

I Am Legend



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD MATHESON

Richard Matheson grew up in Brooklyn, and later attended the University of Missouri, where he majored in journalism. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he began writing science fiction stories, and succeeded in publishing some in sci-fi magazines. Throughout the 1950s, Matheson remained a prolific author, and many of his stories and novels were adapted into films and TV episodes. Matheson's 1956 novel *The Shrinking Man* was adapted into *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, one of the most iconic sci-fi films of the 1950s. Additionally, Matheson wrote more than a dozen episodes of the classic 1950s TV show *The Twilight Zone*, including the famous "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" (the one where William Shatner sees a monster on the wing of his plane). Matheson remained a prolific, highly-respected sci-fi writer throughout the second half of the 20th century; his short story "Duel" formed the basis for an early Steven Spielberg film of the same name, and his novel *I Am Legend* (1954) has been made into a film at least five times. Matheson died in Los Angeles in 2013, just days before he was due to receive the Saturn Award, one of the science fiction community's most prestigious honors.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a science fiction novel, *I Am Legend* doesn't reference very many historical events; however, like many of the best SF books, it uses science fiction to allude to some of the social and political events of its era. Matheson's futuristic portrait of Los Angeles as a dangerous, vampire-ridden wasteland could reflect his impressions of Los Angeles in the 1950s, when there were numerous fires and the city experienced a major increase in violent crime. Furthermore, *I Am Legend* alludes to the Cold War: the era in the second half of the 20th century when the United States and the Soviet Union fought a series of proxy wars against one another, and when there was a legitimate danger of global nuclear war.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a vampire novel, the touchstone for *Am Legend* is, without a doubt, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (a novel which Matheson mentions more than once over the course of the book). Stoker's 1897 Gothic horror novel tells the story of the evil Count Dracula, a vampire who sucks the blood of his victims. The book is credited with sparking a revival of interest in the vampire legend; Matheson's book then reinterprets vampires in a more futuristic, scientific context. Perhaps the most famous author to

credit Matheson himself as an influence is Stephen King, the author of such horror classics as *Salem's Lot*, *Pet Sematery*, *Cujo*, *Carrie*, and *The Shining*. In many of his books, King studies lonely, depressed characters, not unlike Richard Neville; furthermore, King credits Matheson with showing him how to combine science fiction with horror in a convincing way.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** I Am Legend
- **When Written:** 1953
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles
- **When Published:** Summer 1954
- **Literary Period:** Cold War science fiction (sometimes called "Silver Age" sci-fi)
- **Genre:** Science fiction / Horror
- **Setting:** Los Angeles, 1976-1978
- **Climax:** The "new society" breaks into Robert Neville's house.
- **Antagonist:** It's difficult to say who the antagonist of the novel is; one of the central themes of the book is that everyone is an antagonist to someone else. The "dead vampires," the "new society" of living vampires, or even Robert Neville himself could be considered the novel's antagonist.
- **Point of View:** Third person limited (following Robert Neville's point of view).

EXTRA CREDIT

The most famous writer you've never heard of. Even if you've never heard of Richard Matheson, you're probably familiar with his work. He penned episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and wrote the stories on which the films *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *Real Steel*, *Duel*, *Jaws 3-D*, and *What Dreams May Come* were based. *I Am Legend* alone was adapted for the cinema five times: in 1964, 1967, 1971, and twice in 2007. Matheson kept busy with TV and film writing—just three years before his death, he helped write a hilarious episode of the TV show *Family Guy*.

Famous fans. On the week Richard Matheson died, there was a massive outpouring of grief throughout the science-fiction/horror community. Steven Spielberg, Stephen King, Roger Corman, Richard Kelly (the director of the cult classic *Donnie Darko*), George Romero (the director of *Night of the Living Dead*), and Edgar Wright (the director of *Shaun of the Dead*) were among the industry figures to express their sympathies for Matheson. Clearly, the guy had a lot of fans.



PLOT SUMMARY

The year is 1976—one year after a deadly plague sweeps the world, killing virtually all human beings. After their deaths, the world's human beings rise from the grave and become **vampires**: sensitive to light, garlic, and mirrors, dormant during the day, and impervious to bullets. In the city of Los Angeles, a man named Robert Neville has managed to survive by converting his house into a fortress. Every day, he travels across the city, impaling sleeping vampires with wooden stakes, and every night, he barricades himself in his house to hide from the vampires (who only come out in the dark). All night, Neville hears the sound of his old friend and neighbor, Ben Cortman—now a vampire—shouting, “Come out, Neville!”

Neville has several close calls with the vampires. One evening, his watch stops, so that he's forced to drive home after sunset and fight past Ben Cortman and the other vampires. Neville narrowly manages to return to his house alive. Afterwards, he **drinks** heavily and falls into depression.

In flashbacks, we learn that Neville has been devastated by the death of his wife, Virginia Neville, and his daughter, Kathy Neville. In 1975, the year of the plague, there were widespread reports of dust storms and genetically mutated bugs and insects that spread the plague across the world. The government instituted a law that all victims of the plague be burned in a huge pit; after the death of his daughter, Neville followed this rule. However, when Virginia died, Neville couldn't bear to burn the body; instead, he dragged it to a cemetery and buried it underground. To his horror, Virginia rose from the dead and walked back to the house—afterwards, it's strongly implied, Neville was forced to “kill” his vampire wife for a second time.

In an effort to stave off his depression and loneliness, Neville tries to learn about the vampires. During the day, he kidnaps sleeping vampires from their hiding places, and takes them back to his house. There, he waits for them to wake up, and then dangles crosses in front of their faces—he finds that some, but not all, of the vampires are repulsed by the sight of a cross. Neville also learns that it's possible to kill vampires by piercing their bodies anywhere—it doesn't have to be the heart, contrary to folklore. Neville also tries to kill vampires by injecting them with allyl sulphide, the pungent chemical found in garlic. However, the allyl sulphide fails to provoke any reaction in the vampires he tests. Neville manages to isolate the vampire germ: he does this by teaching himself about medicine, extracting blood from vampires as they sleep, and looking at the blood under a microscope. Finally, Neville realizes that there are two distinct kinds of vampires: living vampires and the “true undead.” The former kind of vampire is a human being who's currently suffering from the vampire plague, but who still has some control over their own mind; the latter kind is a corpse that has risen from the grave, and is now

wild and feral.

One day, Neville discovers that there's a live dog outside his house. The dog appears to be infected with the vampire germ; however, it can still walk around in the sunlight. Neville, desperate for companionship of any kind, feeds the dog hamburger meat, and tries to convince the dog to live in his house. However, the dog seems to be frightened of Neville. Over time, the dog becomes more and more sick with the vampire germ, until, one day, it dies.

Neville resists the temptation to drink heavily after the dog's death. Instead, he throws himself into his research. He hypothesizes that some vampires are frightened of crosses because the cross reminds them of their former, Christian lives. However, vampires who were Jewish or atheist in life may not be afraid of the cross at all.

The novel then jumps ahead two years: it's now 1978, and Neville has become more comfortable in his new life. He spends his days hunting the neighborhood for Ben Cortman's sleeping body—indeed, the hunt for Cortman is the best part of Neville's life.

One day, Neville is shocked to discover a woman running through the streets. The woman is initially reluctant to stop and talk to Neville, but eventually she agrees to go back to his house. At home, Neville learns that the woman is named Ruth, and that she lived with her husband until her husband died the previous week. Neville is highly skeptical of Ruth—he's suspicious that she's infected with the vampire germ, since Ruth is disgusted by the smell of garlic.

During his time with Ruth, Neville tells her some things he's learned in the past two years. He's learned that vampires are immune to gunfire, because the vampire germ creates a “powerful body glue” that can absorb bullets. He also tells Ruth that he's immune to the vampire germ, probably because he was bitten by a vampire bat during his time fighting in Panama. Neville explains that he spends his days killing vampires in their sleep, and Ruth asks him how Neville can be so laid-back about killing them. Neville, in spite of himself, begins to feel guilty. That night, it's implied, he and Ruth sleep together.

Neville insists on testing Ruth's blood; he does so, and immediately sees that she's heavily infected with the vampire germ. But as he looks into the microscope, Ruth knocks him out and leaves the house. When Neville comes to, he finds that Ruth has left him a note, explaining that she's a member of a “new society” of living vampires: vampires who haven't yet succumbed to the ravages of the germ, but who take special pills to stave off the germ's effects. Neville killed Ruth's husband, also a living vampire, in his sleep. Ruth further explains that her fellow vampires sent her to spy on Neville; however, she decided not to hurt Neville after she fell in love with him.

Late at night, Neville sees members of Ruth's new society

walking outside, killing the dead vampires. Neville despises the new society vampires for their cool, casual attitude toward murder. He sees the vampires of the new society killing his old enemy, Ben Cortman, and feels a strange wave of sympathy for Cortman. Then, the new society vampires break into his house. Terrified that he's going to be killed, Neville defends himself with a pistol, but the vampires overpower him.

Neville wakes up in a cell, with Ruth next to him. Ruth explains that the new society vampires are going to execute Neville: in their eyes, Neville is a horrifying monster who has mercilessly killed their kind for the last three years. She offers Neville some poison capsules to make his execution less painful. Neville takes the capsules and walks out of his cell, toward the new society vampires, who are about to kill him. As he faces death from the poison, Neville realizes the truth: although he's spent the last three years fearing vampires and thinking of them as hideous monsters, *he* is the monster to them. Neville has devoted his existence to killing the living vampires: from their perspective, he is the danger, the monster, and the "legend."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Robert Neville – The main character of *I Am Legend*, Robert Neville is the last human being to survive after a **vampire** plague hits Los Angeles in the year 1975. While his friends and family become vampires, Neville converts his house into a fortress, and spends his days traveling around the city, killing any sleeping vampires he can find. Over the course of the book, Neville tries to understand the causes of the vampire plague. He also battles depression and alcoholism—without anyone left to talk to, **whiskey** is one of the few pleasures left to him. Throughout the book, Neville expresses his fear and hatred for the vampires, and it's his goal to rid the city of vampires altogether. However, after he meets Ruth, a "living vampire," Neville begins to see the truth: from the perspective of the vampires, *Neville* is a hideous monster, who spends his waking life killing vampires in their sleep (just as vampires are said to spend their waking lives killing slumbering humans). Thus, as the novel comes to a close, Neville seems to see the world through the eyes of a vampire: *he* is the monster, the antagonist, and the "legend."

Ruth – A ranking officer in the "new society" of living **vampires** (i.e., vampires who retain their intelligence and memory, and who live at peace with their vampire bacteria by taking special pills). Toward the end of the novel, Ruth shows up near Robert Neville's house, pretending to be a normal human being. The two share a romantic connection, and though she's seemingly been sent to kill Neville, she only knocks him out, and then leaves him a letter telling him to leave Los Angeles immediately. In the end, Neville is captured, and Ruth mercifully offers him

poison capsules so that he won't have to suffer an execution at the hands of the vengeful new society.

Ben Cortman – Ben Cortman is Robert Neville's friend and neighbor and, after he becomes infected with the **vampire** germ, one of Neville's most dangerous enemies. Every night, Cortman stands outside Neville's house, shouting for him to come outside. Over the course of the novel, Cortman becomes more than just Neville's enemy: he becomes Neville's reason for living. As Neville becomes more comfortable in his role as a vampire-killer, he begins to enjoy hunting for Cortman during the day—indeed, he doesn't know how he'd spend his time if he ever managed to catch Cortman. In the end, then, Cortman symbolizes the strange symbiosis between vampires and human beings—one of the novel's most important themes.

Virginia Neville – Virginia Neville is Robert Neville's dead wife. She succumbs to the **vampire** plague, and Neville buries her in a cemetery. To his horror, Virginia comes back from the dead and menaces him—he's forced to kill her for a second time, and bury her once more. Although Neville's love for Virginia is one of the crucial aspects of his character, we're given almost no information about Virginia's personality—she's an important, but somewhat one-dimensional character.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dr. Busch – A Los Angeles doctor who gives Robert Neville some information about the **vampire** plague, but never actually appears in the book.

Kathy Neville – Robert Neville and Virginia Neville's daughter, who dies of the **vampire** plague.

Fritz – Robert Neville's father.

Freda Cortman – Ben Cortman's wife.



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.



OTHERNESS

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* is a science fiction adventure and a terrifying horror story. But unlike most works of horror, *I Am Legend* is not a black-and-white tale of "us versus them"; in other words, a story in which a hero fights off a monstrous villain. Matheson's novel is set in a futuristic version of Los Angeles, in which Robert Neville, the last man left on Earth, fights against a terrifying race of **vampires**. However, the book does not simply glorify Neville and demonize the vampires. Instead, Matheson uses

Neville's interactions with the vampires to study the concept of "otherness"—the way that one group interacts with and conceives of a radically different group. As *I Am Legend* goes on, it becomes clearer and clearer that there are no real heroes or villains in the book: just two groups (humans and vampires), each of which fears, and is equally alien to, the "Other."

One of Matheson's most important points about otherness is that the Other is both repulsive and attractive. In the year 1976, Robert Neville navigates the city of Los Angeles, looking for sleeping vampires to kill with a wooden stake. He's terrified of vampires, and for good reason: Every night, they gather outside his house and yell for him to come outside (presumably so that they can bite him and infect him with their vampire plague). But although Neville despises vampires and considers them a threat to his very existence, he's curiously drawn to them. He spends all his time learning about vampires, feels sexually attracted to female vampires, and repeatedly expresses sympathy for them. In part, Neville's feelings of attraction for the vampires stem from his loneliness and sexual frustration. But at the same time, he seems to feel a profound sense of connection between himself and the vampires: they are, after all, just human beings who've contracted a disease. By portraying the Other—the race of vampires—as both terrifying and sympathetic, Matheson complicates the typical horror novel scenario. Instead of a heroic human being fighting off demonic vampires, Matheson portrays a morally ambiguous human being fighting against morally ambiguous vampires. (See Survival and morality theme.) Neville hates vampires, and thinks of them as being totally "Other" than himself; however, he also seems to realize, deep down, that humans and vampires aren't so different.

At the end of *I Am Legend*, Matheson brings the concept of Otherness "full circle" by showing that Neville is just as "Other" to the vampires as they are to him. After being captured by a race of intelligent vampires, Neville is sent to be executed for his "crimes" against their race. As he marches to his death, Neville realizes that, from the perspective of the vampires, he is a monster. Just like a vampire, he's snuck into his enemies' homes and killed them in their sleep. Neville's realization leads him to utter the book's final line, and title: "I am legend"—the suggestion being that, to the vampires, Neville is a terrifying, supernatural creature who needs to be destroyed before he can kill again. In short, at the end of the book, Neville finally sees through the eyes of the Other—he sees the world from a vampire's perspective, and comes to understand that he, too, is a foreign, alien being. Over the years, various scholars and critics have interpreted *I Am Legend* as a metaphor for the experience of homosexuals, African Americans, or immigrants. Indeed, the vampires in Matheson's novel could represent any and all minority groups that have been demonized and treated as the "Other" in the United States. While it's all-too easy to portray an unfamiliar group as foreign, frightening, and

unknowable, Matheson's novel shows that Others may be just as frightened of "us" (whatever that might mean) as we are of them—and that, in fact, the distinction between "us" and "them" may be less important than what "we" have in common.



GRIEF, LONELINESS, AND DEPRESSION

I Am Legend contains a surprising amount of psychological insight about grief, loneliness, and depression. The novel's main character, Robert Neville, is the last human being left on Earth—everyone else has been turned into a **vampire**. Neville thus has to deal with the psychological effects of being completely alone—a fate that is, in some ways, worse than becoming a vampire.

Without any human connection whatsoever, Neville is forced to take refuge in his memories of other people. Every day, it's suggested, he thinks about his wife, Virginia, and his child, Kathy, both of whom died in the vampire plague of 1975. Neville's memories of his wife and child are horrific: after Kathy succumbed to the plague, he burned her body. Furthermore, after Virginia died of the plague, Neville buried her underground; when she rose from the grave, a full-fledged vampire, Neville was forced to kill her with a wooden stake. The way that Neville relives the death of wife and his child day after day suggests the symptoms of trauma. While some human beings overcome their trauma by interacting with other people—in essence, diluting their old, traumatizing memories with new, happy ones—Neville has no one to talk to: he's all alone with his depression. As a result, he spends his time **drinking** heavily and playing loud **music**, in a vain effort to escape his own grief.

Neville tries many different remedies for his grief, loneliness, and depression, none of which "cure" him entirely. Throughout the novel, he drinks heavily—a remedy that staves off depression temporarily, but ultimately makes it worse. More successfully, he tries to set himself a routine: driving around Los Angeles to kill vampires, researching the science of vampirism, fortifying his house, etc. Routine gives Neville the strength to survive his new life; it gives him a sense of control over his own destiny, and provides him with something to look forward to when he goes to bed every night. Finally, Neville seizes the opportunity to make connections with an outsider—first a dog, and then a woman named Ruth, whom Neville believes to be a human being (but who is actually a vampire). In both cases, Neville risks his own safety in order to bond with an outsider: his hunger for someone to talk to easily outweighs the possibility that his new acquaintance will hurt him. But in both cases, Neville fails to forge an emotional connection between himself and his new acquaintance. The dog succumbs to the vampire plague, and Ruth betrays Neville to her fellow vampires. Ruth's betrayal steers Neville (and the novel) toward a frightening conclusion: as the last human being left on Earth, Neville will never truly escape his own loneliness

and depression. The other potential interpretation of the book's final line (in addition to the one discussed in the Otherness theme) is that Neville has finally come to accept his own mortality and his own isolation from the rest of the world. As the last member of the human race, his days are numbered—soon, he, and the entire human race, will fade into a distant memory.



SURVIVAL AND VIOLENCE

In *I Am Legend*, Robert Neville spends his days traveling around Los Angeles, driving stakes into the hearts of **vampires**—in effect, murdering them in their sleep. Neville is sometimes sympathetic to the vampires (see Otherness theme), yet he continues to kill them, reasoning that if he doesn't, they'll kill him at night. In general, the novel studies the lengths to which ordinary people will go to survive in a time of crisis. In particular, Matheson is interested in the way that people use "survival" as a justification for their acts of violence—to what extent is there a valid reason to kill?

After he survives the vampire plague, Neville is forced to face a simple fact: if he doesn't protect himself, vampires will kill him. Thus, survival becomes the dominant theme of his life. Indeed, he converts his house into a fortress, so that the vampires won't be able to attack him in his sleep. In general, Neville sees himself as playing a defensive role: he sees the vampires as an aggressive force and a threat to his survival. Because he sees himself in a purely defensive role, Neville can always justify his own acts of killing. At several points in the novel, he feels guilt or regret while killing sleeping vampires with a wooden stake. However, whenever this happens, he convinces himself that he's doing the right thing: he refuses to be on the losing side of a "kill or be killed" situation. Strictly based on these scenes, the novel seems to imply that survival is the most basic, fundamental value; put another way, nothing Neville does is more important than surviving.

Even if survival is the most important part of Neville's life, *I Am Legend* shows some of the moral challenges of using survival to justify one's violent deeds. Over the course of the book, Neville becomes increasingly numb to the act of killing vampires. In the earliest chapters, he feels pain and regret for his killings, and compensates by **drinking** heavily. Later, he seems to get an almost sexual pleasure out of killing vampires. As the years go by, however, Neville seems to become totally desensitized to the violence. Toward the end of the novel, when Neville meets Ruth, Matheson makes it clear how much of a toll killing has taken on Neville. He explains to Ruth how he kills vampires, and becomes genuinely puzzled when Ruth points out that what he's doing is barbaric and cruel. Indeed, insofar as she's capable of expressing sympathy and concern for others, Ruth comes across as far more "human" than Neville in this scene, despite the fact that she's really a vampire. Three years of systematic killing have turned Neville into an insensitive, emotionless

wreck. Whether or not his killing is justified for survival's sake, it has stripped him of his humanity.

At the end of the novel, Neville finally seems to recognize some of the dangers of violence. After learning of a new race of intelligent vampires, he watches the new vampires slaughter other vampires, seeming to enjoy themselves while doing so. When he questions Ruth about the brutality of the new vampire society, Ruth offers the same unconvincing excuse that Neville offered her: they're just trying to survive. Ruth's words suggest that survival isn't always a valid justification for violence; more often, it's just an excuse to behave sadistically and cruelly. Neville's final words to Ruth—"don't make it too brutal"—have an important double meaning. On one hand, Neville is asking Ruth to make his execution as painless as possible; at the same time, however, Neville seems to be warning Ruth against building a brutal, violent vampire society. Over the past three years, Neville has lived in his own brutal "society"—every single day, he's killed dozens. A few minutes from death, he seems to see the danger of basing one's existence on acts of violence. In general, *I Am Legend* suggests that a life of violence destroys the killer's soul as well as the victims' lives. Survival is important, but there seems to be little point to killing to survive when killing deprives us of our humanity.



SCIENCE

Another important theme of *I Am Legend* is the power—both benevolent and malicious—of science. Throughout the book, Robert Neville studies the science of vampirism. In the process, he empowers himself and gives himself a new purpose in life. By researching epidemiology, bacteriology, and other "ologies" at the Los Angeles Public Library, Neville comes to realize that **vampires** aren't supernatural monsters—they're just human beings suffering from a serious disease. Neville's discovery helps him conquer his own fear of the vampires. Because he no longer sees them as indestructible demons, he sleeps better at night, and instead of dreading tomorrow, he finds himself looking forward to the future. Furthermore, the science of vampirism helps Neville expand his moral horizons: he realizes that the vampires are the victims of their own germs, and feels sympathy for them. Perhaps most importantly, science empowers Neville by giving him something important to do every day. Neville is a natural scientist: he's intensely curious about the vampire plague, and plans various experiments and tests to further his knowledge. He finds that, when he's studying the vampires, he looks forward to each new day instead of dreading it, and goes for hours without fearing the vampires at all. In generally, *I Am Legend* suggests that fear and anxiety are often rooted in ignorance—by embracing the power of science, Neville staves off some of his own anxiety and conquers some of his fears.

In spite of Matheson's obvious love for biology and medicine, *I Am Legend* doesn't offer an entirely uncritical view of science. Like so many science fiction books of the era, the novel portrays science as a potentially dangerous force that's capable of leading to great destruction. In the process of studying the science of vampires, Neville develops some sympathy for the vampires; however, his sympathy isn't enough to dissuade him from killing them. Neville uses his scientific training to kill vampires with expert efficiency—a violent, destructive act that ultimately leaves him a hardened, emotionless man. (See Violence theme.) In this sense, science enlightens Neville but also gives him even greater powers of destruction. Indeed, Matheson strongly implies that the deadly vampire plague itself is the result of runaway scientific experimentation. In flashbacks, we learn that the vampire plague may have originated from the nuclear fallout from a recent world war, or from germ warfare. While Matheson offers only a brief discussion of the origins of the vampire plague, the discussion is crucial for situating *I Am Legend* in its proper historical context. Less than a decade after the Hiroshima bombing—a “triumph” of physics that must have seemed like science fiction—many Americans regarded science and technology as being incredibly dangerous. Ultimately, *I Am Legend* is typical of science fiction written during the Cold War era insofar as it presents science as empowering but inherently dangerous. Neville empowers himself by learning about vampires, but his empowerment doesn't necessarily make him a better man—only a more efficiently destructive one.



SYMBOLS

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



VAMPIRES

Entire books have been written about what, exactly, the vampires in *I Am Legend* symbolize. Science fiction scholars have convincingly argued that the vampires symbolize the African American civil rights movement, which was gaining power during Matheson's time in Los Angeles (and which was widely vilified at the time). Others have argued that vampires evoke the increasingly public sexuality of 1950s America. Still others have found parallels between the vampires and the California gay culture of the era. While all these theories have some merit, it's hard to find *one* convincing symbolic explanation for the vampires. Perhaps instead of symbolizing one specific group of people who were persecuted in 1950s America, the vampires symbolize Otherness itself—and the way that people often instinctually resort to violence, fear, and superstition when responding to people who are unlike them.



MUSIC

Throughout *I Am Legend*, Robert Neville entertains himself by listening to records of classical music. The music relaxes Neville, and reminds him of the achievements of humanity before the onset of the vampire plague. In all, Neville's music symbolizes rapidly vanishing human civilization.



ALCOHOL

Robert Neville copes with his depression and loneliness by drinking heavily (in real life, Matheson was known to be a heavy drinker, suggesting that there might be some autobiographical touches in *I Am Legend*'s descriptions of alcoholism and depression). Alcohol could be said to symbolize the depths of Neville's loneliness as the last man on Earth.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Tor Books edition of *I Am Legend* published in 2007.

Chapter 1 Quotes

With a stiffening of rage, he wrenched up the record and snapped it over his right knee. He'd meant to break it long ago. He walked on rigid legs to the kitchen and flung the pieces into the trash box. Then he stood in the dark kitchen, eyes tightly shut, teeth clenched, hands clamped over his ears. Leave me alone, leave me alone, leave me alone!

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter One, Robert Neville has been defending himself from the vampires of Los Angeles for five months. He's fortified his house, boarding up all the windows and reinforcing the doors. By day, Neville travels around the city, killing any sleeping vampires he can find. In the evenings, he barricades himself in his house, trying to distract himself from the sounds of vampires outside by listening to old classical music records.

In the passage, it becomes clear that Neville is having a hard time adjusting to his new role as last uninfected man in

Earth. The records can't entirely distract him from the vampires, and in this scene, he becomes so furious with his isolation that he breaks the record over his knee.

Another aspect of Neville's psychological torment that's hinted at in the passage (in addition to his isolation) is his celibacy. On more than one occasion, Neville is sexually drawn to the vampires of the night—he hasn't been with a woman since the death of his wife in 1975, and every night, the female vampires try to lure him outside. Matheson is fond of using phallic, sexualized language to hint at Neville's erotic torment, and in this passage, the word "stiffening" could suggest his sexual frustrations.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛☛ He checked the oil, water, battery water, and tires. Everything was in good condition. It usually was, because he took special care of the car. If it ever broke down so that he couldn't get back to the house by sunset ... Well, there was no point in even worrying about that. If it ever happened, that was the end.

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Two, Neville drives around Los Angeles, killing vampires in their sleep. Neville drives a Willys station wagon (a common car of the 1950s), and keeps it in excellent condition at all times. His reasoning is simple: if, for any reason, the station wagon were to break down in the middle of the day, Neville would be stranded far from his house—and would have to fend off the vampires from outside the safety of his house. In that case, the vampires would surely attack him and kill him.

There are two things to notice about the passage. First, notice that Matheson doesn't actually *say* what would happen to Neville if he were to remain outside after sunset; instead, he leaves it unsaid. As in many horror books and films, the reader's imagination is far more frightening than anything a writer or a director can dream up, and at various points in *I Am Legend*, Matheson uses similar kinds of ellipses to frighten readers. Second, notice that survival is the core value in Neville's new life. Everything he does during the day—even something as banal as driving a station wagon down the streets of Los Angeles—is suffused with the possibility of death. It's no wonder that Neville

experiences psychological problems throughout the book—he lives in a constant state of fear.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛☛ He thought of the eleven—no, the twelve children that afternoon, and he finished his drink in two swallows.

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Three, Neville has wrapped up a busy day of killing vampires with wooden stakes. Back in his house, he thinks about the vampires he killed, some of whom were children, and shudders. To distract himself from his own guilt, he drinks heavily.

One of the basic questions that Matheson poses in *I Am Legend* is, "Is Neville morally justified in killing vampires in their sleep?" In this passage, Matheson gives us reason to believe that the answer is no. Deep down, Neville seems to know that he's doing something horribly wrong when he kills vampires, especially children—that's why he's trying to forget about his acts of killing. In general, the passage foreshadows the novel's famous ending, in which Neville comes to realize that, from the vampire's perspective, *he's* the monster.

☛☛ At one time, the Dark and Middle Ages, to be succinct, the vampire's power was great, the fear of him tremendous. He was anathema and still remains anathema. Society hates him without ration. But are his needs any more shocking than the needs of other animals and men? Are his deeds more outrageous than the deeds of the parent who drained the spirit from his child? The vampire may foster quickened heartbeats and levitated hair. But is he worse than the parent who gave to society a neurotic child who became a politician?

Related Characters: Robert Neville (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter 3, Neville—now very drunk—delivers a mock-lecture in which he talks about the prejudice and discrimination that vampires face. Jokingly, he talks about how vampires have always been hated and unfairly vilified—even though they’re just trying to survive, humans have treated them like monsters. Neville even draws a moral comparison between vampires and human beings, such as corrupt politicians and abusive parents. Vampires may be killers, but they kill because they need to survive; evil human beings, on the other hand, commit evil acts simply because they can.

Although Neville is drunk, and not being serious in this scene, he raises some important points about Otherness. For decades, science fiction scholars have interpreted *I Am Legend* as a veiled metaphor for the civil rights movement, immigration, gay liberation, etc., and this passage is an important piece of evidence. Instead of regarding vampires as demonic villains, Matheson seems to be willing to entertain the possibility that they’re just misunderstood, and that the concept of the “other” is all relative.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☹️ Another thought: That man had been one of the true vampires; the living dead. Would sunlight have the same effect on those who were still alive?
The first excitement he'd felt in months made him break into a run for the station wagon.

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel progresses, Neville (and we, the readers) learn more about the different kinds of vampires. In this passage, Neville speaks of “true vampires, the living dead” and “those who were still alive.” As we come to understand, some vampires have no conscious minds—they’re just feral, aggressive creatures. These vampires originated from human corpses, people who’d already died of the vampire

plague and been buried in the earth. There are also vampires who are “still alive,” in the sense that they’re infected with the vampire plague, but still have some intelligence and humanity left.

For most of the novel, it won’t be clear why Matheson is bothering to make this distinction. It’s only in the final few chapters that we come to understand what he’s doing: as Neville will learn, the still-living vampires will mutate into a race of intelligent, civilized creatures, who wage war against the “living dead.” For the time being, however, the passage is a good example of how science and curiosity give Neville something to live for. All alone in the world, Neville needs something to do, a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Studying vampires—reading about medicine, and conducting experiments on them—provides him with a rare sense of excitement and purpose.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☹️☹️ Fury exploded in him. Enough!
His rage-palsied hands ripped out the clothes from the bureau drawer until they closed on the loaded pistols.
Racing through the dark living room, he knocked up the bar across the door and sent it clattering to the floor. Outside, they howled as they heard him opening the door. I'm coming out, you bastards! his mind screamed out.

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter Five, Neville, having just survived being stranded outside of his house after sunset, chooses to walk outside once again. He’s become so furious with the vampires—and so uneasy with being the only man left on the planet—that he retaliates with mindless violence. He carries two loaded pistols outside, and proceeds to shoot at the vampires. However, Neville’s shots do no damage to (as we later learn, the vampires are impervious to bullets, thanks to the strength of the *vampiris* bacterium).

Neville’s violence isn’t supposed to serve any practical purpose—rather, it’s his frustrated way of compensating for anxiety, isolation, and depression. It’s important to notice that Neville is capable of acts of savage, useless violence; although he likes to think of himself as a civilized, rational

human being (and the vampires as mindless, dangerous killers), he has more in common with the vampires than he would care to admit.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☛☛ "Maybe the insects are . . . What's the word? Mutating." "What's that?"

"Oh, it means they're ... changing. Suddenly. Jumping over dozens of small evolutionary steps, maybe developing along lines they might not have followed at all if it weren't for..." Silence.

"The bombings?" she said.

"Maybe," he said.

"Well, they're causing the dust storms. They're probably causing a lot of things."

She sighed wearily and shook her head. "And they say we won the war," she said. "Nobody won it."

Related Characters: Virginia Neville, Robert Neville (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

In this flashback scene, Robert is talking with his beloved wife, Virginia, who's already suffering from the vampire plague. Virginia and Robert talk about the possible origins of the plague—they list insects, dust storms, and nuclear fallout as potential culprits.

Although this brief passage marks the only time in *I Am Legend* that any characters talk about the origins of the vampire plague, it's a good "snapshot" of 1950s paranoia. At the time that Matheson was writing his book, America was locked in a Cold War with the Soviet Union: both countries had deadly nuclear missiles, and it was widely believed that they'd go to war at some point in the not-too-distant future. In *I Am Legend*, set two decades in the future, it appears that the U.S. and another country (probably the Soviet Union) have fought a deadly war that has ravaged the environment and caused horrible plagues.

Even if *I Am Legend* is a work of science fiction, it's also an important historical document. In passages like this one, Matheson shows us what average Americans in the 1950s were scared of: war, disease, environmental degradation, and nuclear fallout.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛☛ Ten minutes later he threw her body out the front door and slammed it again in their faces. Then he stood there against the door breathing heavily. Faintly he heard through the soundproofing the sound of them fighting like jackals for the spoils.

Later he went to the bathroom and poured alcohol into the teeth gouges, enjoying fiercely the burning pain in his flesh.

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Neville captures a sleeping vampire, ties her up, takes her to his home, and conducts experiments on her. At one point, the vampire becomes so frightened and frustrated that she bites Neville on the shoulder. Later, when Neville becomes exhausted, he throws her outside, leaving her to be attacked by the vicious, feral vampires outside.

The passage is intriguing because it juxtaposes the vampire's savagery with Neville's own perverse behavior. He seems to enjoy the pain of the vampire's bite, and savors the feeling of pouring alcohol on the wound. There may be an erotic element to this scene, as Neville has shown repressed sexual desire for female vampires before, but it may also be that the searing pain is a reminder of Neville's humanity and aliveness—he might be feeling something uncomfortable, but at least he's feeling.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛☛ Oliver Hardy always coming back for more, no matter what happened. Ripped by bullets, punctured by knives, flattened by cars, smashed under collapsing chimneys and boats, submerged in water, flung through pipes. And always returning, patient and bruised. That was who Ben Cortman was—a hideously malignant Oliver Hardy buffeted and long-suffering.

My God, it was hilarious!

He couldn't stop laughing because it was more than laughter; it was release.

Related Characters: Ben Cortman, Robert Neville

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Neville looks out of his house after dark and sees the vampires gathering outside his door. He notices one vampire in particular: Ben Cortman, his former friend and neighbor. Suddenly, he realizes that Cortman reminds him of Oliver Hardy, the Hollywood comedian of the thirties and forties. Neville finds the comparison between Hardy and Cortman so amusing that he can't stop laughing.

As Matheson makes clear, Neville isn't just laughing because the comparison is funny; he's laughing because he's been lonely and depressed for months, and he needs to release some of the anxiety and fear he's been feeling. In tense, frightening situations, human beings often respond with uncontrollable laughter—psychologists have argued that laughter in the face of danger is a survival mechanism, designed to distance the mind from fear. Neville's laughter could be termed a survival mechanism, too: here, he's releasing his stress and fear so that he can maintain his sanity.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☹️ He couldn't even scream. He just stood rooted to the spot, staring dumbly at Virginia.
"Rob...ert," she said.

Related Characters: Virginia Neville (speaker), Robert Neville

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter Nine, Matheson describes how Robert Neville responded to the death of his beloved wife, Virginia. After Virginia succumbed to the vampire plague, he buried her in the ground, even though the law required him to throw his wife's body in a burning pit (to ensure that she wouldn't come back from the dead). Shortly afterwards, Virginia arose from the dead, dug her way out of the ground, and walked back to Robert's home.

The passage is a great example of how, in scary books and films, less is often more. Matheson doesn't tell us what exactly happens after Virginia, now a vampire, returns to Robert—the chapter ends here, very abruptly. In this way, Matheson allows readers to imagine their own version of what happens next—a technique that builds suspense and proves more terrifying. (Later on, we find out that Robert was forced to kill his vampire wife and bury her again.)

Chapter 10 Quotes

☹️ He thought about that visionary lady. To die, he thought, never knowing the fierce joy and attendant comfort of a loved one's embrace. To sink into that hideous coma, to sink then into death and, perhaps, return to sterile, awful wanderings. All without knowing what it was to love and be loved. That was a tragedy more terrible than becoming a vampire.

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Robert Neville goes to the Los Angeles Public Library to research the science of vampirism. As he walks through the building, he finds himself thinking about the shy librarian who worked here in the final days of the vampire plague: in all likelihood, he assumes, she was unmarried, lonely, and sad—"a tragedy more terrible than becoming a vampire."

Setting aside the fact that Neville seems to be stereotyping librarians (for all he knows, she could have been happily partnered or happily single), the passage is an interesting example of how Neville thinks about his own situation. Although Neville is ostensibly talking about the librarian, he's really talking about himself: Neville hasn't felt "a loved one's embrace" in a very long time, and, as the last human being left on the planet, he has no one to love him. Indeed, there are many times in the novel when Neville seems to conclude that being the last man alive *is*, in fact, worse than being a vampire—in part, that's why he's tempted to go outside at night and join the vampires. However, Neville's hope of finding another human being one day keeps him sane.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ No, not the vampire. For now, it appeared, that prowling, vulpine ghost was as much a tool of the germ as the living innocents who were originally afflicted. It was the germ that was the villain.

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Eleven, Neville begins to learn about the science of vampirism. He isolated the vampire germ, and begins to form hypotheses about how the germ spreads from host to host. Here, Neville realizes something surprising: the vampire germ takes control over its human hosts, destroying their minds and bodies, and forcing them to search for fresh blood at night. Previously, Neville had thought of vampires as demonic creatures, but now he realizes that they're not. Rather, vampires are just as much the victims of the vampire germ as their human victims.

The passage is a good example of how science and research enlighten Neville and provide him with a sense of purpose in life. After isolating the vampire germ, Neville becomes less afraid of vampires—he realizes that they're not evil, supernatural creatures; they're just sick humans.

Furthermore, the passage shows Neville's moral conundrum. He seems to be sympathetic to vampires, as he recognizes that they're people too, even if their bodies have been corrupted by infection. But in spite of his sympathy, Neville continues killing the vampires in their sleep; victims or not, the vampires are trying to kill him first.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝ The thought of forty more years of living as he was made him shudder.

And yet he hadn't killed himself. True, he hardly treated his body welfare with reverence. He didn't eat properly, drink properly, sleep properly, or do anything properly. His health wasn't going to last indefinitely; he was already cheating the percentages, he suspected.

But using his body carelessly wasn't suicide. He'd never even approached suicide. Why?

There seemed no answer.

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Here Neville contemplates his future and his own mortality. He's been living alone in Los Angeles for months, and he's utterly miserable. He takes refuge in books, music, and alcohol, but nothing can entirely replace human contact. As a result, Neville is intensely lonely and depressed; however, as he notes here, he's never been tempted to commit suicide.

The reason that Neville hasn't tried to commit suicide, even with his depression, is left unclear. However, what Matheson seems to be implying is that Neville still has the willpower to survive because he wants to feel human contact once again. Survival is the most powerful instinct in the human mind—even when they're feeling miserable, most people never seriously contemplate ending their own lives, as the hope that life will get better, against all odds, sustains them through their misery. Although he's isolated and grieving, Neville keeps on living, praying that, some day, he'll meet another human being.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ He smiled down at the dog, his throat moving. "You'll be all better soon," he whispered. "Real soon." The dog looked up at him with its dulled, sick eyes and then its tongue faltered out and licked roughly and moistly across the palm of Neville's hand.

Something broke in Neville's throat. He sat there silently while tears ran slowly down his cheeks.

In a week the dog was dead.

Related Characters: Robert Neville (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Twelve, Neville finds a dog running through the streets of Los Angeles. The dog shows some signs of being infected with the vampire plague, but it also can run through the streets in broad daylight. As a result, Neville isn't sure what to do with it. However, Neville is so

desperate for connection—whether with a human or with an animal—that he tries to adopt the dog as a pet. In this passage, Neville has succeeded in bringing the frightened dog into his house. However, by this point, it's obvious to Neville that the dog is dying of the vampire plague. Neville wants to cure the dog of its illness by finding an antibiotic, but he's unable to do so, and the dog dies a week later.

The passage is especially poignant because the dog has been Neville's only friend since the death of his wife and child. Neville wants to save the dog's life, not just because he likes dogs but because he *needs* someone to talk to (even if that "someone" can't talk back). In the end, Neville fails to find a cure—in all likelihood, he burns the dog's body in the flaming pit, and reverts to being alone.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☛ The people twisted and moaned and smote their brows and shrieked in mortal terror and screamed out terrible hallelujahs.

Robert Neville was shoved about, stumbling and lost in a treadmill of hopes, in a crossfire of frenzied worship. "God has punished us for our great transgressions! God has unleashed the terrible force of His almighty wrath!"

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

In this flashback scene, Neville remembers the early days of the vampire plague, when human society was trying to decide how to respond to the impending doom. He recalls attending a fundamentalist religious gathering, in which a preacher told a room full of "frenzied" congregants that God had sent the vampire plague to punish the world for its sins.

There's a lot to notice here. First, the word "frenzied" is significant, because it's also one of Matheson's preferred adjectives for describing the *vampires*. In this way, Matheson draws an implicit connection between the fearsome, uncontrollable mob of vampires that menace Neville at night, and the wild, ecstatic mob of religious worshippers in the passage. As Neville will soon realize, this comparison is far from arbitrary. Indeed, the religious ecstasy of the final days of the vampire plague may have *created* more vampires: by teaching human beings to fear vampires, preachers guaranteed that, when their congregants died and arose from the dead, they'd be driven insane with self-

loathing, and begin behaving like vampires.

In all, the passage seems to critique organized religion for its lack of logic and clarity. Although the preacher in this scene claims that God is punishing humanity for its sins, Neville later discovers the truth: vampirism has a rational, scientific cause, the *vampiris* bacterium. As in many science fiction novels, organized religion here comes across as frenzied, illogical, and potentially very dangerous.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☛ As he strolled, Neville wondered again what he'd do if he found Cortman. True, his plan had always been the same: immediate disposal. But that was on the surface. He knew it wouldn't be that easy. Oh, it wasn't that he felt anything toward Cortman. It wasn't even that Cortman represented a part of the past. The past was dead and he knew it and accepted it. No, it wasn't either of those things. What it probably was, Neville decided, was that he didn't want to cut off a recreational activity.

Related Characters: Ben Cortman, Robert Neville

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Part Three, two years have passed since we last saw Robert Neville. In these two years, Neville has developed a new routine for himself: he doesn't drink as much, and every day he devotes himself to hunting down vampires and killing them. Interestingly, Neville has come to enjoy hunting Ben Cortman, the vampire who was once his friend and neighbor. He wonders what would happen if he were ever to kill Cortman, and realizes that he'd be very disappointed—without Cortman to hunt for, he'd probably go back to drinking heavily.

The passage is a good example of the concept of "antagonistic cooperation": the symbiotic relationship that often emerges between enemies or competitors. Even if Neville hates Cortman, and wants to kill him, he also *needs* Cortman: the hunt for Cortman provides Neville with a sense of purpose in life. The trope of antagonistic cooperation is very common in science fiction stories and comic books (in Batman comics, for example, it's often suggested that Batman and Joker "need" each other, even though they're sworn enemies). All alone in the world, with nothing else to do, Cortman has decided to structure his life around killing vampires—if the vampires were to disappear

overnight, his life would be meaningless.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ All these years, he thought, dreaming about a companion. Now I meet one and the first thing I do is distrust her, treat her cruelly and impatiently. And yet there was really nothing else he could do. He had accepted too long the proposition that he was the only normal person left. It didn't matter that she looked normal. He'd seen too many of them lying in their coma that looked as healthy as she. They weren't, though, and he knew it. The simple fact that she had been walking in the sunlight wasn't enough to tip the scales on the side of trusting acceptance. He had doubted too long. His concept of the society had become ironbound. It was almost impossible for him to believe that there were others like him. And, after the first shock had diminished, all the dogma of his long years alone had asserted itself.

Related Characters: Ruth, Robert Neville

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Neville has crossed paths with a mysterious woman named Ruth (who later turns out to be a vampire). Neville is unsure what to think about Ruth; his first instinct is to distrust her. However, he's also sympathetic to Ruth, and wonders if he isn't predisposed to distrust other people, simply because it's been so long since he's had human contact. As he notes here, he's spent years thinking about human contact—and now that he's found some, he's frightened of it.

The passage shows how greatly Neville's years of loneliness have changed him. In order to survive, Neville has forced himself to focus on the present, rather than dwelling on the past (in particular, his memories of his dead wife, Virginia). In a way, he's built a one-man "society" for himself, founded on discipline, efficiency, and murder—and now, the idea of adding another person to that society is almost intolerable to him. Nevertheless, Neville eventually decides to let Ruth stay in his home—his suspicions aren't enough to outweigh his persisting need for companionship.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ They were silent then and the only sound in the room was the rasping of the needle on the inner grooves of the record. She wouldn't look at him, but kept staring at the floor with bleak eyes. It was strange, he thought, to find himself vaguely on the defensive for what yesterday was accepted necessity. In the years that had passed he had never once considered the possibility that he was wrong. It took her presence to bring about such thoughts. And they were strange, alien thoughts. "Do you actually think I'm wrong?" he asked in an incredulous voice.

Related Characters: Robert Neville (speaker), Ruth

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 17, Neville tells Ruth about his one-man society: he explains that he spends his days traveling around the city, searching for Ben Cortman and other vampires to kill. To his surprise, Ruth is revolted by Neville's descriptions of killing. She suggests that Neville is killing innocent people: some of his victims, after all, are "living vampires"—human beings who have contracted the vampire plague.

Neville is genuinely surprised by Ruth's suggestion: he's been killing vampires for so long that the act of killing has become an utterly uncontroversial part of his existence. Though we don't realize it at the time, Ruth is actually a vampire—a member of the "new society" of the undead. Ironically, Ruth the vampire comes across as much more emotional, sympathetic, and "human" than Neville. Years of killing have hardened Neville, stripping him of compassion. The passage paves the way for Neville's epiphany in the final chapter, when he realizes that, from the vampire's perspective, he's a heartless monster.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ He didn't know how long it was they sat there holding each other close. He forgot everything, time and place; it was just the two of them together, needing each other, survivors of a black terror embracing because they had found each other.

Related Characters: Ruth, Robert Neville

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

After knowing each other for less than a day, Ruth and Neville become romantically involved. The scene is staged somewhat awkwardly, partly because 1950s publishing norms probably prevented Matheson from writing an explicit, full-scale love scene. As a result, it's unclear what, exactly, Ruth and Neville do while "holding each other close." (The passage is another good example of how Matheson leaves the most emotionally intense moments in *I Am Legend* up to his readers' imaginations.)

On a thematic level, the passage is important because it shows Neville finding the companionship he's craved for all these years. When Neville found Ruth in the streets, he immediately distrusted her; however, in the end, his need for a friend outweighs his distrust, and they end up loving each other. (The fact that Ruth and Neville's love scene has been censored helps Matheson avoid an awkward plot-hole: if Ruth the vampire has disguised herself as a human being by wearing heavy makeup, wouldn't Neville notice when he holds her close?)

Chapter 19 Quotes

☛ When I was first given the job of spying on you, I had no feelings about your life. Because I did have a husband, Robert. You killed him.
But now it's different. I know now that you were just as much forced into your situation as we were forced into ours.

Related Characters: Ruth (speaker), Robert Neville

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

After their romantic encounter, Ruth has attacked Neville and abruptly abandoned him. She leaves a letter for Neville, in which she explains that she's really a vampire from an intelligent, civilized society. She was sent to spy on Neville, the last remaining human being and her husband's killer, but she decided to forgive him when she realized that Neville is just as frightened of vampires as the vampires are frightened of Neville.

The passage is important because it introduces the theme of moral relativism: although Neville has spent most of the novel thinking that he's justified in killing vampires in their sleep, he's inadvertently murdered Ruth's husband (and, presumably, hundreds of other civilized vampires). But

surprisingly, Ruth is willing to overlook Neville's murders—she understands that he was just trying to survive, just as Ruth and her fellow vampires are now trying to survive. (To some, it might seem implausible that Ruth would forgive Neville for murdering her husband, and fall in love with him, after knowing him for less than a day.)

☛ He looked into the eyepiece for a long time. Yes, he knew. And the admission of what he saw changed his entire world. How stupid and ineffective he felt for never having foreseen it! Especially after reading the phrase a hundred, a thousand times. But then he'd never really appreciated it. Such a short phrase it was, but meaning so much. Bacteria can mutate.

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Part Three of *I Am Legend* ends with Neville's realization that the *vampiris* bacterium has mutated. Previously, he'd believed that vampires were dangerous, feral creatures who needed to be killed with the utmost speed. Now, however, he realizes that not all vampires are wild and dangerous—some, like Ruth, are intelligent, and belong to an organized society. The passage suggests that Neville has been too myopic in his view of the vampires; although he has "mutated" (completely changed his personality) in the last three years, he's been too prejudiced against vampires to imagine that *they* could change.

From another perspective, this passage could be said to break one of the most basic rules of science fiction storytelling. In most good works of science fiction, authors introduce the "rules" and implausible premises of their fictional worlds early on (for example, Matheson doesn't wait long to introduce the premise that vampires rule the world). In this passage, however, Matheson introduces a "new rule": the vampires can evolve into other creatures. Although Neville has, apparently, read about bacterial mutations many times before, Matheson hasn't given his readers any advance warning or foreshadowing for such an important plot point. As a result, some readers may find the passage unconvincing and, on a structural level, unsatisfying.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☞☞ Robert Neville felt tight fists shaking at his sides. He didn't like the looks of them, he didn't like the methodical butchery. They were more like gangsters than men forced into a situation. There were looks of vicious triumph on their faces, white and stark in the spotlights. Their faces were cruel and emotionless.

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Neville has learned that there's a new race of intelligent, organized vampires, and late at night, he sees the new vampires attacking the wild, feral vampires with pikes and other deadly weapons. Neville immediately despises the new vampires: he finds their acts of killing to be vicious and brutal, and detects "triumph" on their faces (although Matheson says in the next sentence that the vampires' faces are emotionless—it's not clear how a face can look triumphant and emotionless at the same time.)

The irony of this passage is that, after nearly three years spent killing vampires on a daily basis, Neville can't stand to see *other* vampires doing the same thing. What, we might well ask, is the difference between Neville's own daily killings and the new vampires' "methodical butchery?"

There are two possibilities. First, it's possible that Neville treats killing vampires as an unfortunate duty—something he has to do in order to survive—whereas the new vampires clearly get real pleasure from killing their feral cousins, suggesting that the new vampires are a cruel, sadistic race. The second, more intriguing possibility is that there is no substantive difference between Neville's killing and the vampires'—a murder is a murder. Thus, Neville's realization that the new vampires are brutal, cruel people paves the way for his epiphany during the final chapter, during which he'll come to realize that he, too, is a cruel monster, who's spent years methodically taking vampire lives.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☞☞ "New societies are always primitive," she answered. "You should know that. In a way we're like a revolutionary group—repossessing society by violence. It's inevitable. Violence is no stranger to you. You've killed. Many times." "Only to ... to survive." "That's exactly why we're killing," she said calmly.

Related Characters: Ruth (speaker), Robert Neville

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

In the final chapter of the novel, Neville finds himself in a prison cell, next to Ruth—who, he now knows, is a member of the new vampire society. Neville accuses Ruth and her fellow vampires of being needlessly cruel and violent, but Ruth responds that all new societies are—but she implies that one day, the society of vampires may become more peaceful. Ruth also draws a comparison between Neville and the vampires. Echoing the themes of the previous chapter, Ruth points out that Neville, no less than the vampires, is a systematic, emotionless killer—he's spent years of his life killing vampires in their sleep, and thinks of killing as an uncontroversial part of his life.

Ruth hits home her point by stressing that the new vampires kill to survive—in other words, killing is a duty, not a pleasure for them. Neville has seen first-hand that Ruth is wrong: some of the vampires *do* seem to enjoy killing for the sake of killing. However, over the years, Neville has also shown signs of enjoying killing vampires. Neville tries to tell himself that he's the "good guy"—the civilized human being who kills only to survive—but he's finding it increasingly hard to believe this.

☞☞ "I'm a ranking officer in the new society," she said. His hand stirred under hers. "Don't ... let it get" He coughed up blood. "Don't let it get ... too brutal. Too heartless." "What can I—" she started, then stopped. She smiled at him. "I'll try," she said.

Related Characters: Ruth, Robert Neville (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

In this ambiguous passage, Ruth has just informed Neville that her fellow vampires are going to execute him. Neville has spent years killing the vampires' families and loved ones, including Ruth's husband. Now, it's time for Neville to pay the price for his murders.

Strangely, Neville seems calm as Ruth tells him that his life is about to end. Instead of begging for his life, he asks Ruth—who, it's revealed, is a powerful figure in the new society of vampires—not to let "it" get too brutal.

On the most obvious level, "it" refers to Neville's execution. However, there's a second, more interesting interpretation of "it." Perhaps Robert intends for "it" to refer to the "new society" that Ruth has just mentioned. After three years, during which he's built a one-man society founded in the heartless murder of vampires, Neville encourages the vampires not to make the same mistake he (and other humans, who destroyed themselves through war) made—in other words, to be civilized and peaceful, not "heartless."

●● A coughing chuckle filled his throat. He turned and leaned against the wall while he swallowed the pills. Full circle, he thought while the final lethargy crept into his limbs. Full circle. A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever. I am legend.

Related Characters: Robert Neville

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, Neville experiences an epiphany. Throughout his time as the last human being on Earth, he's thought of himself as the good guy: the vampires are his enemies, and deserve to die. While he's often expressed sympathy for the vampires, nothing can change the fact that they're his enemies, and that he needs to kill them in order to protect his own life.

But here in the final paragraphs of the book, Neville sees things from the vampires' point of view. Just as human beings are brought up to fear vampires—hideous monsters who prey on the living while they sleep—the vampires of Ruth's new society have come to see Neville as a hideous monster, too: *he sneaks into vampires' homes and kills them in their sleep.* Thus Neville's final thought, "I am legend," could mean that Neville finally accepts his own monstrosity—even if he was just trying to survive, he's a killer, and a menace to the vampire race.

A second, equally important interpretation of the book's final line (and title) is that Neville, as the last representative of the human race, is about to fade into a distant memory. Human society is going to be replaced by the new vampire society—in other words, it's going to become a "legend."



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

On a morning in January 1976, a man named Robert Neville walks around his house, carefully checking to see if it's well-fortified. He checks the planks and boards that he's hammered in front of all the windows, and checks his private watertank for damage. As he surveys the house, he considers the fact that he can never calculate exactly when the sun goes down—and therefore, he can never calculate exactly when “they” will arrive. After inspecting his house, Neville goes back inside, and notices his reflection in a cracked mirror he fastened to the front door. He makes a mental note to place more garlic on the door.

The inside of Neville's house is “entirely functional”—just a bed and some tools. Inside, Neville retrieves a hammer and some nails, and walks outside to finish fortifying the house. Neville is a tall, athletic man, thirty-six years old. As he hammers more boards to the window, he surveys the wreckage of the houses to either side of his own. Neville burned the houses surrounding his own—“to prevent *them* from jumping on his roof.”

Neville smokes a cigarette, has a **drink**, and then goes back outside to his “hothouse.” Inside the hothouse, he retrieves a basketful of garlic. Neville used to find the smell of garlic disgusting; now, he barely notices it. Neville makes garlic necklaces, and proceeds to hang them all over the outside of his house. As the day drags on, he carves sharp wooden stakes, noting that, no matter how many stakes he carves, they're always “gone in no time.” Neville continues working until the evening. Suddenly, he checks the time—it's almost sundown, meaning that “they're” coming soon.

The novel begins on a note of uncertainty: a man is fortifying his house, but we don't know why. Neville keeps referring to “they,” without explaining his thought process. Matheson heightens the suspense by slowly giving readers more and more information about who “they” are, rather than stating things outright. Notice that Neville uses garlic and mirrors—two traditional methods for fighting vampires—to fortify his house, hinting at who “they” might be.



The fact that Neville could burn down the houses to either side of his own suggests that he is on his own—there aren't many other people, if any, nearby. Also, Matheson paints a grim picture of Neville's living quarters in this section: he spends so much of his time protecting himself that he has no time to decorate.



So far, we know that “they” don't like garlic or mirrors, they come out after sundown, and Neville can fight them with wooden stakes. If readers have seen even a few horror movies, they'll probably be able to guess that Neville is defending himself against vampires.



Neville opens his enormous freezer and retrieves frozen vegetables and lamb; he proceeds to cook himself dinner. As Neville eats dinner in his home, he hears the voice of someone named Ben Cortman, shouting, “Come out, Neville.” Neville ignores the voice, finishes his meal, and tries to drown out the voices outside by listening to some **records**. Neville begins to think about “the women.” Outside, there are women, trying to lure him outside by posing seductively. As he listens to the music, Neville reads a medical text about blood, and tries not to think about sex. He tries to accept that “they” have forced him to be celibate for the rest of his life. Neville tries to focus on the music, but becomes so frustrated that he breaks the record over his knee.

Neville changes into his pajama bottoms—he’s never worn pajama tops since serving in Panama during “the war”—and goes to his bedroom. He looks at the large cross tattooed on his chest—a tattoo that he acquired in Panama, and which may have saved his life. In bed, Neville tries to avoid thinking about women, especially about a woman named Virginia.

CHAPTER 2

Neville’s alarm goes off at 5:30 am, and Neville gets out of bed. As he stumbles to his kitchen, he hears Ben Cortman calling, “Come out, Neville!” As the sun rises, Ben and “the others” go away. Neville notes that often, “they” attack each other—there’s “no union among them.” Neville makes a to-do list: he wants to check his electric generator, find water, and find a lathe (a machine for shaping wood). He finishes breakfast and steps outside, where he’s pleased to see that the skies are cloudless. Neville walks out his garage, noticing two dead female bodies sprawled on the sidewalk. The bodies are sickly pale, and there isn’t a drop of blood left in them. Neville backs his Willys station wagon (a kind of car) out of the garage and throws his lunchbox, along with a wooden mallet and a bag of stakes, into the car. Using gloves and wearing a gas mask, he drags the bodies into the car.

Neville drives off toward Compton Boulevard and heads east. He stops at a gas station where he finds a barrel of gasoline, and fills up his car, even though it already has half a tank of gasoline. Neville takes excellent care of his car, because it would be extremely dangerous if the car broke down in the middle of the day—indeed, if such an event ever happened, it would be “the end.”

Matheson conveys Neville’s simultaneous repulsion and attraction to the vampires gathered outside his house. On one hand, Neville hates the vampires—he fears them and tries his hardest to ignore them. Yet Neville also seems strangely drawn to them, and is sexually attracted to the female vampires (beautiful female vampires are common tropes in vampire fiction). Neville seems to be starved for companionship—sexual or otherwise. His life is lonely, silent, and celibate, and he can barely stand it.



Matheson drops a few more hints about where the vampires may have come from. The novel takes place in the 1970s—twenty years after Matheson wrote it—and there seems to have been some kind of serious war, in which Neville served. Also notice that Neville’s enemies don’t like crosses (another traditional sign of a vampire) and that Neville seems to be mourning a woman named Virginia.



Neville wakes up early, even though doing so requires him to again hear Ben Cortman’s menacing voice. This might suggest that Neville likes to keep busy and fill his days with activity. During the morning, we learn more about the nature of the vampires. The fact that Neville uses a gas mask to dispose of the bodies might suggest that there’s a bacterial or viral aspect to vampirism. Also notice that, based strictly on Matheson’s description, it’s unclear whether the two bodies belong to vampires or the victims of vampires—Matheson will explore this ambiguity soon enough.



Based on the street names, some readers will notice that Neville is living in Los Angeles (Matheson was living in L.A. around the time that he wrote I Am Legend, so there are lots of specific details about the city). Every aspect of Neville’s existence is suffused with danger—even something as banal as driving a car.



Still wearing his gas mask, Neville drives out to a huge, burning pit. The pit has been burning since June 1975, Neville remembers. He drags the bodies out of the car and pushes them into the fire. Neville now takes his mask off, thinking that somewhere in the flaming pit is Kathy's body.

Neville drives to Inglewood and stops at a market to pick up some bottled water. Inside, he finds a group of pale, sleeping young women. Neville takes out his mallet and wooden stakes and drives them into the hearts of the sleeping women. Neville notes, "it was always hard when they were alive." He also notices that the sleeping bodies "all look like Kathy."

As he drives out to Sears to find a lathe, Neville tries to understand why he needs to use wooden stakes, and why he has to drive them through the heart. A man named Dr. Busch once told him to drive the wooden stakes into the **vampires'** hearts, so Neville follows this advice, but has no way of understanding Busch's reasoning. Neville is reminded of his cold, overly logical father, Fritz, who died "denying the vampire violently to the last."

Neville stops the car to eat his lunch. As he eats, he tries to understand why garlic hurts **vampires**, and why vampires hate sunlight, wooden stakes, mirrors, and crosses. He also accepts that some superstitions about vampires are wrong—for example, the legend that vampires are invisible in mirrors, or that they can transform themselves into wolves and bats. But he tells himself, "Forget it, you're not ready yet." Neville has been killing vampires for five months; when the time comes, he plans to learn about them in more detail. For now, he focuses on the forty-seven stakes he's packed. He spends the afternoon going from house to house, and uses every one of his stakes.

CHAPTER 3

Later in the evening Neville sits at home reading Bram Stoker's [Dracula](#). The book is full of silly superstitions and legends about **vampires**, but its basic premise is sound, Neville decides: throughout history, vampires have been deadly because almost nobody believed in them. But vampires are all-too real. Neville thinks about "the twelve children that afternoon" and shudders.

We get the sense that Neville has disposed of many bodies in this burning pit, perhaps to ensure that more vampires don't appear at night. This is the first we've heard of Kathy—like Virginia, we'll learn more about her soon.



In this important passage, Neville kills a group of vampires; however, he expresses some reluctance about doing so. Although Neville is terrified of the vampires killing him in his sleep, he spends his days killing vampires in their sleep—an irony that lies at the heart of Matheson's novel.



At this point in the novel, Neville knows some of the basic facts about vampires (thanks to the advice of Dr. Busch, a minor character who never actually appears). However, Neville doesn't yet really understand why driving a stake through a vampire's heart kills it.



Neville's first priority isn't education; it's survival. When he has more time, and when he feels more secure in his daily routine, he'll try to learn about vampirism—for now, however, his task is killing his enemies. He spends his day methodically killing vampires in their sleep—an act that, as we've seen, causes him some guilt, but which he believes to be morally justified, since he wants to protect himself from being attacked in his sleep.



*Bram Stoker was a major influence on Matheson, and not just in *I Am Legend*; this passage is Matheson's way of acknowledging his influence. Neville continues to feel guilty for killing vampires—even though he knows it's the best way to ensure his own survival, he's not comfortable ending the lives of others.*



It's nighttime. Neville drinks **alcohol** and hears the voice of Ben Cortman calling out to him. A little drunk, he contemplates going out to join the **vampires**, so that he can "be one of them," but then reminds himself why he doesn't give in: somewhere out there, there must be other human beings like him.

Suddenly, Neville has a profound feeling that he'll never see another human being again. Frustrated, he breaks his glass, cutting his hand. He stares down at the blood dripping from his hand, and thinks, "Wouldn't they like to get some of it?" As he bandages his hand, Neville finds himself thinking about Kathy again.

Neville continues **drinking**. As he becomes slowly drunker, he begins to give a mock-lecture about how the **vampire** is a persecuted minority—hated throughout history. He wonders aloud if a deadly vampire is any worse than a politician, a manufacturer, a shady businessman, or a terrorist. He concludes that the vampire can't be blamed for its evil acts—it has no voting rights or means for education. He concludes his lecture by asking, "Sure, but would you let your sister marry one?"

Neville staggers around his house, trying not to think about the beautiful bodies waiting for him outside. He walks to his door and starts to remove the heavy bar that keeps the door locked. As he lifts the bar, he can hear the **vampires** outside howling with excitement. Then, suddenly, Neville lets the bar fall again, and walks back to his bedroom. He thinks, "how long, how long?"

CHAPTER 4

Neville wakes up around ten o'clock the next morning, very hung-over. He walks outside and sees that the sky is grey and overcast, meaning that he'll be unable to travel far from his home. He sits down on his couch, feeling miserable, and thinks, "the black bastards had beaten him."

Neville decides that he has to get out of his house, even if it's dangerous to be outside on such a cloudy day. He drives his station wagon out onto the street and heads for the freeway. Neville drives out to a cemetery. There, he thinks about Virginia, buried in the cemetery. He wishes that he'd placed Kathy in the cemetery "with her mother" instead of burning the body, as officials had advised.

As the novel goes on, Neville begins to flirt with the idea of just giving up the fight and joining the vampires. As the passage implies, Neville is desperate for company, even if it's the company of vampires.



This passage provides another key piece of information about the vampires (one which readers can probably assume): they survive by drinking blood. This may lead one to ask: if there are no human beings left alive, then how do the vampires feed themselves?



Matheson introduces themes of discrimination and prejudice. While I Am Legend is an entertaining horror/science fiction novel, it's also a serious meditation on otherness. Even if Neville is drunk in this scene, the political themes that he brings up (e.g., that vampires aren't evil, but misunderstood, yet he still wouldn't feel comfortable treating them as complete equals), are very important to the novel.



Seemingly the last human being in Los Angeles, Neville has no potential for romance or sex; as a result, he's sexually drawn to the vampires. Clearly, Neville is finding it difficult to be alone—he hungers for connections with others.



Neville begins to suffer from depression in this chapter. The monotony of his life is crushing; furthermore, there are many days when he's unable to leave his house, leading him to feel claustrophobic and stir-crazy.



Here, we learn who Virginia and Kathy are: Virginia was Neville's wife, and Kathy was his daughter (both are now dead). We also learn that the government advised that people burn their loved ones' bodies, perhaps so that the vampire plague wouldn't spread to other people.



At the cemetery, Neville goes to Virginia's crypt. Inside, he's shocked to see a vampire (not Virginia) curled up, asleep. Furious, he drags the body out of the crypt and into the sun. To Neville's amazement, the vampire rots instantly—in few seconds, he looks as if he's been dead for days. Neville realizes the truth: the other way to kill **vampires** is to expose them to the sun. Somehow, he's been living with vampires for five months and never realized that sunlight kills them. However, Neville realizes that this particular vampire is one of the "true vampires, the living dead"—in other words, a human being who died before the vampire plague and has now risen from its grave. Neville is unsure if sunlight can kill the vampires "who were still alive"—in other words, the human beings who haven't actually died yet, but who suffer from the vampire plague.

Neville drives away from the cemetery, still excited with his discovery that sunlight kills the **vampires**, or at least some vampires. He stops by a house, carrying his wooden stake and mallet, and finds a woman who's asleep in her bedroom—he deduces that this woman is a "living vampire"—a human being who's suffering from the vampire plague, but who hasn't actually died and been buried in the ground. Instead of killing the woman with his usual stake, Neville drags the woman outside into the sunlight, and notices that the woman's flesh grows cold, and her heartbeat stops. To test whether sunlight has really killed the woman, Neville decides to take the woman's body home in his car. He checks his watch—it's three o'clock. Suddenly, he realizes that the watch is broken.

CHAPTER 5

Immediately after the events of the last chapter, Neville speeds home, praying that it isn't after sunset yet. He remembers that he's left his garage door open, meaning that he could return home to find a pack of **vampires** waiting for him.

Neville drives back to his house. To his horror, he finds **vampires** assembled outside—and when they see his car, they run toward him. Neville drives his car into the vampires, crushing them. Ben Cortman runs up to the side of the car, and Neville presses his foot to the pedal, only to realize that the car is stalled. Cortman claws at Neville's chest. Just as he's about to grab Neville's throat, Neville punches Cortman, and the motor coughs into life again. Neville drives off, with the vampires chasing behind him.

Here Neville discovers that sunlight kills vampires—a rather obvious piece of information, one might think (especially since Neville has already figured out that vampires don't like mirrors or crosses). Neville also draws an important distinction between "living" vampires and "dead" vampires. The gist of this distinction is that the vampire plague can infect either living people or already-dead corpses. In the former cases, the resulting vampires are "living"; in the latter case, they're "dead." While this distinction may seem trivial for most of the book, it becomes a major plot point in the final few chapters.



Neville is becoming more scientific in his approach to studying vampires. In a previous chapter, he told himself that his priority was killing vampires—he'd learn the details later. Now, Neville seems highly curious about those details, and he's conducting "experiments" to test the differences between dead and living vampires. The chapter ends suspensefully—will Neville be able to make it back to his house before the sun goes down?



Matheson continues to build the suspense, as his hero seems in dire straits.



This is an especially cinematic passage, reflecting Matheson's training as a Hollywood screenwriter. Even though it's unlikely that Neville's car would stall at the exact moment when Cortman tries to grab his chest, or that it would cough into life at the exact moment when Neville punches Cortman, or that Cortman would be able to reach inside the car, all three events create a suspenseful action scene.



Neville circles around the corner, the **vampires** running behind him. He's careful to drive at a slow pace—just fast enough for the vampires to pursue him. Then, he circles back to his house—the garage door is still open, but no vampires are standing in front of it, since they've all gone running after him. Neville parks the car “on the street (“there was no time to put it in the garage”) and runs toward the garage—behind him, he can hear the other vampires running for him. Suddenly, Cortman jumps out of the shadows of the garage: he tackles Neville and tries to bite his throat. Neville pulls Cortman by his hair and sends him “hurtling down the driveway.” Neville runs toward his front door, but then remembers that he's left his keys in the car. He runs back to the car, knocks Cortman down, and snatches his keys out of the ignition. Then he runs back to the door, fighting off two more vampires. He manages to push through to the door and lock it behind him.

Safe again, Neville pours himself a **whiskey** and drinks it quickly. He hears a crash; looking through the peephole in his door, he sees the **vampires** destroying his station wagon with rocks. Furious, Neville goes to his fridge—only to realize that the electricity in his house isn't working, since he didn't have time to check the generator that day. Drunk, frightened, and furious, Neville fetches two pistols from his room. He pushes open the front door and shoots a vampire in the face. He fires his pistols until they're both empty, and then begins beating and hitting the **vampires**. But Neville's shots and blows don't kill the vampires. As Neville realizes how futile his efforts are, he turns and runs back into his house again. Inside, he weeps and whispers, “Virginia, Virginia.”

CHAPTER 6

It is March 1976, and Neville has made his house “livable again.” He's soundproofed the walls, so that he no longer has to listen to the sound of the **vampires** howling at him every night. He's also managed to find a new, reliable car in Santa Monica, driving there using a car in a garage about a mile from the house. He's also repaired his generator. Neville **drinks** less and feels healthier; he also sleeps more soundly.

One evening, Neville decides that it's time to begin his investigations into the nature of **vampires**. He closes his eyes and thinks back on a morning he spent with Virginia, several years ago. On this morning, Neville and Virginia awoke early, after a night of bad sleep. They proceeded to cook breakfast, with Kathy asleep in the room down the hall. Over breakfast, Virginia and Neville talked about the mysterious black dust that had been floating through the city for weeks.

Neville manages to trick most of the vampires into running away from his house, but not Cortman—Cortman hides in the shadows, tricking Neville into thinking that his garage is empty. We also learn a few more things about the vampires in this action-packed scene. First, although most of the vampires aren't particularly smart (most of them take the bait and run after Neville's car), some of them, like Cortman, are cunning enough to fool Neville. Second, Neville seems to be significantly stronger and faster than the vampires—perhaps because Neville is a military veteran, and perhaps because vampires are weaker than humans (a possibility that Matheson confirms later in the book).



The vampires are destructive and vindictive—they don't kill Neville, so they satisfy themselves by destroying his car instead. But notice that Matheson parallels the vampires' mindless destruction with Neville's: for no logical reason, Neville takes his pistols and fires at his enemies, eventually giving up when he realizes that most of the vampires are impervious to bullets. Neville continues to be haunted by the death of his wife (and, implicitly, his child). He's not a vampire, but he's living a depressive, isolated life—a fate that is, perhaps, even worse than being a vampire.



We begin two months after the events of Part One: Neville seems to be staving off his depression and loneliness by pushing himself to be healthy and productive, repairing his machines and fortifying his house.



In this flashback scene, we get more of a sense of Neville's backstory and why he has been so depressed: he seems to have loved his wife dearly. In the flashback, Neville and Virginia discuss the “black dust,” which, readers can probably guess, spreads the vampire plague across the city.



Virginia told Neville that she was feeling strange, but couldn't put into words what was wrong with her; Neville, noticing that she looked extremely pale, suggested that she visit Dr. Busch. Together, Neville and Virginia discussed the sudden onset of large bugs and insects in California. There had been rumors of mutating grasshoppers, mosquitoes, and other "superbugs" in the bordering states. Virginia and Neville agreed that the insects were probably mutating in response to "the bombings," though they don't specify what these bombings are. They also talked about the mysterious disease spreading across the country—a disease that might have been the result of "germ warfare," even though "the war" was over, officially. They argued whether or not to send Kathy to school, considering the danger of her contracting the disease. Neville then left for work, walking outside and climbing into his car, and waving to his neighbor, Ben Cortman.

At this time, Virginia has already contracted the vampire disease, and is about to become a vampire herself—unbeknownst to Neville. The passage marks the only time in the book when the characters discuss the potential sources of the vampire plague. First, it's implied that insects have mutated, perhaps in response to radiation from nuclear war (a very common trope in Cold War-era science fiction). Second, it's suggested that the vampire plague was created as a kind of "germ warfare," perhaps in America's military standoff with the Soviet Union. Also, notice that Ben Cortman was Neville's friendly neighbor before becoming a vampire, explaining why Neville finds Cortman's nightly presence especially painful.



CHAPTER 7

Back in 1976, Neville reads about the chemical composition of garlic, and guesses that the chemical found in garlic that **vampires** hate is allyl sulphide. He reads about how to prepare allyl sulphide, and goes outside to make some. He takes a syringe and fills it with allyl sulphide. Then, he drives to a nearby house, goes inside, and finds a sleeping female vampire. Neville injects the allyl sulphide into the vampire's "soft, fleshy buttock," and waits. Nothing happens. Frustrated, Neville leaves and returns to his house, determined to continue learning about vampires in order to protect himself and distract himself from **drinking**.

Neville, a working-class man, gradually morphs into a sophisticated scientist. Some readers find it implausible that Neville would be able to conduct so many complex experiments with the vampires—and indeed, in most of the film versions of Matheson's book, Neville is a scientist, not a worker at a "plant," as he is here. Notice also the phallic, highly sexualized language with which Matheson describes Neville's experiments on the female vampire, again suggesting Neville's frustrated desire for any sexual contact.



The next morning, Neville tries to understand the power of the cross over **vampires**. He returns to the female vampire whom he injected with allyl sulphide, carries her back to his car, and drives her back to his house. As he drives, it occurs to Neville that he only experiments on female vampires. Feeling guilty, he tells himself, "I'm not going to rape the woman!" Back in his house, Neville ties the vampire to a chair and waits for sun to set.

Neville vehemently denies that he experiments exclusively on female vampires because of some sexual attraction to them, but Matheson clearly implies that Neville is, in fact, sexually attracted to them, at least on some level (both because of the sexualized language and because he offers no other explanation for why Neville chooses females).



After sundown, the **vampire** wakes up, and Neville dangles a cross in front of her face. The vampire looks repulsed, and Neville asks, "why are you afraid of it?" The vampire does not answer, but continues to look repulsed. Neville grabs her shoulder, and she bites his hand. Neville carries the vampire outside, still tied up, and goes back inside. He pours alcohol on the bite-marks, and enjoys the "burning pain in his flesh."

Neville seems to enjoy—on an almost sexual level—the way the vampire bites him, or at least the experience of pain that the alcohol causes, as if pain is a reminder of his humanity and aliveness. The passage also reminds us that Neville is immune to the vampire plague (so he isn't concerned about a vampire biting his skin).



CHAPTER 8

Neville continues to explore the mystery of why **vampires** are repulsed by crosses. He wonders what a Mohammedan (i.e., Muslim) vampire would do if faced with a cross, and laughs. It's the first time Neville has laughed in months, if not years. Later in the day, Neville tries to see if the "running water bit makes sense," and sprays a hose into a wooden trough, so that the water flows through the trough and down into the soil below.

That night, Neville looks out through his peephole and sees Ben Cortman on his front lawn. Cortman has a beard now, and his face seems thinner. Cortman and Neville once worked at the same plant, and used to be good friends; now, Cortman is totally alien to Neville.

Neville runs into the kitchen and turns on the water, so that the hose flows on the front lawn. Neville goes back to looking through the peephole, and sees Cortman grinning and laughing—Cortman jumps over the "running water" of the hose without any hesitation. Furious, Neville gets his pistol, opens the front door, and shoots Cortman in the shoulder. Cortman collapses, and suddenly, a female vampire stands in front of Cortman and begins "jerking up her dress." Neville goes back inside before he can see anything—he doesn't want to feel temptation. Later that night, Neville looks outside and sees Cortman standing again, calling, "Come out, Neville!" Suddenly, Neville realizes that Cortman reminds him of Oliver Hardy (the black-and-white comedy star). He laughs hysterically, but later, he cries.

In the following days, Neville continues experimenting with **vampires**. He takes female vampires and stabs them with wooden stakes, sometimes in the heart, sometimes elsewhere. No matter where he stabs, the vampires die, spurting dark blood everywhere. But Neville discovers that some vampires have a different reaction to being stabbed. He stabs a female vampire, and in mere seconds, she disintegrates into "salt and pepper" ashes. Neville then remembers talking to a "Negro" at the plant, who told him that corpses eventually decompose until they look like a pile of salt and pepper. Neville concludes that this particular vampire must have been dead for a very long time—perhaps she was one of the vampires who originally started the plague. He wonders if Virginia, buried in her crypt, looks like a pile of salt and pepper, too.

Like any good scientist, Neville conducts further experiments to answer his questions and learn more about his subjects. Here, he tries to test the old superstition that vampires fear (or cannot pass over) running water.



The passage confirms that Cortman was once Neville's good friend, but now he's Neville's sworn enemy.



Evidently, not all vampires are afraid of running water. As we've already seen (and as Neville already knows) Cortman and the other vampires seem impervious to gunfire, meaning that Neville's attack is a pointless act of violent rage, stemming from Neville's isolation and depression. Neville's hysterical laughter could be another symptom of his plummeting mental health: in times of extreme isolation or stress, people have been known to respond with uncontrollable laughter.



As Neville continues experimenting with vampires, he becomes more aware of the distinction between the two main kinds of vampires, living and dead. Humans who contract the vampire virus while they're alive react to wooden stakes by spurting blood everywhere; those who contract the virus after they're buried in the ground react by disintegrating into "salt and pepper." The passage foreshadows the connection between Virginia and the vampires—as we'll see later, that connection is important to Neville's backstory.



CHAPTER 9

Neville remembers a morning several years ago—the morning when Virginia’s heart stopped. On this morning, Neville sits beside Virginia in bed, weak and disoriented. For more than an hour, he sits next to his wife’s body, trembling and repeating her name.

On the morning Virginia’s heart stops, Neville thinks about the recent death of his daughter, Kathy. After Kathy’s death, Neville threw her body into the large burning pit—however, Neville refuses to do the same for Virginia.

Still in the flashback, Neville steps outside and runs over to his neighbor Ben Cortman’s house, intending to borrow Cortman’s car. He knocks on the door, but there’s no answer. Neville opens the door; inside the house, he finds Ben’s wife, Freda, asleep, with bite marks on her throat. He also sees Ben, asleep, with no bite marks. Disturbed, Neville finds Cortman’s car keys and runs out of the house. This is the last time he’ll see either Ben or Freda alive.

Neville sews Virginia into a blanket and carries her body to Cortman’s car. As he’s about to leave, a man down the street shouts, “Could you bring my mother too?” Neville explains that he’s not taking his wife’s body to the flaming pit, even though it’s the law to do so. He drives Virginia’s body to a cemetery, and buries her in the ground.

Two days after burying Virginia, Neville lies in bed, drunk and unkempt. He hears a knock at the door, opens the door, and sees Virginia, moaning, “Rob ... ert.”

In a way, Virginia isn't strictly dead; she's just becoming a vampire and entering a coma (since it's daytime).



Neville refuses to treat his beloved wife like a germ-ridden object; he wants to honor Virginia's memory by burying her in the ground, even if doing so means risking his own safety.



Neville sees his friends and neighbors, Ben and Freda Cortman, asleep on the couch in the middle of the day. From this, we can deduce that Ben has contracted the vampire disease (he's in his daily coma) and Freda has been bitten by a vampire—quite possibly her own husband.



Neville is so determined to bury his wife in a proper cemetery, rather than throwing her in the flaming pit, as the government requires, that he doesn't even bother lying about it to his neighbor down the street.



Matheson implies that Neville has buried Virginia in the cemetery, and that she's risen from the grave. Matheson doesn't reveal what happens next, but he suggests that Neville is forced to kill his beloved wife.



CHAPTER 10

It's April 7, 1976, and Neville is exploring the Los Angeles Public Library, intent on finding some books about blood. As he walks through the library, he imagines a sad librarian, shutting down the building for the last time, probably “never knowing the fierce joy and attendant comfort of a loved one’s embrace, a tragedy” even worse than becoming a vampire. Neville finds some books on blood in the “Medicine” section of the library, and takes them back home with him.

Neville is always conscious of his own loneliness and isolation. As he walks through the library, thinking about the sad, lonely librarian, he's really thinking about his own situation: to be the last man left on Earth is, indeed, a fate worse than death, and worse than becoming a vampire.



Neville reads that there are two ways to activate the lymphatic system: breathing and physical movements (such as compressions of the chest). But **vampires** do not breathe, he knows—at least not the dead vampires. This means that at least half of the dead vampires' lymphatic flow is cut off, which would explain their pale skin and rotting odor. He also reads about how bright sunlight can kill off many bacteria. As he reads, Neville finds it hard to concentrate, and wonders why he can't force himself to focus. He wonders, "Was it just reactionary stubbornness, or was it that the task would loom as too tremendous for him if it were germs?"

Neville begins to develop some theories about the **vampires**. The vampire plague is certainly bacterial in nature; it's possible that it spread so quickly because the vampires themselves wander all over town at night, spreading their bacteria. Neville also knows that mosquitos and other insects played a role in spreading the plague. Finally, Neville begins to realize that the vampire microbe forces its host to enter a coma during the daylight, so that sunlight won't kill the bacteria. As he thinks, he feels a strong temptation to give up and get **drunk**; however, he forces himself to concentrate.

Neville goes to sleep, still thinking of explanations for how the **vampire** plague spread so quickly. At three in the morning, he wakes up to the sound of a dust storm blowing outside. In a fraction of a second, "he made the connection."

CHAPTER 11

In the next few days, Neville finds a microscope—and then, when he realizes his microscope is no good, a better one. Over the course of the next week, Neville becomes highly adept at using a microscope. One major obstacle to using the microscope is that the slides he finds at the library become covered with dust very quickly—there are dust storms in Los Angeles every four days or so.

Neville obtains blood samples from **vampires** he encounters during his days. One day, he examines a blood slide under the microscope and identifies an unfamiliar bacterium: he concludes that this must be the "vampire germ," and dubs it *vampiris*. Neville feels exhilarated with his discovery, but his exhilaration quickly gives way to despair. He wants to cure the vampire plague, but has no idea how to proceed.

Neville continues to immerse himself in medical knowledge, hoping it will help him learn more about the vampires. One of the most interesting parts of this section is that Neville is a little reluctant to study his enemies: it's much easier for him to believe that vampires are evil, supernatural creatures than it is for him to understand the scientific causes of their state. One could generalize this point to apply to any unknown, frightening group: it's often easier to treat the group as a frightening "Other" than to understand the group.



Vampires spread their sickness to other people in the act of sucking blood from their victims; furthermore, they enter a coma during the day because they need to protect themselves from the sunlight (vampires aren't just sleeping during the day—that's why Neville can move them around without waking them up). Neville has to force himself to continue working, rather than giving in to his own alcoholism.



The vampire plague spreads across the city (and, perhaps, the world) because dust storms blow vampire bacteria through the atmosphere.



Neville trains himself to be a competent scientist: he learns about using microscopes and slides. The fact that there are constant dust storms in Los Angeles suggests that the vampire disease is still present in the atmosphere (and that Neville's immunity to the disease is again confirmed).



Every one of Neville's discoveries opens up a new set of questions. For example, his discovery of the vampiric bacterium immediately brings up the question of how to kill it. Neville has to force himself to be patient and steadfast: he must continue learning about vampires, instead of giving up and pouring himself a drink.



Neville tries to understand the *vampiris* germ. He knows that when a human being contracts the germ, they have to feed their bodies with fresh blood. If they run out of blood, they'll eventually die: the *vampiris* gene will take over their bodies. Then, after the **vampires'** bodies decompose, the *vampiris* gene will be swept to potential new hosts, thanks to the dust storms. Neville realizes that vampires are a historical reality. The bubonic plague, the plague of Athens, and other plagues of history were, quite possibly, the result of the *vampiris* germ. Neville also realizes that vampires, no less than "the living innocents who were originally afflicted," are the victims of the *vampiris* germ.

In the evening, Neville continues thinking about the *vampiris* germ. He realizes that there are two different kinds of **vampires**. Some vampires originate from the corpses of human beings; these vampires are entirely controlled by their germs. Other vampires are physically alive, and have conscious minds; these vampires originate from living human beings who contract the vampire germ. Based on his experience, Neville assumes that the dead vampires can withstand bullets, though he doesn't know how. Excitedly, Neville realizes that he hasn't craved **alcohol** all day. He spends the night eating dinner and listening to **records**, and he manages "to forget all about vampires for a while."

CHAPTER 12

The next day, Neville notices that his sun lamp has killed the *vampiris* germs in his slides. He tries to kill the *vampiris* bacterium—taken both from living **vampires** and from dead vampires—with allyl sulphide (the chemical found in garlic), but to no avail. He becomes frustrated again, and eventually becomes so unstable that he knocks over the microscope. He tries to console himself by thinking about everything he's learned so far: 1) there is a *vampiris* germ; 2) the people who have the germ are sensitive to sunlight and garlic; 3) the people with the germ can be killed with wooden stakes. Neville makes a list of all the aspects of the vampire germ that need explanations: mirrors, garlic, germs, running water, crosses, etc. He tries to work, but finds himself craving a drink. Angry, he drinks directly from a **whiskey** bottle until he's very drunk.

Neville's research into the causes of vampirism gives him a new moral perspective. Previously, Neville thought of vampires as vile monsters. Now, he realizes that, not only does vampirism have a scientific cause, but also that the vampires are themselves victims of the plague. Thus, it's possible to feel sympathy for the vampires: they're sick patients. However, even after he learns all this Neville will continue to kill vampires—rightly or wrongly, he believes that doing so is the only way to ensure his own survival.



Neville's scientific investigations provide a temporary "cure" for his depression and alcoholism. Instead of worrying about the impending threat of the vampires every night, Neville finds himself feeling genuinely excited about the future: he looks forward to learning more. Neville's knowledge empowers him by proving that, contrary to legend, vampires aren't supernatural, indestructible creatures—they're just people with a bacterial disease.



At times, Neville's scientific investigations comfort and reassure him that his life is worth living. However, Neville often becomes impatient and restless: he wants to know everything about vampires, right now. Neville tries to force himself to remain calm, and gradually accumulate more information about his enemies. But in the end, he gives in and pours himself a glass of whiskey. Tragically, Neville's curiosity about vampirism isn't enough to stave off his alcoholism and depression.



Neville have continued to **drink** himself to death, the narrator notes, had it not been for a “miracle”—after a few days of drinking heavily, he hears a noise outside during the day. Neville finds a dog roving about on the lawn. Although Neville knows from experience that dogs can become **vampires**, it’s obvious to him that this is no vampire—it seems to be an ordinary animal. Neville calls the dog toward him, but the dog runs away. He tries to follow the dog, but then it occurs to him that the dog might be afflicted with the vampire germ, and therefore is already sensitive to Neville’s garlic. But how, then, could the dog be roaming around during the day?

It also occurs to Neville that, if he doesn’t try to help the dog, the **vampires** will kill it at night. He leaves a bowl of milk and some hamburger meat outside for the dog, and surrounds it with garlic so that the vampires won’t touch it. The thought of the dog’s death makes Neville conscious of his own mortality. He wonders how much longer he’ll be living in Los Angeles, fighting off the vampires every day—perhaps for another thirty or forty years. Much to his own surprise, Neville finds himself praying for the dog’s survival. He realizes that he “needed the dog.”

CHAPTER 13

The next day, Neville goes outside and finds that the milk and hamburger are gone; there are also two dead female bodies lying on the lawn. He notices that the hamburger has been dragged over the garlic, suggesting that the dog took it, not the **vampires**. Neville takes the two bodies to the fire, and later leaves out more food for the dog.

As he proceeds with his day, Neville wonders why the **vampires** have never tried to burn his house down—it seems like such an obvious tactic. Perhaps the vampires are stupider than human beings, since the *vampiris* germ has ravaged their brains. Later in the day, he is pleased to see the dog walking near his house. The dog eats the hamburger Neville has left for it, and Neville pets the dog, but then lets it walk away (he doesn’t want to scare the dog by pushing it into his house).

The next day, Neville opens his front door to allow the dog to come inside; the dog comes, and Neville feeds it another hamburger. However, the dog scampers away after it’s eaten. Neville spends the evening outside, trying to understand why the dog runs away from him. He becomes so immersed in his thinking that he doesn’t notice that night has fallen—in the distance, he sees Ben Cortman running toward him, and he hurriedly rushes back to his house.

Neville is desperate for contact and companionship of any kind, even with a pet, so he’s extremely excited when he encounters the dog. The arrival of the dog is the first sign that creatures (including, perhaps, human beings) can both be infected with the vampire germ and survive during the daylight.



Many people who’ve survived prolonged isolation report that they developed imaginary friends, or formed a close emotional bond with animals or inanimate objects. Human beings need companionship, even if this companionship is largely imagined. Thus, it’s revealing that Neville almost immediately feels a close connection with the dog: even though the dog might be a vampire, Neville sees himself and the dog as engaging in the same struggle for survival. Thus, by taking care of the dog, Neville is really taking care of himself, in the sense that he’s giving himself a purpose to go on living.



Instead of spending his day drinking, Neville resumes his routine, dragging bodies to the pit and leaving out food for the dog. Having a companion to care for (the dog) gives Neville a new sense of purpose in life.



It’s not clear why Neville is only now wondering why the vampires don’t burn down his house—one might think that he would’ve thought of this earlier. But perhaps it’s a sign that Neville’s scientific research has helped him think more clearly about his situation, instead of being consumed by fear and paranoia.



The fact that the dog runs away from Neville may be a subtle symbol that Neville, even if he is the last man on Earth, isn’t necessarily the “good guy” in this story. Neville wants the dog to be on his side, but every night, he’s still left alone.



Over the next few days, Neville continues to feed the dog, and he also begins to talk to it. Neville has barely spoken in the last year, and his own voice sounds strange to him. The dog seems to be getting more and more comfortable with Neville. Then, one day, the dog doesn't come at all—Neville is very worried. A couple days later, Neville sees the dog, its eyes glazed over, snarling. The dog runs away from Neville, and Neville realizes that it's seriously infected with the *vampiris* germ now. He decides that he needs to find a way to cure the dog. He continues leaving food and milk out for the dog during the day, and the dog continues to eat it. One day, Neville picks up the dog and carries it into a room of the house. The dog barks, panicked. Neville thinks, "Why don't you *trust* me?"

That night, Neville is eating dinner when he hears the sound of the dog scratching at the linoleum in its room. He realizes that the animal is trying to dig a hole to hide from the **vampires**. Neville becomes sick to his stomach; he knows that he needs to find a way to cure the dog, fast. He goes into the dog's room and begins to pet it and talk to it. With tears in his eyes, he promises to take care of the dog. A week later, however, "the dog was dead."

At first, taking care of the dog is important for Neville because doing so provides him with a sense of purpose and a companion—he finally has someone to talk to (even if the dog can't talk back to him). Also, the fact that Neville is sympathetic to a victim of the vampiris germ might suggest that Neville is becoming more sympathetic to vampirism in general: instead of regarding all vampires as monsters, he's starting to see them as victims of an uncontrollable disease.



Neville immediately assumes that the dog is trying to hide from the vampires outside, but it seems just as likely that the dog is trying to escape from Neville, the last uninfected man on Earth! Notice also that Matheson doesn't say what happens when the dog "dies." Given that vampires die and then wake from the dead, it's probable that Neville burns the dog in the pit to ensure that it won't rise from the grave. Neville, continuing to think of himself as the "good guy," fails to see things from the point of view of the infected—he thinks he can "cure" vampires, when, in the end, he just ends up burning them to ensure his own survival.



CHAPTER 14

After the death of the dog, Neville resists the temptation to **drink** heavily. Instead, he returns to work trying to understand the **vampires**.

Neville remembers a year ago, just a few days after he put Virginia to "her second and final rest." During the day, he wanders through the streets, and encounters a man who tells him, "come and be saved, brother." The man leads him to a tent, in which a "frenzied" crowd of people is joined together in prayer. The people pray that God will protect them from the **vampires**. A preacher yells out that God is punishing human beings for their sins by sending vampires to torment them. Neville manages to leave the tent; by this time, night has fallen.

Strangely, Neville doesn't sink further into depression after the dog's death; instead, the dog's death inspires him to work harder.



Notice that Matheson doesn't describe Virginia's second death (although, presumably, Neville is forced to kill her). The passage also seems to criticize organized religion, describing the crowd of spectators as "frenzied" and masochistic, since they're willing to blame themselves for vampirism. While religious fanatics accept the plague as an inevitable punishment from God, Neville tries to remain rational.



Back in 1976, Neville sits in his living room, reading about psychology. It occurs to him that some of the **vampires'** behaviors—for example, their aversion to the cross—could be psychological, not bacterial in origin. During the vampire plague, there was a massive religious revival, and millions of people engaged in “primitive worship.” So, perhaps, when these worshippers themselves contracted the vampire germ and woke up as vampires, their minds snapped. Neville realizes that vampires may not like crosses and mirrors because the sight of a cross reminds them of their previous lives as religious fanatics, while mirrors remind them of their new vampire identities. He also realizes that some of the “vampires” *believe* themselves to be vampires, because religious leaders and yellow journalists taught them to hate and fear vampires during their final days as human beings. This would explain why the vampires outside his house never try to burn down his property—they can't think logically.

Neville pauses for a moment and realizes that his life is becoming slowly more bearable. Despite the death of the dog, he's feeling optimistic about the future. He spends the evening listening to phonograph **records** and relaxing while, “outside, the vampires waited.”

CHAPTER 15

It's June 1978, and Neville is “out hunting for Cortman.” Hunting Cortman has become Neville's hobby, one of the few things that brings him pleasure. Neville knows that Cortman knows that he's trying to kill him; he imagines that Cortman savors “the chase.” It occurs to Neville that, if he were ever to kill Cortman, he wouldn't know how to occupy his time anymore. Over the last two years, Neville has changed. He's gained a lot of weight but he's also built up some muscle. He has a long blonde beard, but his hair is thinning. His eyes shine bright blue.

One day, Neville strolls down the streets, searching for Cortman, when he sees a white shape in the distance—the shape of a woman's body. As Neville approaches the woman, he sees that she's tan and red-haired. Neville calls out to the woman, but she runs away from him. Neville runs after her, trying to convince her to stop. Eventually, Neville catches up with the woman, tackling her to the ground. She tries to push him away; confused, Neville cries out, “Why are you afraid?”, and “What's your name?” Slowly, the woman stops struggling. She whispers that her name is Ruth.

Neville's hypothesis is that the vampires who torment him every night were once religious fanatics (“primitive worshippers,” as Matheson calls them), who were told that vampires are demonic—now that these fanatics have been reborn as vampires themselves, the contradiction causes them to go insane. The passage could be interpreted as Matheson's critique of organized religion in general: he seems to be implying that religion, through its intensity and hysteria, has actually made the vampires more dangerous and unstable. Matheson further criticizes organized religion by drawing a clear parallel between the hysterical mob of worshippers and the mob of vampires.



In contrast to organized religion, science and rationality calm Neville and give him a sense of purpose: he intends to use his new psychological and medical knowledge to fight vampirism.



Two years have passed since the events of the previous chapter, and Neville has entered into a new routine. Every day, he hunts for the sleeping body of Ben Cortman, his former friend. There's a kind of “antagonistic cooperation” between Neville and Cortman. Pursuing Cortman gives Neville a sense of purpose in life; if he ever caught Cortman, he'd probably revert to drinking all day. (This is a common trope in science fiction and superhero stories, including some written by Matheson himself.)



Up until this point in the novel, Neville has seemed to be the only human being left on Earth. Now, it would seem, there's another: Ruth. Ruth responds to Neville's presence in the same way as the dog from Part Two: running away as fast as she can. And perhaps Ruth has good reason to run away from Neville: in the past three years, he's evolved into a hardened killer, capable of ending hundreds of vampire lives every week.



CHAPTER 16

It's four in the afternoon, and Ruth lies asleep in Neville's bed. Neville sits in his living room, trying to understand what's happened. It's possible that Ruth is infected with the *vampiris* germ; however, Neville is willing to take the risk, since he hasn't seen a human being in years. Neville still knows nothing about Ruth—he brought her back to his house, but she refused to speak to him, or to eat any food he gave her.

Ruth emerges from the bedroom, and Neville begins to ask her some questions. Ruth explains that she lived with her husband in Inglewood until recently. Her husband died last week, and before that, her two children died. Ruth has spent the last week wandering through Los Angeles. Suddenly, Neville stands up and gets a handful of garlic from his cabinet, and Ruth becomes revolted by the smell. Neville realizes that Ruth has been infected with the *vampiris* germ. In the last two years, Neville has learned that garlic is an allergen for the **vampires**; injecting it into their veins does nothing, but exposing them to the odor creates nausea.

Ruth insists that she isn't infected at all; rather, she just has a weak stomach. Unconvinced, Neville asks to take a sample of Ruth's blood. Ruth cries out, "Leave me alone!" Neville offers Ruth **whiskey** in order to calm her down. Suddenly, he realizes that he doesn't care whether Ruth is infected or not. He tells Ruth that he can't let her go out to the **vampires** at night: "You don't know what they'd do to you."

Because the chapter begins with Ruth asleep in Neville's bed, Matheson immediately suggests a romantic connection between Neville and Ruth (although, apparently, they've barely interacted). Neville is so desperate for company that he's willing to ignore the fact that Ruth could be infected with the vampire germ.



Ruth claims to be an ordinary human being, with a husband and children; however, her story seems a little implausible, especially since she's allergic to garlic (as, indeed, all vampires are, Neville has learned).



Ruth's explanation for being revolted by the smell of garlic isn't particularly convincing. But Neville seems not to care: he's so intent on spending time with another human being that he's willing to overlook the strong possibility that this human being is infected with the vampire germ. As with the dog, Neville doesn't let Ruth leave the house—supposedly for her own safety, but mostly because, after three years, he wants someone to talk to.



CHAPTER 17

Neville and Ruth eat supper together. Neville explains to Ruth that he doesn't understand how the **vampires** are surviving: surely their nourishment is running out, and they spend their days lying in a coma. Ruth seems surprised to hear about the vampires—she claims that she and her husband never realized that the vampires had come back from the dead. However, she agrees to let Neville check her blood in the morning. Neville realizes that he's afraid to check Ruth's blood, in case she really is infected.

Neville brings up an important question: if the vampires survive by drinking the blood of the living, why aren't the vampires dying out now that almost all human beings are dead? Ruth's behavior is becoming increasingly suspicious: it seems impossible that she could fail to recognize that vampires come back from the dead. But even though Neville has some suspicions about Ruth, he's so desperate for companionship that he continues talking to her.



Neville explains to Ruth that crosses are sometimes an effective deterrent to the **vampires**, but not always. Vampires who weren't Christians in life don't care about crosses. As he speaks, Neville notices that Ruth has a body like a young girl—it seems unlikely that she gave birth to two children. He also notices that, in the last few years, his sex drive has virtually disappeared—he's "submerged himself in investigation" for the last two years. Thus, he feels little to no desire for Ruth now. He also feels a vague suspicion that Ruth isn't telling him the truth.

Ruth looks at Neville carefully, and says, "You don't believe a word I've said, do you?" Neville demands that Ruth tell him more about her husband, but Ruth begs, "Not now. Please." Neville isn't sure what to believe—he's not sure why she would lie. He resolves to check her blood first thing in the morning. He also tells Ruth his theory—he seems to be immune to the *vampiris* germ, which would suggest that there are other people who are immune to it too; perhaps Ruth is one of these people. Neville thinks about Ruth some more: if she really is immune to the disease, the two of them could have a family together. Such a possibility seems "terrifying" to Neville—he's lived as a bachelor for the last three years.

Neville tells Ruth about something else he's discovered: he can make Cortman panic by waving a copy of the Torah in his face. Since Cortman was Jewish in life, the sight of the Jewish holy book would naturally make him frightened as a vampire. Neville also tells Ruth that bullets have no effect on dead **vampires**. Privately, Neville thinks about why this is: he's discovered that the *vampiris* germ creates a "powerful body glue that sealed the bullet openings as soon as they were made."

Ruth asks Neville, "Tell me about yourself," and Neville isn't sure how to reply. Neville realizes how greatly isolation has changed his personality; he's no longer sure how to interact with other people. Ruth, sensing Neville's discomfort, asks him to tell her about the **vampire** plague instead. Neville explains that the vampire plague is caused by a *vampiris* germ. This germ causes the various symptoms of being a vampire, including elongation of the canine teeth. When **vampires** die from a lack of blood, their bodies disintegrate into dust. Then, dust storms blow *vampiris* spores across Los Angeles, infecting more people. Neville hypothesizes that he's immune to the disease because he was bitten by a vampire bat during his time in Panama, causing him to develop an immunity.

In these sections of the book, Neville shares the knowledge he's accumulated over the past two years: for example, he's learned that crosses only repel vampires who were Christians during their time as human beings. Over two years, Neville has forced himself to repress his sexual instincts; as a result, he isn't sure how he feels about Ruth.



Instead of doing the sensible thing and checking Ruth's blood immediately to determine if she's lying or telling the truth, Neville decides to wait until morning to check—for now, he just wants to talk. But even if Neville is glad to have another human being to talk to, he's also repelled by the possibility of having to live with another human being from now on. He's settled into his own routine and doesn't seem to want many changes. Neville's attitude toward Ruth parallels his attitude toward the vampires at the beginning of the novel: he's at once drawn to them and repelled by them.



Neville tells Ruth about his discoveries (and, at the same time, provides the reader with some much-needed exposition). The reason that Neville's gunshots couldn't kill Cortman or the other vampires is that vampires' bodies are impervious to bullets.



Neville's time alone has permanently altered his personality: after years of isolation, he can barely hold an ordinary conversation. Indeed, he's spent so much time studying vampires that vampirism is the only topic he's comfortable talking about. Matheson again uses this passage to provide some backstory and exposition. Before this chapter, for example, we didn't know that Neville is immune to the vampire plague because he was bitten by a bat during his time in Panama.



Neville also explains that wooden stakes kill the **vampires**. The stakes don't have to penetrate the heart, contrary to legend; anywhere on the body will do (and, in fact, a wooden stake isn't necessary; any sharp object will do). The reason that a stake kills the vampire is that the stake lets air into the body "and keeps the flesh open so that the body glue can't function." In spite of the knowledge he's accumulated, Neville says, he still doesn't know how to cure the vampire plague—he's experimented with antibiotics, but nothing works.

Ruth then asks Neville a question: if, as he says, some of the **vampires** are still living, how can Neville know "they're not going to stay alive?" Neville, feeling vaguely defensive, insists that the only way to protect himself is to kill vampires before they kill him. Neville is amazed by Ruth's question—in three years, he's never once considered that it's wrong for him to attack the vampires during the day. Neville asks Ruth, "do you think I'm wrong?" and Ruth replies, "It's not for me to say."

Neville has amassed a lot of knowledge about vampires, but he's been unable to determine how to cure the disease. Indeed, Neville's vampire research has only made him more adept at killing vampires in their sleep, so that, from a vampire's perspective, he's just become a more efficiently murderous monster.



Neville is so used to being the last man left on Earth that he's genuinely surprised when anyone questions whether he's doing the right thing. However, Neville doesn't seem to be trying to cure the vampires anymore—recognizing that antibiotics aren't working, he's just continued to kill the vampires in their sleep. Ruth's question suggests that she thinks that what Neville is doing is morally wrong; however, she refuses to elaborate on her feelings.



CHAPTER 18

Very late at night, a sound wakes Neville up from the couch, where he's been sleeping. Neville cries out, "Virge!" only to realize that it's Ruth, walking down the hall. Neville gets out of bed, dresses, and accuses Ruth of trying to leave him; Ruth denies this. Neville pours himself **whiskey** and drinks all of it right away. He tells Ruth about the night his wife came back from the dead "to drink my blood." Neville stuck a wooden stake through his own wife's heart, killing her for good, and then buried her for the second time.

Ruth asks Neville, "Why were we punished like this?" Neville says he doesn't know, and apologizes to Ruth for not trusting her. He tells Ruth that, somehow, things will get better, and holds her tight. Suddenly, Neville and Ruth kiss each other. They "sat there holding each other close" for a long time.

After a long time, Neville stands up, gets his syringe and proceeds to draw blood from Ruth. He bends over a microscope, assuring Ruth that, if she is infected, he'll find a way to cure her. Ruth cries out, "Don't look!" Neville proceeds to look, anyway, and sees that Ruth is infected. Suddenly, a wooden mallet crashes down on his head. He falls to the floor, and "night filled his brain."

Neville confuses Ruth and his wife, Virginia, implying a romantic connection between Neville and Ruth, but also suggesting that Neville is far from "over" the trauma of his wife's death. Furthermore, this chapter marks the first time that Neville has actually talked about killing his wife with a wooden stake.



This part is confusingly written: Matheson implies that Neville and Ruth have sex, but because of publishing norms in the 1950s, he's discouraged from writing about their sexual encounter, and leaves it up to readers to imagine what Ruth and Neville do while "holding each other close."



This is a rather unsurprising plot twist, except for the fact that Ruth immediately shifts from romantic affection to violence. After three years of attacking vampires, the vampires are striking back.



CHAPTER 19

Neville wakes up in his house. He sees that the front door is wide open: Ruth is gone. He finds a note from Ruth, explaining, “I want to save you if I can.” The note explains that Ruth was sent to spy on Neville: she wore makeup to make herself look tan. Ruth volunteered to spy on Neville because Neville killed Ruth’s husband, but Ruth developed “feelings” for Neville during the course of their time together. The note goes on to explain that “we” are going to set up a society, “slowly but surely.”

Ruth’s note goes on to explain that she and her friends are infected with the germ, but have learned how to survive with it. They can stay out in the sun for short periods of time, and they take special pills that help them tolerate the germ. Ruth explains that she doesn’t blame Neville for killing some of her friends with wooden stakes, as she knows that he was just trying to survive. She adds that she’s left one of her pills; these pills both nourish the *vampiris* germ and also keep it from multiplying and destroying the host. She encourages Neville to take the pill and then get as far from Los Angeles as he can. The note ends, “I wasn’t spying on you. I was loving you.”

Neville finds a small pill next to the note. He feels confused about what’s just happened: he remembers that he and Ruth “had embraced, they had...” In the midst of his confusion, however, Neville remembers a sentence he’s read again and again in his textbooks, a sentence he’s never fully appreciated until now: “Bacteria can mutate.”

CHAPTER 20

Late at night, Neville looks out of the peephole in his door and sees “them” coming. Then he sees “dark-suited men” attacking the **vampires**. They drive “razor-tipped pikes” into the vampires’ bodies, and blood spurts everywhere. Neville realizes that he’s looking at the “new society” Ruth described in her letter. The people of the new society attack dead vampires in the middle of the night. He hates the new society’s “methodical butchery”—he prefers his own method of killing vampires, silently and in the middle of the day.

Ruth’s letter provides some quick, much-needed exposition. As in many science fiction novels of the era, the romantic connection between Ruth and Neville isn’t portrayed very convincingly. Furthermore, it seems like a potentially sexist assumption that Ruth would forgive and fall for her husband’s killer after only one night of seduction.



For most of the novel, Neville has operated on the assumption that vampires—and those who’ve contracted the vampire germ—can’t move around in the sunlight. Now, he learns that there are some vampire-like creatures who’ve learned how to control the vampiris bacterium with special pills. This further suggests that, for a long time now, Neville has been killing off sentient, civilized vampire-creatures, an act that Ruth finds morally despicable (hence her question at the end of Chapter 17).



The implication of this passage is that, over the last three years, some vampires—Ruth included—have mutated from feral, dangerous creatures into sentient, intelligent beings, with their own society. (A further implication is that Neville accidentally has intercourse with a vampire.)



Neville gets his first taste of the “new society” on the night after Ruth attacks him. Neville thinks that the vampires of the new society—those who use pills to control their disease—are overly cruel and bloodthirsty in the way that they kill the other vampires (those without control of their minds). But even if the new society vampires are brutal, they’re no less murderous than Neville himself.



Neville realizes that the new society is going to kill Ben Cortman, sooner or later—somehow, he doesn't want Cortman to “perish like that.” Suddenly, he sees Cortman on the roof of the house across the street, and Neville realizes that Cortman has been hiding in the chimney all these years. The men in dark suits fire guns at Cortman, but Cortman continues to crawl across the roof. Neville finds himself weeping at the “ungainly form of his old friend.” The dark-suited men open machinegun fire on Cortman, ripping his head apart.

After years of trying to kill Ben Cortman, Neville is strangely sympathetic toward his old opponent. Although Neville wanted Cortman dead, the hunt for Cortman gave his life meaning and a sense of purpose; furthermore, to the extent that Neville wanted Cortman to die, he wanted Cortman to die in his sleep, not wide-awake, by machine gun. (Presumably, the strength of the machine guns' bullets is great enough to rip through the vampires' “body glue.”)



It occurs to Neville that the dark-suited men are going to call for him to come outside and “surrender.” Neville realizes he has no choice but to come outside—he's outmanned and outgunned. However, the dark-suited men never call out for him. Suddenly he realizes the truth: the men aren't going to call him outside, they're just going to kill him. The men shoot open the lock on the front door, and Neville runs away from the door. Neville crawls to his room and retrieves his pistol. As the men push their way into his house, he opens fire, and shoots one. Suddenly, a man hits Neville in the chest with a club. Neville falls to the floor and whispers, “Virge.” The dark-suited men drag Neville's “lifeless body” out of the house, “into the world that was theirs and no longer his.”

Neville believes that the vampires of the new society are going to break into his home and murder him; thus, he tries to defend himself with his pistols, but to no avail—he's badly outnumbered. The last sentence of this chapter is especially important: throughout the book, Neville has been trying to recreate the old, human world, killing vampires and trying to develop a cure for vampirism. But now, it's become clear, the world of human beings is finished: it will be replaced with a new society, led by intelligent vampires.



CHAPTER 21

Neville wakes up and wonders, “Where am I?” There's an awful pain in his chest, and he sees that there's a big bandage on his body. He looks around and sees that he's in some kind of a cell. After three years of spending every day in the same house, the experience of being in another place is surreal for Neville.

The final chapter of the book takes place in an unfamiliar location, emphasizing the fact that Neville is, both literally and metaphorically, “out of place” in the new vampire society—he's a vestige of the obsolete human society.



Suddenly the door opens and someone walks in—“my executioner,” Neville thinks. A woman asks, “Are you thirsty?”, gives him some water, then wipes his perspiring forehead. Neville sees that the woman is Ruth. Ruth asks, “Why did you fight them? They had orders to bring you in unharmed.” Ruth explains that her “new society” is violent, but only for the sake of survival. The new society consists of living **vampires**, and they kill dead vampires—Neville's mistake was that he killed both dead and living vampires. Neville points out that the dark-suited men from the previous night were clearly enjoying the act of killing. Ruth replies that Neville, too, enjoyed killing vampires—he's no more or less sadistic than the people of the new society.

Ruth's claims that the new vampire society is violent, but only “for the sake of survival,” seem to contradict the brutality and bloodthirstiness that Neville witnessed in the previous chapter. However, even if Ruth and the new vampires are hypocritical in their attitude toward violence, they're no more hypocritical than Neville himself. Although Neville has always killed vampires for the sake of his own survival, Matheson has made it clear that he sometimes takes pleasure in the act of killing, often smiling while he drives a stake into his enemies' bodies.



Ruth whispers that she's a ranking officer in the new society. Outside, the people of the new society are waiting for Neville's execution: they are terrified of Neville, and want him dead. Neville nods as he hears this—he seems eerily calm. This Ruth seems altogether different than the woman he met—much more official and formal in her manner. Neville asks Ruth, "Don't let it get too brutal. Too heartless." Ruth pauses, and then says, "I'll try." She gives Neville a handful of pills "to make it easier," and says, "You'll be with her soon."

From the perspective of the new vampires, Neville is a monstrous killer, who's been murdering vampires in their sleep for years—they want him to be executed for his crimes. On some level, Neville seems to accept that he deserves to die—all he asks is that his execution not be "too brutal." But Neville's request has an interesting double meaning: perhaps he's also advising Ruth not to let her new society become too brutal and destructive—in other words, not to make the same mistakes he's made. The pills that Ruth gives Neville have sparked a lot of confusion (especially since she gives Neville a different pill in Chapter 19). However, the fact that Ruth tells Neville that he'll be with "her" (presumably, his dead wife, Virginia) would suggest that she's given Neville some sort of painkiller or lethal poison, so that he won't suffer during his execution.



Neville stands up, trying to ignore the searing pain in his chest, and walks outside. He sees a huge group of white-faced people, and realizes that they're afraid of him—he's the odd man out. Neville understands why the white-faced people hate him: he's spent the last three years killing them in their sleep. He clutches the pills in his hand and thinks, "So long as the end did not come with violence, so long as it did not have to be a butchery." He swallows the pills. As he does so, something darkly amusing occurs to him: *he* has become a terror, "a new superstition." As "the final lethargy" engulfs him, he thinks, "I am legend."

At the end of the novel, Neville finally sees things from his enemies' point of view. Throughout the novel, he's operated under the assumption that humans are "right" and vampires are "wrong"—and, therefore, that he's morally justified in killing vampires in their sleep. However, as he ingests the pills (which will, presumably, cause his death—the "final lethargy"), Neville realizes that he's no better than the vampires he's been fighting. Indeed, Neville is just as much of a murderous monster as vampires once were in human society: like a vampire, he sneaks into people's houses and kills his victims in their sleep. Thus, in the final line of the book (which also serves as the book's title), Neville accepts that he is a monster. Furthermore, the final line suggests that human society—of which Neville was the last representative—is now fading into the past; it, too, has become a mere legend.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Arn, Jackson. "I Am Legend." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 Mar 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Arn, Jackson. "I Am Legend." LitCharts LLC, March 3, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/i-am-legend>.

To cite any of the quotes from *I Am Legend* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Matheson, Richard. *I Am Legend*. Tor Books. 2007.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Matheson, Richard. *I Am Legend*. New York: Tor Books. 2007.