruises and her father still in bed. Pretending to be deferent and respectful, she begs him to undertake the job of gravedigger, offering to pay him in lambs from her flock. He agrees, and Anna is happy to have lightened Mompellion's burdens.

Josiah has always been a force of anarchy, disregarding community mores even when they were more rigidly enforced. His negative behavior shows how strong norms can positively benefit a community.

As the winter progresses, Anna is so busy nursing the sick she barely has time to sleep. She doesn't even notice the passing of Yuletide, instead marking time by the babies she delivers, to Kate Talbot and Lottie Mowbray.

Religious symbols like Yuletide have declined in importance, especially to Anna. Midwifery has become the most important aspect in her life. This shows not only Anna's growing self-identification as a healer, but the extent to which science is becoming important in the community.

Since most laborers and skilled workers are sick, the town doesn't produce enough to support itself and relies for sustenance on the Earl of Chatsworth, who continues to send provisions diligently. On the other hand, while the Bradfords are safe and sound in Oxforshire, they send neither money nor food or even any words of support.

While the Earl of Chatsworth uses his resources to organize aid for Eyam (even if it is in his own interests to do so), the Bradfords are completely negligent. Their contrasting behavior shows two different possibilities for class privilege.

Anna and Elinor turn the rectory kitchen into a laboratory, in which they experiment with different ways of preparing herbs in order to best "extract a plant's virtues." They make teas, syrups, and salves, which are used for two main purposes: to alleviate pain in those afflicted by the plague, and to strengthen the healthy and prevent them from getting sick. They even embark on a primitive public health campaign, teaching people how to recognize wild plants that are good for their health and immunity.

Anna and Elinor quickly come into their own as bona fide doctors. It's important that they rely on folk wisdom, which turns out to be the most scientific knowledge practiced, as well as on common plants. Their medicine is aligned with the common people, rather than the privileged establishment.

Anna comes to dread Sundays, since the empty pews in the church emphasize the limitations of their attempts to "arrest the Plague's ravages." However, to show solidarity in the face of catastrophe, the Puritan Thomas Stanley begins attending services, as well as Eyam's few non-conformist families. Moreover, Elinor invites Anna to share her pew, saying that their work together has made them family. Anna regards these changes as "wonders."

The new attendees in church show that community norms have changed, but this time it's for the better. In reaction to the plague, people have developed more tolerance towards different religious ideas. Anna uses the word "wonders" again to describe these developments, showing that the plague has positive and negative ramifications.

However, in March Mompellion closes the church, since the plague thrives in warm weather and large assemblies are an opportunity for contagion. Instead, they will meet in Cucklett Delf, a large field where families can stand at a safe distance from each other. Mompellion continues explaining the plague as the test of a loving God, saying that even the most loving parents must inflict punishment on children so that they grow into good adults.

As the plague continues, Mompellion has to keep altering his explanations: the plague is no longer a test from God but a parental punishment. As pastor, Mompellion supposedly speaks for God, but it's increasingly clear he doesn't know exactly what he's doing.

The villagers are devastated at having to give up one of their few sustaining rituals – even more so when Mompellion says that, to stop the spread of disease, they must bury the dead immediately on their own property rather than in the hallowed ground of the churchyard. The congregation almost revolts, and the strain of calming them causes Mompellion to faint. However, Mr. Stanley steps forward and scolds the congregation for clinging to superstitions, reminding them that God will know where the dead are buried even if it isn't in the churchyard. As Brand carries a dazed Mompellion out of the church, the congregation recites Psalm 88, a desperate plea for god's help. Mompellion continues to whisper the psalm even as he falls asleep in the rectory.

Even the clergymen realize that public health is much more important than religious orthodoxy. Mr. Stanley's brusque explanation that God will know where the dead are buried shows how religion can function as a prop for social mores, adapting as community needs change. However, Mompellion's collapse shows a moment of weakness, as it's hard for him to maintain his ardent faith in God when none of his interpretations of the plague seem to prove true.


While Mompellion continues to attend to the dying, Elinor and Anna take on the case of nine-year-old Merry Wickford, the daughter of Quaker couple George and Cleath Wickford. The Wickfords moved to Eyam after they were run out of another town for their dissenting faith. One night, George Wickford saw a shooting star, which local superstitions said indicated the location of lead seams in the moors. George staked a claim and worked at it with his entire family to produce the dish of ore required by law to prove the seam was good and cement ownership of the claim. The mine claim was the sole sustenance of the Wickford family, lifting them out of poverty; but now the plague has killed the entire Wickford family except for Merry, who risks having her claim "nicked" by another miner, David Burton, since she can't produce a dish of ore every nine weeks, the amount stipulated by law to keep a claim.

Like Mompellion, David Burton is clinging to old conventions in the midst of new catastrophes. However, in his case it's clear that this convention, which permits miners to "nick" unattended claims, must be amended in fairness to Merry Wickford, who will be penniless without the security provided by the claim. It's becoming increasingly important to decide which conventions should stay and which should be eliminated.

As the ninth week approaches, Anna informs Elinor of the problem and Elinor suggests that they "get the dish out" themselves. Anna thinks this is even more ill-advised than Elinor's insistence that she become a midwife; her own husband died in a mine accident, and women generally aren't allowed in the mines out of a superstition that they cause bad luck. However, Elinor is set on undertaking the task and even lies to Mompellion about their whereabouts, so he doesn't do it himself and die of exhaustion.

Just as they become doctors when doctors are needed, Elinor and Anna jump into another field dominated by men: mining. However, this is a somewhat different proposition, since neither of them know the first thing about mining.

Anna and Elinor go to the Wickford cottage, where Merry now lives alone. When they tell her they intend to save her mine claim, she is elated and decides to help them. The women arm themselves with Sam's old tools and the Wickford's leather mining suits and hats. Elinor remarks wryly that her highborn ancestors would disapprove of her descent into common labor, while Anna reflects that Sam would be horrified if he knew what danger she was exposing herself to.

Elinor's breezy approach to the dangerous task contrasts with Anna's apprehension, showing lingering differences in their class attitudes despite their close friendship. Elinor's privileged upbringing has generally shielded her from physical calamity, whereas Anna spent her childhood and married life worrying about accidents.

Anna and Elinor descend via ladder into the mine, which is slick, wet and dark. At any moment, the walls could cave in, or they could slip and injure themselves fatally. Remembering her husband's death, Anna panics, but Elinor calms her and cautions her not to "let your fears be your master." The women follow the trail of old pick-work and, when it ends, begin chipping on the rock. The work is punishingly hard, even for Anna, who has spent her whole life doing hard manual labor. But for Anna the greatest challenge is keeping her fear and frustration at bay, especially as after hours they have only eked out a small amount of "bouse," or viable ore.

Just as she does during Mary Daniels' childbirth, Elinor provides a steadying voice when Anna begins to panic. In both cases, Anna (who is physically stronger and more skilled) has to do most of the work, while Elinor strategizes and keeps her calm. However, Anna is learning to channel her frustrations, becoming more like Elinor just as she has hoped.

Finally, Elinor admits that they won't be able to produce a dish by the end of the day. Anna knows another technique to extract ore, called fire-setting. It's a complicated and volatile process and caused the accident that killed Sam, so she's reluctant to suggest they try it. But when she sees Merry's disappointed face she tells Elinor, who thinks they should take the risk.

Elinor is almost unwisely altruistic, willing to take extreme risks for others, and Anna follows her lead. Elinor's altruism derives from her strong religious convictions. Anna's altruism stems from a certain disregard for her own safety after the death of her sons.

Anna and Merry gather wood and tinder, then drip cold water into the mine and cram boughs of wood into every crevice in the walls. Anna insists that Elinor climb out of the mine and leave her to face the final danger alone. As she lights the fire and smoke begins to fill the mine shaft, she reflects that she'd rather die of the plague than down here, alone.

Anna is an essentially communally-minded person, feeling much more comfortable in the presence of others than left on her own. Perhaps that's why she's so attuned to what happens around her and invested in the survival of the town.

The ore begins to fall from the walls, but large slabs of it pin Anna down. Mud fills her mouth and she knows she will die, but as she loses consciousness she is calmed by a hallucination of Jamie and Tom, their faces sharper and clearer than they have been for a long time.

Anna's hallucinations show her strong religious faith. She immediately assumes that since she is dying, she will soon be reunited with her sons, and that their suffering will be ameliorated by this reunion.

Anna regains consciousness to find Elinor and Merry, neither of whom actually left the mine as instructed, frantically working to free her. She finally crawls out of the mine and they stumble into the village, covered in mud, to present the ore to the Barmester (a local judge), who is stunned that two women have achieved this feat. When Mompellion arrives Anna worries he will be angry, but instead he laughs and proudly embraces his wife.

In Anna's eyes, Mompellion and Elinor continue to model an ideal marriage. Mompellion appreciates Elinor's sterling qualities and brave actions, even when they are unconventional or improperly unfeminine.

Everyone goes to the Miner's Tavern – even Elinor, who normally couldn't put her gentlewoman's reputation at risk by frequenting such a seedy locale. The miners applaud the women for their work, except for the frustrated David Burton, and the Barmester says that although a miner could nick the claim in another nine weeks, no one will be shameless enough to do so.

Here, the characters put aside two useless conventions. Elinor visits the lower-class tavern, eroding class distinctions even further. Moreover, the miners amend their code to protect Merry Wickford. This episode shows the town's ability to adapt and even improve in response to the plague.

Anna goes to sleep nursing bruises on her face and back, but sleeps better than she has since her flirtation with the poppy oil. She's satisfied that for once since the onset of the plague, something has "come out right."

Anna sleeps well through the physical gratification of the poppy, but even better after successfully helping Merry. After her sons' deaths, the only thing that brings her tranquility is a sense of being useful to those around her.

PART 2: THE BODY OF THE MINE

Anna feels like an old woman as she tries to force her slowly healing body through her daily chores. She is glad to see Josiah one morning, thinking he will help her carry water from the well, but she's dismayed when she finds out he has taken all the Widow Brown's valuable pewter in exchange for burying her husband and son. In the following days, she notices that her neighbors stop talking when she approaches and concludes they are discussing her father's actions. He has become the "grave-digger to the desperate," taking household goods and even much-needed food from his desperate and bereaved customers. He's been drinking more than ever, and doesn't even bother to clean his clothes so as not to bring the disease into his house.

While the previous chapter showed some positive results of abandoning conventions, Josiah's behavior shows the negative side of this trend. His unscrupulous impulses, only ever barely contained by social pressure, run rampant now that there are no structures to keep them in check. It's clear that whatever good qualities Josiah once seemed to possess were imposed by communal norms, rather than inherent to his character.

When Anna runs into Aphra, she attempts to remonstrate with her, but Aphra just says that Josiah is being a good provider for the first time in his life. Anna even risks chastising her father in public when she sees him carrying a bale of wool through the street, but he spits at her.

Aphra is remarkably adaptable in the face of the plague, but not in a positive way. Like Josiah, she sees the catastrophe as an opportunity to benefit herself and only changes to that end, rather than to help the community.

Meanwhile, the villagers begin holding church services at Cucklett Delf. Each family group stands far apart, but they retain the old arrangement in which farmers and miners stand in the front, while artisans take the middle and laborers stand in the front. Josiah stops coming to church; in former times, this would have earned him a stint in the stocks, but no one has the time or energy to carry out this punishment now.

Because of the plague, the villagers move away from harsh punishments like the stocks. This is a generally progressive development, but it also allows characters like Josiah to grow bolder and more unscrupulous without fear of reprisal.

Because he likes spending his afternoons in the tavern, Josiah declares he will no longer bury anyone past noon, and he callously digs graves right outside the windows of the ailing. At this, Mompellion and Anna visit his cottage to ask that he be less greedy. Joss is unmoved; he launches into a rant, saying that members of the upper classes, like Mompellion, always want the common people to do back-breaking work "for a pittance." After having labor extorted from him for years, as a conscript sailor and a farm laborer, he intends to make money while he can.

Josiah rightly asserts that the ruling class expects the lower classes to live brutally harsh lives without asking for much in return. However, he's taking out his resentment on the wrong people, harming his fellow commoners rather than those who have been profiting off his labor for years. This makes his speech seem selfish and self-pitying more than anything else.

One morning, Randoll Daniel comes to the rectory to say that his neighbor Christopher Unwin, who's been sick with the plague for several days, believes himself near death. Although Mompellion hasn't even eaten breakfast, he immediate sets off with Anna. As they walk, they pass the village green, where the stocks and cucking stool are overgrown with weeds after months of disuse. Mompellion remarks that the abandonment of such harsh punishments is one of the few bright spots of this time, and he hopes to remove them forever once the plague is over.

Mompellion sees the stocks as archaic, and thinks that they don't provide enough benefit to the community to offset their brutal nature. Like Elinor, Mompellion tends toward a less harsh and more flexible concept of justice and punishment. His comments here further establish him as progressive and compassionate when it comes to judging others and changing community norms.

When Anna and Mompellion arrive at the Unwin house, they find that Christopher isn't dead or even likely to die. He's just spooked out because Josiah has been digging a grave in the backyard since dawn. Anna tends to Christopher while watching from the window as her father curses Mompellion and he answers in "coarse words that he did not learn…at Cambridge." Joss tries to hit Mompellion, but the priest nimbly sidesteps him and knocks him into the half-dug grave. Anna makes a meal for Christopher, who, far from failing, seems likely to survive. She pretends not to have seen Mompellion's altercation with Josiah, suspecting he wouldn't want her to know about his un-priestly behavior.

Here, Mompellion shows himself as a class chameleon, able to behave in an un-gentlemanly way when he needs to confront Josiah. The novel positively portrays characters who can take on positive attributes from the upper and lower classes, like Mompellion and especially Anna.

That afternoon, Josiah is so violent and intemperate that he's ejected from the Miner's Tavern. Anna is worried he will abuse his wife and children and tactfully tells Aphra she can always escape to the Gowdies' unused cottage, but Aphra laughs at her and says she has "my own ways of bridling that mule." Anna resolves to have no more involvement in her father's embarrassing affairs.

Like Anna, Elinor, and Anys, Aphra is a relatively independent woman, but her independence isn't characterized positively like theirs. What power she has comes from manipulating Josiah's stupidity and lack of scruples, rather than developing her own intellect or morality.

Anna rises to a beautiful spring dawn, but while she's drawing water from the well a "figure from a nightmare" runs into the town, covered in blood and dirt, clothed in a torn shroud, and calling Josiah Bont's name. Anna realizes the ghastly figure is Christopher Unwin. Christopher tells Anna and her neighbors that Joss had attacked him with a shovel and then buried him alive. Fortunately, he was too lazy to cover him completely and Christopher was able to climb out before he suffocated.

Joss's despicable behavior has come to a head. He has abandoned community norms so far as to attempt a completely bizarre murder, apparently without fear of getting caught. The odd nature of the crime, and Christopher's ghost-like appearance in town, show that, as time passes, normal order devolves so much that even the nature of misdeeds changes eerily.

The villagers apprehend Josiah in his house and decide to try him at the Barmote Court, the judicial organization of the miner's and Eyam's only governing body of any kind. Anna doesn't want anything to do with it, but she has to attend the trial as a witness. Since crimes as serious as murder are "beyond the scope" of the Barmote Court, Joss is tried and convicted of theft. Before sentencing, the Barmester asks if anyone will speak on Josiah's behalf, and Joss looks at Anna for a long time. As she stands in silence, she sees rage and grief in his face.

The Barmote Court punishes Josiah, but so, in a sense, does Anna—by publicly disowning her family ties with him. This action is an emotional analog for humiliating public punishments like the stocks. Although Josiah is an objectively bad father and she has no obligations to him, this punitive act doesn't feel satisfying to her, and it doesn't resolve her complicated feelings toward her father.

The Barmester sentences Josiah with the punishment customarily applied to miners who steal from each others' claims: Joss's hands will be impaled by a knife to the stakes of the Unwin mine. Later, Anna is told that he "howled like a trapped animal" when the punishment was carried out.

Life in Eyam, especially before the plague, is characterized by harsh, literal punishments like this one. These punishments may deter crime by sowing fear, and may satisfy the aggrieved party, but they certainly don't reform the criminal.

Traditionally, once the criminal is impaled he is left unguarded, so that someone from his family can come to free him. Anna assumes that Aphra will do this for Josiah, so she doesn't worry about it. It rains all night and all the next day, so that no one can leave their houses except in cases of "dire need." However, that day all Aphra's three eldest children catch the plague, so she can neither go to Joss nor send anyone for help. Exposed to the freezing rain and harsh winds, Joss dies on the moors.

When the Barmote Court punishes Josiah, it is clinging to old conventions and assuming that everyone will contribute to upholding those conventions. However, times have changed so much that it is impossible to do this. Josiah's death, in large part due to miscommunication, demonstrates that conventions, especially those regarding formal social structures, must adapt in order for the community to survive.

Stepping back from the narrative and reflecting on Josiah's terrible death, Anna concludes that the fault lies with everyone in the community. Because the Bonts are so resented and disliked, no one checks on Aphra or worries about Joss's fate. Anna says ominously that "our negligence" would have consequences not just for Aphra, but for the whole community.

Anna foreshadows Elinor's murder. Although it's Aphra who commits the act, everyone is responsible because they contributed to Aphra's mental state. This conclusion shows Anna's intensely communal mindset. She has good insights into the links that bind different characters, as well as a strong sense of obligation between members of the community.


Three days after Josiah's trial, Aphra arrives at Anna's cottage, clutching her daughter, Faith, and demanding to know if Anna has rescued her father. When Anna says she hasn't, both women know he is dead. Aphra begins to rave and weep with grief, and tells Anna that her three sons have died that morning and she has just buried them with her own hands.

Tragedy hits Aphra hard, striking down four members of her family at once. While suffering is supposed to be meted out by God according to a divine plan, it's hard to see what that plan accomplishes regarding Aphra. Her personal suffering only corrodes her mental state, leading her to inflict suffering on others.

Pitying her stepmother, Anna accompanies her to collect Josiah's body. When they arrive at the moors they find that wild animals have torn him apart, so that he resembles a "clumsily butchered beef." Aphra cuts off locks of his hair and decides to bury him right there, so that Christopher Unwin "would ever be reminded of the cost of his justice." The women struggle to dig a grave in the hard ground. Instead of placing a cross over the spot, Aphra makes a doll-like figure out of sticks; she mutters an unfamiliar chant instead of the Lord's Prayer and makes strange gestures instead of the sign of the cross.

Anna struggles to perform the familiar rituals of burial. Even if she no longer implicitly trusts in them, they provide comfort during a horrible experience. In contrast, Aphra performs a blatantly pagan ritual. She has descended into superstition because of her grief, whereas Anna has strengthened her commitment to reason. On the other hand, the juxtaposition of accepted Christian and stigmatized pagan rituals highlights the similarities between religion and superstition. Neither can mitigate the fact that Josiah has suffered a meaningless death.

PART 2: THE PRESS OF THEIR GHOSTS

While making tea in the rectory, Anna begins crying for her dead father and sons. She realizes she hasn't had enough time or space to mourn Jamie and Tom, and that her grief is bottled up inside her. Elinor finds her and makes her sit down, stroking her hair and comforting her.

Just as Elinor revealed her secret sorrows to Anna, Anna turns to Elinor with her own grief. Their intense friendship is strengthened by a thorough understanding of each other's character, which Anna doesn't achieve with anyone else in the novel.

Anna tells Elinor of the childhood traumas that molded Joss's unscrupulous character. As a child he was conscripted into the navy, where he was raped by the older men and whipped cruelly by the boatswain. After surviving one apprenticeship at sea he made his way to land but was captured again by a press gang. Even after he finally escaped and moved inland, he feared being conscripted again.

By telling Elinor about her father, Anna realizes that he was violent to her because of his own violent childhood. A cycle of violent punishment, deserved or not, only serves to perpetuate violence. Now Anna knows that it was Josiah's circumstances, rather than innate character flaws, that were responsible for her awful childhood.

Telling Elinor about Joss's life and realizing how much he has suffered makes Anna feel that her mind has been "rinsed" clean. She feels that she's finally achieved a balance between "disgust" and "understanding" for him, between her guilt over his death and her resentment of her brutal childhood.

This is one of the few episodes in which a wrongdoing is satisfactorily resolved. Anna achieves a sense of justice not by blaming a criminal or inflicting punishment, but by trying to think through all sides of this issue. Rejecting the Puritan morality of her childhood, she understands that neither party is entirely right or wrong.

Elinor reflects Joss must have followed the quarantine because he feared conscription if he fled toward the coast, and Anna says that she thinks Aphra convinced her husband that she had supernatural "chants or charms" to ward off the plague. Aphra isn't alone in her superstitions; Elinor produces a charm she found in Margaret Livesedge's house, which Margaret said she obtained from the ghost of Anys Gowdie. Elinor confers with Mompellion, who has seen other villagers clinging to the fake charms. In fact, Mompellion has just come from the Mowbray cottage, where Lottie Mowbray confessed that "the ghost of Anys Gowdie" told her to rub her baby on a bramble hedge to prevent him from catching plague. Anna brings an herbal salve to the Mowbrays and finds them boiling the baby's urine, another charm suggested by the "ghost." She sternly instructs them to put an end to these superstitions and pray to God.

More and more people are succumbing to the temptation of superstition. While it's obvious to Anna and Elinor that no one can cure the plague by soliciting the Devil's help, it's clear to the reader that Mompellion can't do much with his religious teachings besides comfort the dying. The real contrast to superstition is Anna and Elinor's science—the only thing that can tangibly help those afflicted with the plague.

As Anna walks home she begins to wonder why everyone, from Mompellion to the Mowbrays, attributes the plague to a divine entity, whether it's a test from God or the work of the Devil. Villagers are encouraged to embrace religious explanations as certain truth and scorn pagan "charms" as superstition. However, the plague might be "simply a thing in Nature," rather than part of a supernatural scheme.

Here, Anna makes an equivalency between Mompellion's accepted religious beliefs and the Mowbrays' obviously spurious superstitions, showing radical (and blasphemous) doubts about the religion with which she grew up. In doing so, she prioritizes the workings of "nature" (or sicence) over religious theories.

Anna stubs her toe on a rock, which makes her think about God's agency in the world. She doesn't believe that God caused something as simple as a hurt foot; she wonders how one should logically decide which events are large enough to be God's work, and which are small enough to be decided by chance.

Anna questions the role of God in human suffering. The villagers' belief that the plague originated with God has been both comforting (since it explains horrible events) and disturbing (since it suggests an angry and vengeful deity). By suggesting that God might not be responsible at all, Anna moves away from relying on divine assistance and worrying about divine anger.

Ultimately, Anna thinks it's best not to spend too much time on these intractable questions. Rather, they should work on the plague as a purely earthly problem, "as a farmer might toil to rid his field of unwanted tare." Approaching the plague rationally is the most effective way to fight it.

Anna doesn't disown her religious beliefs, but she does decide not to act on them. Comparing the plague to a mundane farming problem makes the suffering it causes seem meaningless, but it also turns it into a problem that human, rather than divine, agency can solve.

As May arrives, the land blossoms into a beautiful spring. Anna watches apple trees flower and reflects that these things used to make her happy. Her flock of sheep gives **birth** to lambs, and she's surprised that they can be so happy and so ignorant of the human catastrophes around them.

The lambing is a reminder of last spring, when Anna and Jamie helped the flock give birth. Natural events remain unchanged despite human suffering, and this suggests that nature is an irrational entity not controlled by any divine presence or influenced by human events.

By the middle of June, as many villagers have died as are alive. As she walks through the eerie streets, Anna feels "the press of their ghosts" oppressing her. The village now lacks skilled workers since the farrier, malter, carpenter, mason, and tailor are all dead, along with scores of others. Most of the fields go unplowed and unprepared for planting.

Other problems than the plague threaten the community. Without laborers or skilled workers, Eyam won't be able to grow food or construct the various tools it needs. This underscores the fact that community survival is dependent on cooperation and group effort.

Different villagers cope with the fear in different ways. Andrew Merrick builds a hut in total isolation and the others leave him food at a safe distance. Jane Martin, Anna's former babysitter who looked down on her in Puritan scorn, turns to alcohol and prostitution to forget the grief of losing her entire family.

Warped by the plague, Eyam is becoming unrecognizable as its former self and people are behaving in ways that would never have been accepted before. Jane's abrupt descent into drunkenness shows that grief and isolation can destroy even those whom the plague spares, and change the face of a society permanently.

John and Urith Gordon stop coming to services at Cucklett Delf, and Anna notices that Urith Gordon, always cowed and afraid of her husband, is thinner and quieter than usual. One evening at the well, Anna sees John Gordon naked to the waist and leaning on a cane, flagellating himself with a handmade scourge and praying as he walks. Anna alerts Mompellion, who says he has feared the spread of flagellation, an extreme practice that often gained popularity in cities during times of crisis. Elinor explains that flagellants believe they can satisfy God's wrath by "grievous self-punishment." Mompellion adds that they are dangerous to community order, leading to confusion and the formation of mobs who seek to identify and kill scapegoats, like Jews or witches.

Normally, extreme practices like flagellation aren't tolerated in Eyam. Mompellion knows it's essential that the community keep to this convention in order to stay sane. This episode suggests that it is norms and mores that keep a society functioning well, rather than inherent human virtues. Additionally, while flagellation is disturbing and unhealthy, it's not so different from Mompellion's rationalization of the plague, since both mindsets attribute the epidemic to God. Anna's doubting of the flagellants will lead her to question traditional religious explanations as well.

Mompellion and Anna set out to confront the Gordons. On their way they come across an inebriated couple having sex in the road, and Anna recognizes Jane Martin with her dress pushed over her head. Mompellion coolly dismisses the young man, Albion Samweys, but he excoriates Jane, shouting at her and condemning her as a sinner. Shocked at this unequal treatment, especially since Jane is too disoriented to understand what's going on, Anna begs that Mompellion be lenient. Mompellion says that Anna forgets her place by contradicting him, but he relents and they convey Jane to her cottage before setting off again. Mompellion says that they should try to forget this incident, and asks that Anna not mention his outburst to Elinor.

Usually Mompellion is flexible about breaches in social convention, and deeply compassionate to parishioners who have sinned; here, he departs sharply from that progressivism and takes a regressive attitude toward Jane's sexual transgression. His outburst suggests that, despite his liberal tendencies, there's something about unleashed female sexuality that is deeply frightening and disturbing to Mompelllion.

Arriving at the Gordon cottage Anna and Mompellion find every wall covered in crosses and Urith starving under the fast John imposes. Urith says her husband has learned about flagellating in a tract from London and now believes that the only way to end the plague is for everyone in the village to publicly confess all their sins. Besides fasting, he has burned all their furniture and bedding, as well as his clothes, although Urith refuses to go about half-naked. Now he is in the habit of denying himself sleep and spending the nights scourging himself near the Edge, a cliff on the moors. Mompellion searches for John on the Edge and the surrounding moors, but can't find him. A week later Brand sees Gordon's body at the bottom of the Edge; he has fallen off the cliff and died.

John has destroyed his last shreds of peace and comfort in an attempt to placate an angry God, which seems ridiculous to the pragmatic Anna. However, the crosses in his cottage are a reminder that his beliefs aren't a huge departure from religious orthodoxy. In attributing all worldly events to divine pleasure or anger, both organized religion and unsanctioned sects can incite unwise behavior.

The next Sunday, Mompellion preaches about John, saying that he "sought to please God even as he embraced conduct unpleasing to God." However, Urith dies of the plague a week later. While she probably caught the plague from clothes and furniture other villagers gave her, many interpret this as evidence that John had been doing the right thing, and kept them safe while he was live. Martin Miller and Randoll Daniel adopt John's behavior, parading around in sackcloth and scourging themselves. Mompellion chastises himself, feeling that his parishioners turn to flagellating because he hasn't provided adequate spiritual guidance. He seeks guidance from his friend Mr. Holbroke, rector of the neighboring town; the two men stand at safe distances of the boundary line and shout to each other.

Mompellion claims to know what behavior is pleasing to God and what is unfounded superstition, but he only comes to these conclusions based on teachings from other members of his own religious sect. Clearly, his certainty in his own beliefs is no longer adequate in the face of the ongoing plague. Rather than realizing that Mompellion actually has much in common with the flagellants, people turn to superstition as an alternative to religion.

Elinor also does much to soothe Mompellion, telling him he always does what is best for the village. One night, Anna stumbles upon them in a moment of intimacy; Elinor is asleep in a chair while Mompellion stands, leaning over and watching her. Anna has never seen a couple behave so tenderly toward each other. She feels jealous of Mompellion because she wants a "greater share" of Elinor's love for herself. She's also jealous of Elinor, who seems to have an ideal marriage and someone to comfort her at night while Anna has to return to "a cold an empty bed." In a fit of anger, she smashes the supper dishes in the kitchen.

Growing close to both Mompellion and Elinor, Anna becomes an uncomfortable third wheel in their marriage. But rather than only being jealous of Elinor's relationship, she is envious of Elinor's attention and love as well. For Anna, the desire for female intimacy and friendship is as strong, if not stronger, than her desire for a romantic relationship.

PART 2: A GREAT BURNING

Anna and Elinor spend the day visiting widows and widowers who have survived the plague, since the elderly are much less susceptible than the young. One man, James Mallion, asks Anna why someone like him, old and ready to die, is spared, while the young people are mowed down. Anna is unable to answer him.

James' question recalls the moment when Anna asked why skilled and useful Maggie died and the Bradfords survived. The rampant illogic and unfairness of death in this catastrophe suggests there isn't any rational force behind it.

On their walk home, Anna and Elinor muse over how the plague chooses its victims. They can understand some aspects of contagion scientifically – for example, that the disease spreads through proximity – but they have no idea why even among families, the plague strikes some people and not others. Anna references Mr. Stanley, why believes that the fate of each victim is part of God's plan, and that God inflicts suffering on people whom he wants to spare pain in the afterlife. This theory contradicts the Anglican doctrine that both women have been taught to believe, but they wonder if he might be right.

Anna and Elinor are remarkably flexible in trying to understand the plague, willing to embrace the ideas of other religious sects. However, as much as they entertain religious theories, they focus on scientific evidence like contagion through proximity. This shows that science is ascending in importance, especially to the female healers.

Elinor begins coughing and Anna is terrified, checking her for fever and insisting she sit down. Trying to be reassuring, Elinor tells Anna briskly not to worry and not to inform Mompellion that she might be ill. But she won't show Anna her handkerchief, which suggests she's been coughing up blood. Anna begins to weep, foreseeing the inevitable death of her friend.

Elinor's sudden illness reminds Anna again of the thin line between death and life. While she's normally stalwart—and even numb—in the face of the plague, the danger to her only friend breaks through her defenses and elicits an emotional response.

In the next few days, Elinor's fever rises. While Mompellion tries to spend as much time with her as possible, Anna stays at the rectory when he is called away to other tasks and tends Elinor with loving care. Elinor has provided the first "motherly concern" Anna has enjoyed since the death of her own mother, while becoming a close friend, even though social conventions normally prohibit intimacy between members of different classes.

Elinor has behaved like family toward Anna, and Anna tries to do the same now. Anna's loyalty and intimacy with Elinor shows that female friendships can be as strong as conventional familial or romantic attachments.

As Elinor's condition becomes graver and Anna becomes more exhausted and desperate, she even blames herself for Elinor's illness, interpreting it as God's punishment for considering Elinor a friend and for being jealous of her relationship with Mompellion. At the same time, she becomes more and more protective of Elinor. Whenever she has to leave the room to give Mompellion and Elinor some privacy, she resents the separation from her friend; she takes to hovering around the rectory even when Mompellion says it would be better for her to go home.

Although Anna has decided it's useless to worry about God's anger, she reverts to this vein of thought out of terror. What's additionally distressing is that her grief for Elinor and desire to stay with her friend isn't sanctioned by the community. Mompellion, her husband, has the right to privacy and intimacy with Elinor, while Anna, who feels she is family, must contain her grief and go home.

In a moment of lucidity, Elinor says she's lucky to have been blessed with a husband like Mompellion and a friend like Anna. She says that the plague has changed Anna, making her stronger and more confident in her abilities. Finally, she tells Anna to be a friend to Mompellion and take care of him after her death.

Elinor ranks Anna equally with her husband among her emotional attachments, showing that, like Anna, she considers their friendship life-defining. In telling Anna to take care of Mompellion, she continues to encourage her friend to emulate her, but Elinor suggests she should do this not by imitating her character but by replacing her as caretaker to Mompellion.

Elinor becomes delirious and cries out first for her erstwhile lover, Charles, and then for Mompellion, speaking in such an intimate tone that Anna is embarrassed. Mompellion appears and dismisses Anna to the kitchen, who sleeps sitting up in the kitchen. When she returns to the bedroom in the morning, she finds Mompellion asleep at the foot of the bed and Elinor awake and well, her fever broken.

In Elinor's delirium, Anna detects a romantic intimacy from which she is necessarily excluded. Even with Elinor's affirmation of their friendship, it seems that her marriage emerges from this night as the stronger relationship.

Mompellion returns to his duties with fresh energy, and is playful and intimate with Elinor. He asks Elinor's advice of how to dispose of the large, eerie crosses left in the abandoned Gordon cottage. As they confer, Anna goes about her household chores and feels left out of their new intimacy.

Even though Anna has an unusual intimacy with the Mompellions, it's sometimes painfully apparent that she's a servant. Her friendship with Elinor isn't strong enough to overcome all class distinctions, but as it grows stronger it competes with Elinor's marriage.

Mompellion tells the town that they must make a great bonfire and burn as many of their worldly goods as possible, both as a sacrifice to God and to dispose of potentially contaminated items. He reminds the villagers that Urith Gordon died because of sharing disease-bearing clothing, and that fire has been "a symbol of rebirth" since time immemorial. The villagers agree, but reluctantly, no longer so impressed with Mompellion's sermons and explanations.

The rationale behind Mompellion's bonfire is a bewildering mix of religious theory and scientific necessity. At this point, no longer so certain in his ability to guide the people through the plague, Mompellion is casting around for a variety of explanations, some based on traditional beliefs and others on new scientific principles. However, what Mompellion's bonfire most closely recalls is John Gordon's superstitious and ill-advised burning of all his possessions.

Anna brings her worldly goods to be burned, except for a jerkin that had belonged to Jamie. The pile of belongings to be burned seems especially sad because the villagers are poor and own so few things. She contrasts their sparse possessions with the Bradfords' luxury and excess, and reflects that the Bradfords might be too scared to come back, even to reclaim their valuable property. To Anna, the destruction of "these humble things" represents the loss of human memories and experiences: a child's crib shows the loss of "peace in a mother's heart," while the hose which had "held the muscled calves of strong young miners" shows the loss of trades and daily routines.

Just like the landscape and the unchanged sheep, the possessions about to be burned are a painful reminder of better times. Natural processes and inanimate possessions don't correspond to or change with human suffering. This cognitive dissonance suggests that there isn't a grand guiding force behind that suffering, and that instead it lacks definite meaning.

Mompellion dramatically starts the fire, calling on God to accept their sacrifice and deliver the town. The villagers sing Psalm 91, but since the few survivors left are "tired and broken," the ritual of prayer lacks its usual force and comfort.

Religious rituals, once a sustaining force, are no longer enough to comfort the weary and bereaved. This shows the devolution both of community norms and of faith in the presence of God.

As the villagers watch their possessions burn, Brand and Robert Snee arrive, carrying Aphra, who is dressed and veiled in black. Brand has caught her trying to sell a charm to his sister, Chastity; he announces that she is the "ghost of Anys Gowdie" who has been preying on the villagers' desperation. Enraged, people start to throw mud; Anna fears that if Mompellion doesn't do something quickly, they will become a mob.

Aphra's exposure shows just how unfounded are the spreading superstitions about the Devil. Like Josiah, Aphra behaves atrociously when there are no social norms to restrain her. Her behavior incites a mob—also a violation of community norms. Only Anna realizes that the townspeople risk descending to Aphra's level through their fear.

Mompellion manages to quiet the crowd, and says that they will formally bring charges against Aphra the next morning. He tells Brand and Robert to take charge of Aphra until the hearing. Meanwhile, Anna takes Aphra's daughter, Faith, to her own cottage for the night.

Mompellion has to act as police and judge, besides his duties of priest. He tries to fulfill these roles to the best of his ability, but while clinging to old rituals of justice he carries them out on an ad hoc basis, which will lead to problems later.

In their rage at Aphra's behavior, Brand and Robert confine her in a particularly cruel manner. Robert stores manure from his pigs in a natural cavern, and they drop Aphra into the excrement-filled pit. They leave her there all night, and she has to constantly scrabble at the walls to avoid sinking and suffocating. As a result of this ordeal, Aphra loses her sanity and is reduced to a "gibbering, broken thing when Brand and Robert guiltily produce her for trial at the village green.

Although they're right to be outraged, Brand and Robert take vigilante action to punish Aphra, causing larger consequences – including the loss of her sanity – than they intended. In a sense, the sewer in which Aphra spends the night represents the experience of the plague: grotesque but meaningless, it strips away the veneer of civilization and fundamentally warps Aphra's character, just as the plague does to the community.

Anna remarks that while public punishments are common in larger market towns, where criminals in the stocks might be mercilessly mocked and pelted with fruit by people who don't know them, that kind of thing doesn't happen in Eyam, where most people know and have some sympathy for each other. Accordingly, even the people Aphra deceived are unwilling to inflict anything further on her. Mompellion declares that Aphra will give back the money she extorted when she is well.

It's evident that this kind of punishment, reminiscent of the brutal stocks in large cities, is ineffective, since Aphra isn't cognizant enough to regret her crime or make restitution. Moreover, while the people she swindled feel pity for her state, they don't seem to feel a sense of justice or resolution. Thus, resentment of the crime lingers in the community to cause further problems.

Elinor and Anna take Aphra back to her cottage and begin the difficult task of cleaning her. As Aphra returns to her senses, she starts cursing and insulting them. Anna wants to take care of Faith until Aphra is more stable, but Aphra refuses, accusing Anna of trying to steal her child for the barren Elinor.

While issues surrounding maternity usually allow female characters to bond, Aphra is so delusional that she warps Anna's concern into something sinister. Her own greed and malevolence prevent her from accessing the kind of female intimacy Elinor and Anna enjoy.

Worried about Faith, Anna returns every day with food and medicine, but Aphra won't open the door or let her speak to the girl. Eventually, Anna doesn't even see Faith looking out the window anymore. One night, she walks to the cottage and finds a half-naked Aphra dancing around a fire, chanting nonsense, and prostrating herself as if praying. She has a snake in her hands.

Just as she did at Josiah's grave, Aphra reverts to performing pagan rituals. Throughout the novel, Aphra has relied on superstition while fearing and rejecting science, which could be useful to her. This is dangerous not just to her own safety, but that of her family.

Anna is afraid, but driven by "mother-courage" and desperation to rescue Faith, she goes inside. She sees that Faith is dead and Aphra has hung her body from the ceiling, covering her plague sores with chalk. Anna tells Aphra to have "pity" and bury Faith so she can "lie in peace," but Aphra shrieks that pity and peace don't exist.

In the chaos of the plague, it's now possible not only to abandon conventional niceties like class and religious distinctions, but fundamental practices like safely burying the dead. While Anna wants to think of Aphra's insanity as an aberration, it's also possible that this grotesque behavior is an expression of true human nature, revealed when restraining social structures fade away.

Aphra continues to dance and chant all day, while Mompellion attempts to remonstrate with her and prays outside her door. He considers sending men to forcibly remove Faith's body for burial but decides against it, fearing that the decaying corpse would spread disease and that the sight of Aphra in her madness would incite new fears of witchcraft.

Mompellion understands that the community's grip on sanity is tenuous, and that news of Aphra's insanity might send everyone into hysteria. At the beginning of the novel, it seemed liberating to jettison old conventions. However, now it's necessary to cling to them in order to preserve the town's basic safety.

PART 2: DELIVERANCE

Anna avoids Aphra, telling herself there is nothing she can do and feeling as if interaction with her stepmother might drive her insane as well. Besides, she has a lot to think about – she realizes that for the first time in a year, they have gone several weeks without any deaths. Mompellion preaches hopefully about the resurrection, and Andrew Merrick returns from his self-imposed exile to his cottage.

Anna and the other townspeople are becoming cautiously optimistic – but Aphra's unresolved presence is an ominous sign, suggesting that the unsettling, primal forces unleashed by the plague won't disappear quietly.

Still, Anna says it's hard for people to "rejoice" at the end of the plague. Only a third of the population is left, and everyone is haunted by the memory of dead friends and family. Moreover, with so few able-bodied citizens, everyone left alive is doing the work of two or three people.

Besides crazy behavior like Aphra's, it's also hard to move past the enormous death toll. In order to rebuild the community, they need to reinstate the norms and practices from before the plague, but they can't do that when such a large swath of the population is missing.

Mompellion and Elinor have a rare argument. Elinor wants to hold a service of formal thanksgiving for Eyam's deliverance, and end the quarantine, so that people who have lost their entire families can seek out their kin in other towns and start life over. Mompellion believes this is premature, and that all their sacrifice will be nothing if new plague cases occur and spread to other villages. Elinor tells him not to wait to long, since "not everyone is made as firm of purpose as you." Anna catches her crying in the library.

Mompellion makes a rare admission that he considers himself not only a spiritual guide but a political leader, responsible for the worldly fate of Eyam and the surrounding village. By now, the reader knows religious ideas and developments are inextricably linked to sociopolitical issues, but this is Mompellion's first hint that he too is cognizant of this fact.

A few weeks later, in August, Mompellion holds the Thanksgiving service in the Cucklett Delf. He and Elinor wear all white and carry flowers. But as Mompellion begins to pray, Aphra runs shrieking into the field, waving the knife that had impaled Josiah and caused his death, and carrying Faith's maggot-infested remains. She calls Mompellion's name and he alone is brave enough to confront her, grabbing her and trying to soothe her and remove the knife from her hand. Elinor runs to his aid, and strokes Aphra's face.

Aphra's use of the knife from Josiah's punishment shows her lingering resentment over the manner of his death. Josiah's punishment was a prime example of justice gone wrong. Rather than resolving a crime and allowing the community to move past it, it perpetuated resentment and, in fact, incited Aphra to further criminal behavior.

In the crush, Faith's skull breaks away from her body and rolls on the grass. Mompellion is startled and releases Aphra, who is roused to new anger. She slashes Elinor's throat, killing her. Then she plunges it into her own chest and falls to the ground, kissing Faith's skull with "exquisite tenderness" before she dies.

Elinor's murder is fundamentally senseless, as she had nothing to do with Aphra's grievances, and it isn't even clear whether Aphra meant to kill her. The plague makes life seem meaningless not just through the deaths inflicted through the disease but through the complete psychological breakdown it catalyzes in characters like Aphra. Still, it's important that despite her insanity Aphra retains shreds of the values that used to define her. Her gesture towards Faith's skull shows the maternal love that links her to characters like Anna, despite her monstrous actions.

PART 3: APPLE-PICKING TIME

The villagers bury Faith at her cottage, next to her brothers. Since no one wants Aphra buried within the village, Anna and Brand dig her a grave next to Josiah on the moors. After Anna washes and prepares her body, Elinor is buried in the churchyard, the novice mason misspelling her name on the tombstone. Mr. Stanley presides over the funeral, since Mompellion is incapacitated by grief.

Anna takes responsibility for Aphra's death in a way she wasn't able to for her father. Now, the dead person's actions in life don't matter to her. Everyone merits a dignified and peaceful death—Aphra as much as Elinor.

Anna feels that it's not in her power to "be a friend" to Mompellion as Elinor had asked her, but she takes care of him diligently, attending all the rectory's household tasks. Every day he seems more removed from the world. He leaves the rectory only once, to dictate letters informing the Earl of Chatsworth that the plague is over and breaking the news of Elinor's death to her father.

As Mompellion suffers a breakdown, he becomes a recluse and his stature in the town declines. While Anna has always been a servant, taking orders from others, now she makes all the decisions not only about the upkeep of the house but about how to comfort and care for Mompellion.

Worrying about Mompellion distracts Anna from her own grief at the loss of her friend. Instead of allowing herself to think, she focuses on what Elinor "might do or say" at every occasion. Finding Mompellion standing in Elinor's garden one morning, she goes so far as to share a memory of Elinor in the garden. But Mompellion begs her not to speak, and Anna feels she has committed an "indiscretion."

Anna tries to emulate Elinor even more than she did when her friend was alive, but no matter how she tries, she can't replace Elinor in Mompellion's life, nor can Mompellion be a good stand-in for Elinor to Anna. Between the two women, there was no such thing as an indiscretion, but no such intimacy can exist with Mompellion.

The next day, Anna finds Mompellion in Elinor's room, sweating from standing by her bed so long. She gently leads him back to his own room, washes his face, and shaves him. A loose strand of her hair brushes his face and he stares at her; Anna feels too discomposed to continue and flees the room.

This passage shows a stirring of sexual tension between Anna and Mompellion. Such a thing would have been impossible before, given Mompellion's committed marriage and Anna's position in the household. However, with circumstances radically changed and the two living alone on terms of relative equality, it's no longer out of the question.

Anna asks Mr. Stanley to console Mompellion, but Stanley is agitated after their interview. He says that Mompellion laughed when he "advised him to accept God's will," and believes him to be mentally unstable. Mompellion refuses to see Stanley again, and instructs Anna to give him the message *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*. From the basic Latin she learned from Elinor, Anna understands that this means "untrue in one thing, untrue in everything." Mr. Stanley stops visiting.

It's clear that Mompellion has suffered a loss of faith, a development that is especially striking in a clergyman. Mr. Stanley interprets this as insanity; to him, a sane person is necessarily a believer. However, Mompellion is voicing religious doubts that Anna, the novel's steadiest and most competent character, has been entertaining for a long time.

The villagers now come to Anna for tonics and medicines, and she takes over the Gowdies' garden, wondering if "fate" has picked her to be their successor, but she feels the Gowdie cottage is too crowded with memories, like her early friendship with Elinor and the deaths of Mem and Anys, that she doesn't want to relive.

On the one hand, her discovery of science has given Anna a sense of purpose that, with the loss of her friend, she needs more than ever. However, Mem and Anys' fate reminds Anna of the pitfalls in her society for a woman of science. She knows she hasn't found her place yet.

The village stumbles lethargically on. Almost no one has the energy to leave, and no one from neighboring towns has the courage to come to Eyam. Mr. Holbroke, Mompellion's colleague, visits, but Mompellion will not see him. Anna brings Mompellion news of positive developments, like Mary Hadfield's marriage to a farrier and a friendship between Merry Wickford and Jane Martin, but Mompellion remains unmoved.

While the plague has abated, the village is far from recovering. It's clear that the plague's most lasting effects aren't medical but psychological. The traumatic experience has ruptured community norms that might never heal.

Anna tells Mompellion that the villagers need his comfort and support, but then realizes this isn't true. Some people blame the rector's leadership for the ravages of the plague, while for others he is "the bitter emblem and embodiment" of a terrible catastrophe. Anna tries to protect him from sensing the village's feelings toward him. Anna begins to despair, as she can do nothing to rouse Mompellion and his physical and mental strength seems to be waning. She feels she's just helplessly waiting out his inevitable death.

While Anna has questioned Mompellion's religious ideology for a long time, she's more sympathetic to him as a person than those who believed in him wholeheartedly. The new hostility towards Mompellion shows the villagers' horror at losing their own absolute faith in God's plan. On the other hand, Anna's relentless loyalty to Mompellion shows her determination to obey Elinor's injunction to take care of him.

Anna resumes her narrative where she left off in the prologue, after Mompellion drops the Bible. As she walks to the stables, she ponders the irony of the psalm he cited. Psalm 128 declares that "your wife will be like a fruitful vine" and "your children will be like olive shoots," while Mompellion's wife and Anna's children have been killed. It's evident that Mompellion is losing his faith, and this worries Anna more than her own doubts.

Anna no longer thinks of faith as central to her identity or her sanity, which is why it doesn't matter to her so much that she has doubts. However, Mompellion has been defined by religion for the whole novel, and it's unclear what will be left of him if he loses that.

Anna pets Mompellion's horse, Anteros, and confides her belief that Mompellion has lost his mind. She's saved a scrap of paper on which Mompellion drafted his letter to Elinor's father, in which he advises him to "never do that thing upon which you dare not first ask a blessing of God." She reflects that he is much more "discomposed" now, since he wouldn't dare ask the blessing of God for his treatment of Elizabeth or his insult to the Bible.

Mompellion's behavior, which has always been a bulwark of stability and reason for Anna, is increasingly erratic and inexplicable. In many ways, she is now more intellectually capable than he is.

Anna tells Anteros that the two of them have to make the most of being alive, and decides to take the restless horse. She gallops onto the moors, and the exhilaration fills her with hope, reminding her that "I was alive, and I was young, and I would go on." While Mompellion is "broken" by their experiences, she has emerged "tempered" and stronger. For the first time in over a year, she rides past the boundaries of the town.

Anna experiences a rare moment of enjoying her own strength. It's important that she accesses that strength not through a relationship to a man, but in contrast to a man. Mompellion's surprising weakness reveals that she has far surpassed expectations for female knowledge and independence.

When Anna returns, Mompellion has noticed her absence and is waiting for her. He asks if she has lost her senses and Anna tartly returns the question to him. At that, he collapses to his knees in the courtyard and Anna rushes to him, holding him in her arms "as Elinor surely would." Anna realizes she hasn't touched a man in two years, and is struck by sexual desire. Mompellion seems to pick up on this, and kisses her.

Even as she kisses Mompellion for the first time, Anna remarks that she's doing what Elinor would do, and thus seems to be trying to emulate her friend. In this sense, the encounter is as motivated by Anna's desire to recapture her lost friendship as it is by sexual desire.

The entrance of the frightened stable boy disrupts their kiss. Anna returns to the kitchen and tries to compose herself. Mompellion follows to apologize for his behavior, admitting that for the past months he hasn't been able to "think clearly" or feel anything except a "formless dread." He lays a finger on Anna's lips when she tries to speak. Anna kisses Mompellion's finger; they have sex on the kitchen floor and then, more tenderly, in the bedroom upstairs. They lie in bed all afternoon speaking of "all the things we had loved in our lives" while avoiding any mention of the plague.

On one hand, this sudden sexual relationship allows Anna to access her sexuality outside the restrictive bonds of marriage or conventional romance. However, both Anna and Mompellion are using sex to retreat into the past and relive better times before the plague. In light of this, the relationship seems unlikely to survive the harsh realities of the present moment in Eyam.

Mompellion helps Anna with her evening chores, telling her that the hay reminds him of his boyhood, when he expected to be a farmer. He asks if he can share her bed that night, and she acquiesces. Mompellion builds the fire and massages Anna's feet, saying he wants to take care of her as she normally does him. After having sex again, they eat a simple dinner in companionable silence and fall asleep together.

Despite the differences in their circumstances, Mompellion and Anna are more alike than they've supposed, especially given Mompellion's upbringing on a farm. Class distinctions don't prevent them from forming a quick and instinctive intimacy.

In the morning, Anna thinks of Elinor and asks Mompellion if having sex with her reminds him of his dead wife. Mompellion confesses that, in fact, he's never had sex with Elinor. He explains that Elinor "had need of expiation" because she "committed a great sin." When Anna says she already knows about Elinor's past, Mompellion comments that their friendship was perhaps closer "than was fitting." Anna resents this judgment, especially given that Mompellion has just slept with her.

The judgmental and dogmatic language with which Mompellion describes Elinor's "sins" contrasts unfavorably with the intimate, confessional tone in which Elinor related them to Anna. His remark that their friendship was too close for (his own) comfort reveals his judgment and his misunderstanding of the intimacy Anna shared with his wife.

Mompellion goes on to explain that in order to help Elinor atone for sinful lust that caused her to forfeit her sexual purity and perform an abortion, he refrained from sex during their marriage, so that she would live "with her lusts unrequited."

Mompellion's drastic and senseless self-castigation is essentially the same as John Gordon's flagellation, as both turn to unorthodox actions to placate an angry God. While Mompellion can easily recognize and suppress superstition in others, he can't do so for himself.

Anna protests that he's imposed on himself and Elinor a much harsher doctrine of sin and atonement than the one he preaches to the village. In fact, he told Jakob Merrill that God makes people lustful and forgives them for it, and that he regretted his outburst over Jane Martin's lust. Mompellion said that he was just trying to comfort Jakob, knowing that his death was near, and that if he had cared more about Jane he would have punished her "until her soul was cleansed." In Elinor's case, he was determined that she become pure enough to gain entrance to Heaven after death.

Mompellion is quickly exposing himself as much less altruistic than Anna thought. He always seemed to care equally for all of his parishioners, but now he reveals that he was just trying to keep them calm, while reserving his true efforts (however misguided) for those he really cared about. Mompellion is seeming less like a spiritual guide and more like an unhinged manipulator.

Anna asks how Mompellion suppressed his own sexual desire, and he says he imitated Catholic priests, who apparently combat their desire for women by thinking of all their unpleasant bodily emissions. Mompellion says he taught himself to ignore Elinor's beauty and attractions and think of "her bile and her pus." Anna finally understands Elinor's allusions to Mompellion's iron will. The revelation makes Anna feel sick, but Mompellion doesn't notice. He launches on a dramatic rant, saying that as the husband he is "the image of God in the kingdom of the home" and that he transformed his "lust into holy fire."

Mompellion's previous outburst to Jane Martin now makes a lot more sense. No matter how progressive he is regarding various social issues, he's still terrified and revolted by the female body, and intensely hostile to the idea that women might experience and act on unsanctioned sexual desires. Even to the society's most liberal and educated members, female sexuality is a taboo and frightening subject.

Mompellion then admits he no longer believes God exists. Rather, he thinks he was wrong to impose penance on Elinor and wrong to impose the quarantine on the villagers, who might otherwise have saved themselves. Now, he says, he will do as he likes. He reaches for Anna, but she grabs her clothes and escapes the room.

Mompellion's loss of faith causes him to turn to hedonism. He concludes that since there is no punishment awaiting him, the natural course of action is to let his impulses run wild and do things he regards as sinful, like having extramarital sex.

Anna stumbles into the churchyard and throws herself on Elinor's grave. She is angry that Mompellion made Elinor feel guilty for her natural character that was "made for love." Moreover, she feels guilty about her own actions. She had tried to become more like Elinor by sleeping with Mompellion, but instead she enjoyed the "wedding night" that Elinor never had.

Anna feels betrayed on Elinor's behalf rather than her own, reinforcing the fact that her fling with Mompellion was much more about closeness to Elinor than closeness to him. While Anna has formed an unusually healthy conception of her own sexuality, Elinor, under her husband's thrall, has remained convinced of her own sinfulness.

Anna hears Mompellion calling for her, and feels a deep repulsion towards him. She runs into the abandoned church to avoid him. Here, she remembers Sam. She had been frustrated by his simplicity and envied Elinor her intelligent, sophisticated husband. Now, she understands that his intelligence had "twisted itself into perversion" and feels nostalgic for Sam's unconditional love. Looking at the pews, she can't believe that she, Elinor, and the entire village had once relied completely on Mompellion for leadership and guidance.

Anna finally realizes that the doctrine and wisdom of elite institutions is often indistinguishable from superstition, and isn't necessarily something to rely on. Rather, it is ordinary pragmatism and goodness—like Sam's and especially like her own—that provide the best bulwark in troubled times.

In the Bradford pew, she finds Elizabeth praying. Elizabeth says that Mrs. Bradford has been in premature labor for a day, and the surgeon has given her up for dead. Anna says she will try to save her, even though Elizabeth taunts her for presuming to know more than the surgeon. At Bradford Hall, Elizabeth hands her horse to Anna, assuming she will stable it. Anna hands the reins back and strides into the Hall.

Anna no longer has any qualms about her own abilities, especially in comparison to the barbaric barber surgeons. Her confidence as a doctor also empowers her as a person, giving her the strength to defy Elizabeth's insults once and for all.

Anna finds Mrs. Bradford bleeding profusely, attended by an inexperienced maid. Anna examines her and finds it's a simple breach **birth**, easy to fix. She concludes that Colonel Bradford instructed the surgeon to let his wife die.

Anna's conclusion firmly establishes barber surgeons, and by extension male medicine, as firmly entrenched in an establishment designed to oppress women and punish them harshly for any transgressions.

Contrary to everyone's expectations, Mrs. Bradford delivers the baby safely and stops bleeding. Looking in the baby's eyes, Anna knows that this work is enough reason to keep on living.

Anna's renewed sense of purpose through helping others, even after losing her faith, is a marked contrast with Mompellion's selfishness and willful self-destruction. It's notable that Anna accesses this purpose by helping other women fight against male repression.

Anna prepares to ride to her cottage and fetch a nettle tonic to strengthen Mrs. Bradford's blood. However, when she turns back to the kitchen for a cloak, she finds Elizabeth about to drown the baby in a bucket. Anna knocks her out of the way, and rubs her until she survives. In a moment of rage, she picks up a meat hook and brandishes it at Elizabeth, but, coming to her senses, she drops it on the ground.

Brandishing a knife and a child in her arms, Anna looks like Aphra for a moment. However, unlike Aphra she is able to restrain her lowest impulses and turn to reason, even in a time of crisis. Anna won't inflict punishment indiscriminately as Aphra did, even when she stops a monstrous crime.

Elizabeth tries to justify herself, saying that the baby is illegitimate and she has to kill it so that Mrs. Bradford can retain the Colonel's good graces. She says that she is only committing this crime out of love for her mother.

Even Elizabeth isn't without redemptive qualities. She seeks her mother's happiness, which she thinks she can only attain by placating her father. However, she behaves like her father in this respect, willing to harm others and neglect basic responsibilities in pursuit of a single aim.

Anna volunteers to adopt the baby. When Elizabeth is reluctant, she says she will move far away from Eyam, where the child can never resurface as a nuisance. As Elizabeth considers the proposition and Anna looks at her calculating, empty face, she tries to pray; but she realizes she's forgotten all the psalms and prayers she once knew by heart. Elizabeth finally acquiesces.

On the brink of taking on new responsibilities and leaving the only home she knows, Anna forgets the texts which have always sustained her. In her new life, she won't need or rely on conventional religion; rather, she'll turn to her own reason and capabilities for guidance.

After haggling over logistics, Anna returns upstairs to inform Mrs. Bradford of the plan. Mrs. Bradford is grateful that the baby's life will be spared; she asks Anna to tell her daughter that she would have loved her "if she had been allowed." In return, Anna says that the little girl will always be cherished. Elizabeth gives Anna money to provide for her on the journey away from Eyam, and she rides away from the Hall.

Mrs. Bradford's love for her daughter contrasts with Elizabeth's mercenary pragmatism. Reassuring her that the baby will be loved, Anna effectively becomes the baby's other parent. The girl's birth is a joint effort between her and Mrs. Bradford, effectively writing any male influence out of the equation.

At home, Anna packs up her few remaining possessions: Jamie's jerkin, Elinor's medical books, and some herbal remedies. Mompellion arrives, having gone to Bradford Hall and been informed of Anna's plans to leave town. He says that he will no longer wallow in his own grief but rather strive to be like Anna, who despite her sadness and her lack of faith is useful to others.

Even Mompellion admits that the loss of faith is less important than what one decides to do after such a crisis. Anna is able to be altruistic and virtuous even without a religious incentive, and Mompellion realizes that this is the best path.

Mompellion says that Anna's life is in danger from the Bradfords, because she knows both of the existence of an illegitimate child and of Elizabeth's attempted murder. He advises that Anna take Anteros and head to Elinor's family estate, where she can find a job. Anna rides away with the baby, briefly waving to Mompellion as she goes.

Leaving town, Anna is much more preoccupied with the baby's safety than her parting with Mompellion. Her relationships and transactions with other women are always much more important than her brief romances with men.

EPILOGUE: THE WAVES, LIKE RIDGES OF PLOW'D LAND

Anna reflects on a Margaret Cavendish poem Elinor once showed her, which compared the ocean's waves to green meadows. Now she lives in a large house overlooking the water. As she works, she watches merchant ships arriving from ports like Venice and Marseilles, exchanging a variety of goods including, unfortunately, slaves. Anna says that she never intends to travel by sea again, since the journey away from England wasn't peaceful and bucolic, like the Cavendish poem, but violent and stormy.

Anna is now situated in a much different and more cosmopolitan landscape than the one to which she's always been confined. Circumstances have forced her to leave Eyam, but have simultaneously opened up the wider world to her.

Anna summarizes her journey away from Eyam. Instead of settling at Elinor's estate, she hires a wet nurse and continues on to Liverpool. She wants to distance herself from her own life. Moreover, she wants to "make something entirely new," away from the memory of her lost friend.

Anna has always tried to emulate Elinor as much as possible, but now she realizes that while she is highly influenced by her friend, she's also a worthy person in her own right. This is the climax of Anna's personal development.

For a few days, Anna stays in a Liverpool inn and wonders what she should do to provide for herself and the baby. Eventually, the innkeeper informs her that an unsavory man has been asking questions about her and the baby. He advises her to get on the next ship leaving port. She boards a ship leaving for Venice.

Colonel Bradford is determined to suppress the shame of his wife's sexual transgressions. That Anna is able to save the baby is a triumph of female bonds over male oppression.

After a tumultuous sea voyage, during which Anna fears death more than once, the ship makes a stop in Oran, Algeria, a city then controlled by the Al-Andalus Arabs. Anna remembers Avicenna's Canon of Medicine, which she once studied with Elinor, and decides that since Muslim societies seem to have so much medical knowledge, she will settle there and try to obtain training in "the craft that had become my vocation."

Even though she has grown up in a religiously homogenous community, Algeria's religious differences aren't important to Anna. For her, the pursuit of science fosters not only education and character development, but tolerance and open-mindedness toward others.

The ship's captain directs her to Ahmed Bey, a well-known doctor living in Oran, who quickly agrees to take her on as an apprentice. Anna becomes one of Ahmed Bey's wives so that she can live in his house without impropriety, although they don't have a romantic relationship. Instead, they develop a close friendship, discussing his strong Muslim faith and "the flimsy, tattered thing that is the remnant of [Anna's] own belief." She says that while she no longer has faith, she has hope.

It's interesting and perhaps problematic that Anna satisfies herself with a celibate marriage, much like Elinor. On one hand, it seems the only way to maintain her independence while living in a conservative community. On the other hand, Anna has always longed for sexual fulfillment and to be rooted in an intimate family relationship like the one Mompellion and Elinor seemed to have. That she has to give up those hopes shows that women who want to live unconventional lives have to sacrifice much.

Under the direction of Ahmed Bey, Anna learns a far more sophisticated kind of medicine than she has ever known. Unlike the primitive barber surgeons of England, Ahmed Bey and his colleagues actually pursue a scientific understanding of the body and its ailments. Anna makes herself useful by treating women who, in this conservative society, sometimes die rather than being examined by a male doctor. Anna becomes an experienced midwife and learns Arabic.

Becoming a midwife, Anna follows through on the positive instinct she had while delivering the Bradford baby. It's notable that she makes midwifery her specialty. Even when she's not delivering the babies of troubled marriages, like Mrs. Bradford's, she's helping women transform a frightening and dangerous part of life into a powerful and independent moment.

Meanwhile, Anna becomes accustomed to life in a completely different world from the one she's always known. She experiences the different colors of the landscape and the dry climate; for the first time, she tastes an orange. While she spent her whole life in a tiny, isolated town, now she lives in a large, noisy city and greets her patients when she walks in the streets. As is traditional, the women call him by the name of her firstborn, "*Umm Jam-ee*."

Anna has always felt stifled by life in Eyam, and she finally gets to experience the wide world, full of things she'd never dreamed of. This broad new life is the reward of her embrace of science and her empowerment as a woman.

Anna names the Bradford baby Aisha, the Arabic word for both "bread" and "life." She walks down to the women's courtyard, where Aisha is waiting for her under the care of Maryam, Ahmed Bey's friendly eldest wife. With Aisha is Anna's younger daughter, to whom she gave birth in Oran. She has Mompellion's gray eyes, but Anna has named her Elinor. Anna takes one daughter in each hand and they walk out of the house, into the city.

Aisha's name reinforces her status as a deciding factor in Anna's life, catalyzing the changes that have led her to Oran. Her younger daughter's name, Elinor, shows Anna's love for her friend, even though she conceived the baby with Mompellion. By naming her daughter Elinor, she turns her into a symbol of friendship between women, rather than the reminder of a flawed relationship with a man.

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