

# The Destroyers



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GRAHAM GREENE

Henry Graham Greene was born into a large and influential family living in the south of England. He lived on the campus of the boarding school where his father taught and then later became headmaster. He studied at Oxford and then worked as a journalist, at the same time trying his hand at writing fiction. He met his future wife Vivian when she wrote him a letter to correct a mistake he had made in describing Catholicism; he converted to Catholicism in 1926 and married Vivien the next year. The couple never divorced, but separated in 1947, and Greene carried on many affairs from which he drew inspiration for his writing. Greene was estranged from his wife and two children for many years. Greene travelled the world, occasionally working as a spy for the British secret service, writing as a freelance journalist and essayist, while also collecting material for the many thrillers that he wrote in addition to more traditional novels. He travelled to countries in the throes of war and revolution and refused to settle down until he became too old to travel.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Destroyers" is set in the decade after the end of the Second World War, when English society was in a state of upheaval following the destruction unleashed by the war. During the war, British cities were disfigured by bombs, hundreds of thousands of British soldiers were killed or maimed, and the economic resources of the nation were taxed to the breaking point. Londoners spent many fearful nights hiding in bomb shelters, uncertain whether their homes would survive the latest round of a German bombing campaign that went on for eight months. This experience took a particularly harsh toll on the urban working class, who could not evacuate to large houses in the countryside like the rich and initially had few options for places to shelter. After the war was won in 1945, the political climate in the country shifted. In 1945 the Labour Party won control of the British parliament for the first time, and went on to radically reshape British institutions in the interests of the working class and poor. Although the party was voted out of power in 1951, its social reforms stuck.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Graham Greene was a prolific letter writer, and maintained close friendships with some of the most influential writers of his time. Two of the writers who most influenced him were T. S. Eliot, author of *The Waste Land* (1921), and Herbert Read. Both wrote poetry and critical essays that addressed the calamity of

the First World War and art's role in modern society. Greene was also friendly with Evelyn Waugh, a fellow Catholic writer who mainly wrote novels about the social relations among the upper class. Finally, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) seems to take something from the literary legacy of "The Destroyers," although it sets the horrifying (yet art-loving) rebellious adolescents it portrays in a dystopic near-future.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Destroyers"
- **When Written:** 1954
- **When Published:** 1954, first in the magazine *Picture Post* and then in the story collection *Twenty-One Stories*.
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** short story
- **Setting:** London in the 1950s
- **Climax:** Mr. Thomas is returning to the house and T. must convince the other boys to bring the destruction of the house to completion.
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Not happy.** Greene suffered from depression his entire life. As an adolescent, he attempted suicide several times and was sent to London to undergo psychoanalysis.

**Family rivalry.** Greene was one of six children; his father's richer brother had another six children. The cousins grew up comparing themselves to one another.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins by introducing us to the Wormsley Common Gang, a group of boys ranging from nine to fifteen years of age, who live in a tough area of London and spend their summer holiday pulling pranks. They gather daily in an empty lot created when bombs dropped on England during World War 2 destroyed the houses that used to stand there. One beautiful old house still stands on the edge of the lot, although it was damaged during the war and is propped up by wooden struts. This house is owned by Mr. Thomas, an elderly, solitary man who used to be a builder and a decorator, and whom the boys derisively call "Old Misery." The bombing destroyed the house's plumbing, so Mr. Thomas uses an outdoor **lavatory**.

The leader of the gang is a boy named Blackie who concerns

himself with fairness and with the gang's reputation. A boy named Trevor, who comes from a more affluent background, but whose parents have fallen on hard times, is the gang's newest member. Usually the boys would make fun of the name Trevor, but the menacing way he carries himself inspires their respect. They call the new boy "T." and allow him to enter the group without a humiliating ritual induction. Other members of the group include the young and easily surprised Mike, and the more practical and outspoken Summers.

One day, T. surprises everyone by arriving late to the lot. Blackie interrogates T. about where he has been and it slowly comes out that T. has visited Old Misery and toured around the old man's home. At first it seems to Blackie that this is unbecoming for a member of the gang, especially because T. describes the home as "beautiful." But T. reveals that he has planned a prank that will surpass all the gang's past exploits in daring: he wants to destroy Old Misery's house while the old man is out of town for the three-day weekend. Blackie raises objections to this plan, but the gang puts T.'s idea to a vote and decides to carry it out.

Blackie is hurt at first to see that T. has replaced him as the leader of the gang, but realizes the exploit *would* burnish the gang's reputation around London. He decides to support T. Meanwhile T., who is suddenly imbued with confidence and leadership skill, instructs the boys to bring tools for the destruction, and they promise to meet the next day. When Blackie arrives the next day, he can hear the destruction already going on inside. Walking through the house, he notices how methodically the boys are destroying everything from the floors to the banisters, while leaving the walls intact. T. is sitting and listening to the **sounds of destruction**. He instructs Blackie to smash up the bathroom and says that he is looking for something special to do.

After the other boys leave at the end of the day, T. shows Blackie the special thing he has found: seventy one-pound notes, Mr. Thomas's life savings. When Blackie asks if T. means to steal the money, T. responds with anger. He says, instead, that the two of them should burn the money as a celebration. Blackie struggles to understand T.'s motivations, asking whether he hates Old Misery, but T. says that hate and love aren't real, and all that matters are things. After they have burnt the notes one by one, Blackie and T. race each other home.

The next day the boys continue the destruction. After removing each of the floors of the house, they turn on the water, which pours through the hollow house. At that moment, Mike rushes in with news that Old Misery is returning early from his holiday due to the rain. Summers says they ought to run away before they get caught, but T. is adamant that they finish destroying the house. Summers continues to resist and mocks T. by using his full name, "Trevor." Before the gang has time to laugh, though, Blackie shoves Summers and throws his support

behind T. T. tells Mike to go out and stand near Old Misery's outdoor lavatory and yell for help. Even though T. is giving the commands, Blackie is the leader once again.

As Old Misery approaches his house, a boy runs up to him and tells him another boy is trapped in the outdoor lavatory. Mr. Thomas is indignant that the boys have broken onto his property, but he hears the yells of the boy supposedly locked in the toilet and allows himself to be hurried along by T., even climbing over his own garden wall.

When Mr. Thomas opens the lavatory door to free the boy, he finds himself pushed into the lavatory, with the door is locked behind him. He pleads to be set free, but the boy tells him to keep quiet. He realizes no one is around to hear his cries. From the lavatory he can hear sounds that resemble carpenters at work coming from his house.

The boys finish by hacking away at the walls of the house until the structure balances on just a thin strip of mortar. Next they tie the wooden struts supporting the house to the back of a truck parked in the lot. T. brings Mr. Thomas a blanket and some sandwiches, telling him they don't want him to be uncomfortable overnight, but also adding, much to Mr. Thomas's confusion, that Mr. Thomas would no longer be comfortable in his house.

Early the next morning, the lorry driver comes to get his truck. As he pulls out of the lot, he feels something tugging on the back fender. Then there is enormous crash and debris rains down. He hears Mr. Thomas yelling from within the lavatory and frees him. Mr. Thomas cries out when he sees that his house has been torn down, but the lorry driver can't stop himself from laughing at the spectacle.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Trevor, or "T."** – T. is a brooding, unhappy, rebellious adolescent and the newest member of the Wormsley Common Gang. He comes from a wealthier background than the other boys, but his parents have lost their place in society and moved to the neighborhood. This, and the sense that T. is more caught up in his own thoughts than he is in the way he is seen by others, sets him apart from the other boys. When T. first joins the gang, he is generally silent, but the way he carries himself impresses the other boys. He learns from his father that Mr. Thomas's house was built by a famous architect and becomes the leader of the group by suggesting the audacious plan to destroy the house. Although T. is determined to destroy Mr. Thomas's house, it is not out of malice towards the old man, but because of a desire to rebel against the older generation's materialism and belief in the superiority of the upper classes.

**Blackie** – Blackie is a fifteen-year-old boy who leads the Wormsley Common Gang up to and after T.'s brief time as

leader. Blackie takes his leadership responsibilities seriously and wants the best for the gang. Blackie's character evolves as his relationship with T. does. At first he sees promise in T.'s way of carrying himself, but has his reservations as to whether T. will share the group's values despite his upper class roots. Later, Blackie is briefly jealous of T. after T. takes over leadership of the gang, but quickly comes to see that T.'s vision for destroying the house promises to bring the gang more prestige than any of his schemes would have because it reflects an even more profound rebellion against ideas of class. This realization inspires his respect for T., and ensures his loyalty at the moment when the rest of the gang turns on T.

**Mr. Thomas, or "Old Misery"** – Mr. Thomas is an old man who worked as a decorator and builder when he was younger, before World War 2. He lives in a beautiful old house that survived the bombing of the war, and is deeply proud of it. He believes in the social fabric that existed before the war, in which order ruled according to a strict social hierarchy of class and privilege. He believes in this world view despite the fact that the world from which it came was destroyed by the war, and never understands the hostility which other characters hold toward that old world. The boys call Mr. Thomas "Old Misery," and indeed he seems like a sad and lonely figure. While he is too much of a miser to fix his plumbing, he does show generosity in once giving the boys chocolates (an action the boys mistrust as a possible bribe). Old Misery looks at the boys over his garden wall and reminisces on his long-gone boyhood, never realizing that the boys he fondly patronizes look upon him with derision. He is a pathetic figure, symbolizing a world that is too old and stuck in its ways to reinvent itself in the wake of destruction.

**The lorry driver** – A driver who keeps his lorry in the lot near Mr. Thomas's house. He unwittingly pulls down Old Misery's house, after the boys tie one of the wooden struts propping the house up to the back of his lorry. After Mr. Thomas cries out in dismay at the destruction of his house, the lorry driver can't stop himself from laughing, despite Old Misery's obvious distress. The lorry driver's laughter suggests that the boy's hostility to the old pre-war world of strict social class, and their affinity for destruction, is shared more broadly by the community of people around them as well.

**Mike** – Mike is one of the youngest members of the group. Mike's frequent moments of surprise show the difficulty of mastering the group's code and moving from childhood into adolescence. Mike is eager to contribute and wants to be taken seriously. He is proud when he manages to warn the gang that Old Misery is coming and dutifully follows instructions to play his part in trapping Old Misery in the outdoor lavatory.

**Summers** – A thin, sallow boy who goes by his last name. Summers is practical and sees playing pranks as a way to have fun, so long as they can get away with it and not end up caught by the police. He is outspoken, and the other boys whose names we never learn seem to follow his example. He

pragmatically withdraws his support for T.'s plan when Old Misery is on his way back, but Blackie pushes Summers and loyally stands up for T. before the other boys have time to follow Summers's lead.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Joe** – A fat boy who worries about being asked to spend money. When the boys have destroyed Mr. Thomas's house to the extent that it is just walls with nothing inside, he drops a penny down from the top and watches it spin.



## 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.



### CLASS AND A CHANGING WORLD

"The Destroyers" is set in London, England in the early 1950s. World War II has ended less than a decade earlier, and the city and country are slowly emerging from the destruction of the war. England is not emerging unscathed or unchanged, however. The country is scarred by the deaths of hundreds of thousands of its soldiers and the destruction incurred during the unprecedented German bombing campaign on British cities. England after the war is also witnessing drastic changes to its social and political orders as a result of the war.

Before the massive upheaval of the two World Wars, England's social hierarchy was extremely rigid. The upper classes were held to be superior, and class was inherited, making it unusual for those lower on the social ladder to move up. At the time when the story is set, the chaos and destruction of the war have reduced the fortunes of many in the upper and upper middle class, while also allowing for greater mobility among those in the lower classes.

The boys in the Wormsley Common Gang do not remember the class world that existed before the war, but they seek to fight against any return to outdated assumptions about the superiority of the upper classes and place their faith in the survival of the new, more meritocratic society then emerging. This stance on the old class order is reflected in the inner workings of the gang, and especially in the way the gang determines the hierarchy among its members. For instance, when the gang learns that the new recruit's name is Trevor, they recognize this name as one that is only given either to members of the upper class or the ambitious upper middle class eager to be accepted among members of the true upper class. Because they have no respect for these class norms, the

boys know that calling T. by his full name is a surefire way to undermine him.

Resentment towards the idea of upper class superiority also helps to motivate the boys in their destruction of Mr. Thomas's house. T.'s father tells him that Mr. Thomas's house was designed by Christopher Wren, an architect who lived from 1632 until 1723 and built palaces for the royal family as well as the landmark St. Paul's Cathedral. This pedigree makes Mr. Thomas's house a relic of the pre-war era, when class distinctions were of huge importance, and it makes the boys' destruction of the house a symbolic strike against that old social order.

Yet the story is not simply a tale of how a rough new social order is sweeping away an older, more genteel one. Indeed, the story deliberately portrays that old order as obsolete and ridiculous, as deserving to be wiped away, despite some sadness that goes along with that destruction. At the end of the story, when the lorry driver, who is clearly a member of the lower class, cannot help but laugh at the destruction of Old Misery's home, we see that glee at the destruction of the old class order is not only an adolescent emotion, but shared by adults as well.

Mr. Thomas's professional history shows that he comes from a time when a different, more rigid class order reigned. Mr. Thomas has the training of a decorator and builder, so he can take care of most parts of his house, but does not know how to fix the plumbing. Plumbers were drawn from a lower class than builders and decorators, and so this lack of practical knowledge is a sign of Mr. Thomas's class pretensions. The fact that he refuses to spend money to fix his indoor plumbing and must, therefore, use an outdoor **lavatory** symbolizes all the concrete disadvantages that pretensions to being above manual labor has brought members of the upper class, along with the financial failure that has left him to pinch and scrimp. When the boys lock Mr. Thomas in his lavatory, it is the final sign that his ineffectual worldview has brought about his downfall.



### CODES OF BEHAVIOR

"The Destructors" not only depicts class difference and conflict between the Wormsley Common Gang and Mr. Thomas, but also probes deeper to examine

the codes of behavior that drive the way the boys of the gang and Mr. Thomas think and act.

Mr. Thomas believes in a world of rigid hierarchies, in which the lower class should naturally show deference to their "betters" in the upper class, and the upper class should, in turn, patronize the lower class and show it a certain amount of (condescending) kindness. He also sees the young as bound to treat their elders with respect. He believes in a world of tradition, order, and propriety, in which the social niceties are followed. He sums up his way of seeing the world when he

explains to T. that he wants the boys to respectfully ask him before entering his property, saying, "sometimes I like company. Only it's got to be regular. One of you asks leave and I say Yes."

The boys' code of behavior differs in a variety of ways from Mr. Thomas's. The boys value strength and courage and constantly assess whether each other's actions embody these traits. Their code is also hostile to tradition and disapproves of any statement that could be construed as showing respect as to a superior. They are especially interested in finding new ways to challenge the old order, which is why T.'s plan to destroy Mr. Thomas's house establishes him as their leader. The gang is also focused on success, power, and reputation, considering their actions based on how they will impact their own individual status within the gang and their gang's ability to earn fame and the respect of other gangs. This code of behavior seems derived from the experience of growing up in the aftermath of the war, a time in London when scarcity and chaos forced competition and struggle, and when relying on the codes established before the war would have left one without the skills needed to survive.

The interactions between the gang and Mr. Thomas, then, present a clash of codes, or pre-war and post-war ways of seeing the world. In some cases, this clash produces humorous misunderstandings, as when Mr. Thomas sees himself as benevolently giving some young lower-class boys a treat, but they interpret his gift of chocolates as a bribe. The story also shows, however, how Mr. Thomas's code makes him obsolete and blind to reality. For instance, when T. asks to see Mr. Thomas's house, the old man obliges, never suspecting that the boy could be motivated by anything but respectful curiosity. Mr. Thomas's blindness to the attributes needed to survive in the reshaped post-war world, founded on his now-obsolete code, is what allows the boys to destroy his home. When the lorry driver laughs at Mr. Thomas at the story's end, we see that he shares the gang's ethos and its belief that those with out of date codes deserve to have their connections to the past swept away.



### MONEY AND THE VALUE OF THINGS

"The Destructors" focuses particularly on the clash between the pre-war and post-war generations in their relationships to money and material

possessions. Perhaps in part because the boys of the gang have grown up during a time of shortage, they have little respect for money or things. They avoid stealing because they think it will end with them going to jail, but also because they see it as beneath them to obsess over and covet material things. They would rather sneak rides on public transportation than shoplift, for instance. This is because of their sense that material objects are corrupting, and can be used by the powerful to control the less powerful. And so, when Mr. Thomas offers them chocolates, they interpret it not as a gift but as a bribe.

Mr. Thomas, by contrast, cares deeply about his possessions and has a penchant for hoarding his money. He prizes his house, but cares too deeply about saving money to fix its plumbing and must, therefore, use an outdoor **lavatory**. This demonstrates that he is more concerned with what money and possessions symbolize than with their functional purposes. He would rather have a home that symbolizes his class affiliation than a comfortable and functional home in which to live.

T., though, takes the boys' irreverence for material objects to a different level. Rather than ignore the world of material things, T. seeks to destroy it. The story implies that the strength of T.'s antipathy for things arises from his family situation. T.'s family has fallen on hard times. His father, who used to be an architect, has had to take a far less prestigious job as a clerk and, presumably, to move his family into the working-class neighborhood where the boys in the gang live and where T.'s mother feels out of place. When T. tells Blackie that hate and love are "soft" and "hoey" and that there are "only things," the story suggests that conflict over the loss of possessions and wealth may make T.'s family life unhappy, leading him to believe that there is no such thing as love between people. When he finds Mr. Thomas's money, he responds with disdain to Blackie's inquiry as to whether he intends to steal it. For T., burning the money is a celebratory act that allows him to feel liberated from the fixation on material possessions that dominates his home life.

The focus the other boys bring to the task of destroying the house indicates that, perhaps without their even knowing it, they share T.'s deep-seated disgust for material things. Similarly, the lorry driver's uncontrolled laughter in response to the home's destruction reflects a wider societal resentment for material things. Although the destruction of the war has swept away many of the distinctions between the classes, so long as people like Mr. Thomas have and treasure their beautiful, old relics, pre-war class divisions and codes of behavior still have some hold on the present.



### ADOLESCENCE, AGE, AND REBELLION

The members of the Wormsley Common Gang are boys ranging in age from nine to fifteen years old.

Mike is still a child, while T. and Blackie are just a few years into their teens. As such, there is little surprise in the boys' rebellious antics. They have little respect for the world around them – a world blown apart by a war that shaped their society but which they don't remember – and so in search of fun and fame from rival gangs they pull pranks such as stealing rides on buses. The boys' rebellions are general and undirected and, for a young boy like Mike, even the destruction of Mr. Thomas's house is just another prank to carry out with gusto.

In the character of T., though, the story explores a different, more pointed sort of rebellion. In the past, both T.'s father and Mr. Thomas worked to build houses – T.'s father as an architect,

and Mr. Thomas in the slightly less prestigious profession of builder and decorator. By destroying the house, T. rebels against his father, who pointed its architectural importance out to T., and against what his father holds to be important. Although destroying an old man's home and possessions is a cruel act, T. is not motivated by cruelty, as is made clear when he thinks of Mr. Thomas's comfort after locking him in the **lavatory** and brings him food and a blanket. Instead the story ties the plan to destroy the house directly to T.'s upbringing, describing it as having "been with him all his life, pondered through the seasons, now in his fifteenth year crystallized with the pain of puberty." This strengthens the impression that T. sees destroying the house as an act of rebellion against the world of his family.

The connection between rebellion, adolescence, and aging is clearly drawn in the scene when T. and Blackie burn Mr. Thomas's life savings and "the grey ash floated above them and fell on their heads like age." This image ties the burning of the money directly to the gray-haired elders whose values T. seeks to flout. And yet it also implies that this act of rebellion will have an impact on the boys themselves. Although it happens outside the confines of the story, Blackie, T. and the rest of the gang are also, inevitably, growing older themselves. There may come a day when they realize the monstrousness of their act towards a weak, elderly man. There may even come a day when they themselves are old, and the things that they have built or cherished are dismissed and destroyed by a younger generation.

The story also employs shifts in perspective to deepen its portrayal of youthful rebellion. When Mr. Thomas is locked in the lavatory, the story is told from his perspective. He feels "dithery and confused and old," sitting on the lavatory "loo" and contemplating his situation "with the wisdom of age." The image of Mr. Thomas sitting on the toilet seems to mock the "the wisdom of age" as nothing more than the realization that one can do little to change the world (or even to escape a locked lavatory). Simultaneously though, the image shows us how cruel what the boys are doing to Mr. Thomas is. With the energy of youth, they cannot fathom Mr. Thomas's discomfort as he sits in a damp, cold lavatory, nor do they consider the horrible injury they are doing him by destroying all that he has left in the world. Yet in its final scene the story shifts to track the actions of the adult lorry driver, who inadvertently pulls down Mr. Thomas's house and then laughs despite Mr. Thomas's obvious distress. This cruel laughter is shocking, but also shows that the British society portrayed in the story is itself going through a kind of adolescence, moving away from the rules that governed it in the past, but still lacking a clear moral compass and sense of right and wrong.



## DESTRUCTION AND CREATION

The idea that destruction is a form of creation is drawn from the section of the story describing the end of the boys' first day destroying Mr. Thomas's house. The mood of the narration becomes distinctly philosophical in its description of the boys: "they worked with the seriousness of creators – and destruction after all is a form of creation. A kind of imagination had seen this house as it had now become." The creative elements of destruction are expressed in several ways throughout the story.

First, the story points out that the **sounds of destruction** closely resemble the sounds of creation. While he is trapped in the **lavatory**, Mr. Thomas, who used to work supervising the building of homes, mistakes the sounds coming from his house for those produced by carpenters at work building a home.

Outside of the action taking place on Mr. Thomas's property, the story is set on an empty parking lot created when bombs destroyed the houses that stood there prior to the war. The destruction of Mr. Thomas's house expands the lot in which the boys meet daily, creating a larger gathering space for public use in a space where a private residence stood before.

Similarly, the social environment of the story was created through the destruction of the war. All the boys, but especially T., is a product of the new kinds of thinking that replaced the old social and political frameworks after the war. The boys operate democratically and, under T.'s influence, organize themselves so that their labor is as powerful and efficient as possible. These priorities reflect the political climate in England after war, when the Labour Party won an election for the first time on a platform appealing to common people and workers. The boys' language, then, reflects the destruction of old class definitions and the political struggle then going on. England as a whole, and the Wormsley Common Gang in particular, hopes that the destruction wrought by the war will pave the way for new groups to assert their political rights for the first time.

Yet the story leaves it entirely to the reader's imagination how the boys' destruction of Mr. Thomas's house will impact each character's future. T., for instance, has allowed himself to be seen by Mr. Thomas so that he could lead him to the lavatory and trap him there. It seems likely, then, that T. will be caught and punished, entailing that this act of destruction creates a new reputation for him that will change the way the world sees him, and perhaps the way he sees himself. As the other boys grow up, they will need to think of new ways to understand the cruel act that they committed when still boys. It is Mr. Thomas's fate which may be the exception that proves the rule. It seems likely that the destruction of his home, all his possessions and his life savings may prove to be a disaster that he cannot weather. Far from creating the next chapter in his life, this destruction may very well prove to be the blow that destroys him entirely. Destruction can be a force of creation in that it

creates a blank slate upon which new things – whether parking lots or political movements – can grow. Yet destruction becomes an act of creation only for individuals and societies young and innovative enough to move forward and build something new out of the rubble.



## SYMBOLS

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



### TOP HAT

**Top hats** in the story symbolize the obsolete values of the upper class in post-WW2-England, and the mocking attitude of the formerly lower class towards those upper class values. The top hat is an outdated, impractical affectation. Rather than keeping the head warm, top hats show that their wearers know the rules of formalwear, a kind of knowledge which has little value in the new more meritocratic world of post-war England. To the lower classes newly empowered by the destruction of the old order, the top hat's tall, conical shape is a sign of unearned privilege and undeserved prestige, and seems to beg to be mocked or even knocked off the wearer's head. Or, in the case of a house like Mr. Thomas's that resembles a top hat, pulled down and destroyed.



### MR. THOMAS'S LAVATORY

Mr. Thomas's **lavatory** is another symbol of the impracticality of the upper classes and their tendency to cling to obsolete things and values. Mr. Thomas's training as a decorator means he can take care of his house, but he lacks the skills of a plumber because that was a profession for a man of a lower class. Mr. Thomas would rather undergo the inconvenience of going outside to use the bathroom than pay to make his plumbing functional again. Using the outdoor toilet, Mr. Thomas clings to a history that precedes his birth, back when Christopher Wren built the house in the 1700s and modern indoor plumbing was not yet available. Rather than value his house as a convenient and comfortable place to live, Mr. Thomas appreciates the way that it ties him to the past, when the rules of class were still unchallenged. The fact that Mr. Thomas is locked in his lavatory during his home's destruction further suggests that this attempt to cling to vestiges of the past is futile and self-defeating.



### SOUNDS OF DESTRUCTION

Sounds of destruction in the story symbolize awareness and ability to adapt. Throughout the

text, hearing and understanding the meaning of the sounds of destruction signifies a character's ability to move forward from that destruction and to create and master the new world that will replace the old. Blackie's claim to have heard the bombs destroy the houses that had stood in the lot before the Blitz is his way of showing that he has understood and helped create the world in which he lives (even if he couldn't possibly remember having heard the bombs because he was just a baby). On the other hand, Mr. Thomas's inability to correctly interpret the sounds he hears while he is locked in the lavatory – he thinks the sounds of his house being destroyed sounds like carpenter's building something – symbolizes his inability to grapple with the world as it is, to let go of what has been lost and to build something new in its place.

T. is not a normal boy though. He impresses the gang with his unusual and dangerous-seeming silence and with his apparent indifference to what they think about him or his name. His personal qualities allow him to be accepted into the group without going through any process of hazing or humiliation, which it seems the gang usually inflicts on new members.

●● The gang met every morning in an impromptu car-park, the site of the last bomb of the first blitz. The leader, who was known as Blackie, claimed to have heard it fall, and no one was precise enough in his dates to point out that he would have been one year old and fast asleep on the down platform of Wormsley Common Underground Station.

**Related Characters:** Blackie

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 7

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the story's setting and situates the action in its historical moment. The story takes place in Northwood Terrace, a London housing development that was ruined during the Second World War. During the war the German enemy conducted a series of massive bombing campaigns that were called blitzes (from the word Blitzkrieg, or "lightning strike" in German). These attacks destroyed over a million buildings in London. The action unfolds after the war has long been over, but the physical damage done to London is still visible all over the city. The characters meet daily in a parking lot that was created after the rubble from the ruined bombed-out houses had been carted away. That this public place was created by the destruction of private space mirrors what the boys themselves will ultimately do to Mr. Thomas's house.

The quote also introduces another of the story's protagonists, Blackie, who is the leader of the gang until his place gets usurped by T. Blackie pretends to remember the sound of the bombing, which makes him seem knowledgeable and experienced to the other boys. This is the first time that the story draws a connection between a character's ability to hear and interpret the sounds of destruction and the character's ability to adapt and thrive in a changing world.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Twenty-One Stories* published in 1993.

### Part 1 Quotes

●● There was every reason why T., as he was afterwards referred to, should have been an object of mockery - there was his name (and they substituted the initial because otherwise they had no excuse not to laugh at it), the fact that his father, a former architect and present clerk, had 'come down in the world' and that his mother considered herself better than the neighbours. What but an odd quality of danger, of the unpredictable, established him in the gang without any ignoble ceremony of initiation?

**Related Characters:** Trevor, or "T."

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 7

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage near the start of the story gives a sense of the Wormsley Common Gang's class concerns and their code of behavior, while also describing T.'s background and personality.

The boys are turned off by the name Trevor, a name that none of their parents would have given them, and which marks T. out as someone born into a higher class than the rest of them. Usually, the boys mock all things that symbolize the upper class for them, and they clearly disdain T.'s mother who does not fit in among their mothers.

●● He was just, he had no jealousy, he was anxious to retain T. in the gang if he could. It was the word 'beautiful' that worried him - that belonged to a class world that you could still see parodied at the Wormsley Common Empire by a man wearing a top hat and a monocle, with a haw-haw accent. He was tempted to say, 'My dear Trevor, old chap,' and unleash his hell hounds.

**Related Characters:** Trevor, or "T.", Blackie

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 10

### Explanation and Analysis

T. has arrived late to the lot for the day and told the gang about his impromptu visit and tour of Mr. Thomas's house. Blackie tries to convince himself that he is not jealous, but he likely did feel some threat to his authority in the gang after the introduction of this mysterious new member.

At this moment he is trying to make sense of T.'s strange action. In particular, he must assess whether T.'s behavior fits with the group's code, which calls for the pulling of provocative pranks that challenge authority. T.'s visit to Mr. Thomas, and especially his description of Mr. Thomas's house as beautiful, seems to be a respectful show of homage to the old man and his home. Further, if T. is impressed by this old house, it suggests to Blackie that T.'s beliefs about class are admiring of the old, pre-war class order, and thus out-of-step with the gang's.

●● T. was giving his orders with decision: it was as though this plan had been with him all his life, pondered through the seasons, now in his fifteenth year crystallized with the pain of puberty.

**Related Characters:** Trevor, or "T."

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 12

### Explanation and Analysis

Blackie finds this scene when he walks back to the group after going off by himself to a different corner of the parking lot to consider T.'s plan and the fact that the rest of the gang has suddenly accepted T.'s authority over Blackie's. He comes back to find that T.'s personality and way of carrying

himself have altered. During the weeks since T. entered the gang when he hardly spoke at all, it seems he was brooding and thinking up a way to rebel with special resonance for him. He is brought to life and confidence by this plan to destroy the old architectural gem that his father pointed out to him as special. The plan is tied to the "pain of puberty" which suggests it is part of the process by which T. will prove his independence from his parents and their beliefs, including their belief in status symbols like Old Misery's house.

## Part 2 Quotes

●● The dining-room was stripped of parquet, the skirting was up, the door had been taken off its hinge, and the destroyers had moved up a floor. Streaks of light came in through the closed shutters where they worked with the seriousness of creators - and destruction after all is a form of creation. A kind of imagination had seen this house as it had now become.

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 15

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage explicitly ties destruction to creation. The boys are deliberate, sticking to T.'s master plan for the destruction of the house. But what exactly is being created? This is a question to keep in mind while reading the rest of the story. For one, the social connection between the boys is altered, as the seriousness T. brings to the endeavor spreads to the rest of the gang. The boys are having the experience of organizing their labor, something that all of England was then experiencing with the rise of the Labour Party following the Second World War. Secondly, this act of destruction will also likely expand the size of the parking lot where the boys of the Wormsley Common Gang meet. Finally, this destruction will impact the characters' lives in the future not portrayed within the confines of the story.

●● 'Of course I don't hate him,' T. said. 'There'd be no fun if I hated him.' The last burning note illuminated his brooding face. 'All this hate and love,' he said, 'it's soft, it's hoey. There's only things, Blackie,' and he looked round the room crowded with the unfamiliar shadows of half things, broken things, former things. 'I'll race you home, Blackie,' he said.

**Related Characters:** Trevor, or "T." (speaker), Mr. Thomas,

or “Old Misery”, Blackie

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 16

### Explanation and Analysis

Blackie and T. remain at Mr. Thomas’s house on the first day of destruction after the others leave. T. has Mr. Thomas’s savings and the two boys set about burning each bank note. Blackie probes T. and, wanting to understand T.’s motivation for destroying Mr. Thomas’s house, asks T. if he hates the old man. T. denies any personal dislike for Mr. Thomas and even denies that such emotional connections like hate and love are real. For T., burning the money is a celebratory act. Burning the money and looking around the room at all the things that the gang has already destroyed puts T. in an innocent and playful mood, and he challenges Blackie to race him home. This seems further to tie this act of adolescent rebellion to the unhappy fixation on material possessions that has (the story implies, but never shows) dominated T.’s home life since his parents’ loss of money and status.

## Part 3 Quotes

☝☝ ‘Oh no, we haven’t. Anybody could do this -’ ‘this’ was the shattered hollowed house with nothing left but the walls. Yet walls could be preserved. Facades were valuable. They could build inside again more beautifully than before. This could again be a home. He said angrily, ‘We’ve got to finish. Don’t move. Let me think.’

**Related Characters:** Trevor, or “T.” (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 17

### Explanation and Analysis

Mike has warned the gang that Mr. Thomas has come home early from his vacation and will soon arrive. The other boys, especially Summers, want to give up on completing the total destruction of the house to avoid being caught, but T. is determined to finish. He wants to strip the house of any value as a material possession and make certain it can never be used as a home again. For destruction to be a kind of creation, it must be carried out as it was envisioned and completed. If the house is not utterly demolished, then the damages to it may be repaired, and no new thing will come

to be created in the space where it once stood.

☝☝ T. stood with his back to the rubble like a boxer knocked groggy against the ropes. He had no words as his dreams shook and slid. Then Blackie acted before the gang had time to laugh, pushing Summers backward. ‘I’ll watch the front, T.’ he said, and cautiously he opened the shutters of the hall.

**Related Characters:** Blackie (speaker), Trevor, or “T.”, Summers

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 18

### Explanation and Analysis

Summers, who wants the boys to flee the scene before Mr. Thomas arrives, has just undermined T. by using his full first name. T. has been a confident leader since proposing his plan, but now seems rapidly to transform back into the silent, brooding figure that the gang first met at the beginning of the summer. At this moment, Blackie takes back his position as leader by boldly, spontaneously throwing his support behind T. and physically shoving Summers. Throughout the story Blackie’s feelings towards T. have evolved from suspicion to jealousy and now, finally, to loyalty. The boy’s code of behavior views Blackie’s act of physical aggression as trumping Summers’s attempt to mock T., and so the boys fall in line and follow Blackie in his support for T.

It is worth considering what motivates Blackie’s loyalty, though. While it might be that he feels loyalty to T. after their conversation while burning Mr. Thomas’s money, it seems perhaps even more likely that Blackie has grown loyal not so much to T. as to T.’s plan. Blackie, after all, now understands how the destruction of the house is a more profound form of rebellion than anything the gang has done before. And, further, Blackie recognizes that in completing the job that the gang is likely to gain respect from other gangs. Blackie’s loyalty to the plan, then, shows his loyalty to the gang and its prospects, and his belief in the meritocratic success-based world. He supports the plan because he thinks the plan will bring the gang, and him personally, success.

●● He said to the boy beside him, 'I'm not unreasonable. Been a boy myself. As long as things are done regular. I don't mind you playing round the place Saturday mornings. Sometimes I like company. Only it's got to be regular. One of you asks leave and I say Yes. Sometimes I'll say No. Won't feel like it. And you come in at the front door and out at the back. No garden walls.'

**Related Characters:** Mr. Thomas, or "Old Misery" (speaker), Trevor, or "T."

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Thomas is being led by T. to the outdoor lavatory, where T. tells him one of the boys has gotten trapped. Although Mr. Thomas is indignant at the boys coming onto his property without permission, he maintains a firm but kind tone, in keeping with his code of behavior. This code sees those in the upper classes as superior and in charge of setting the rules, but it also requires that they show benevolence to those younger and lower class.

In the eyes of the reader, who knows how much control Mr. Thomas has already lost over what happens on his property, this speech is ridiculous. Mr. Thomas and the well-mannered, hierarchical code of behavior that he represents are utterly obsolete.

Mr. Thomas also seems to relate to the boys, recalling his own adolescence. This only serves to emphasize the distance the boys see between themselves and an old man like Mr. Thomas. To them, he has never been a boy, and they themselves will never be like him.

●● After a while it seemed to him that there were sounds in the silence – they were faint and came from the direction of his house. He stood up and peered through the ventilation-hole – between the cracks in one of the shutters he saw a light, not the light of a lamp, but the wavering light that a candle might give. Then he thought he heard the sound of hammering and scraping and chipping. He thought of burglars - perhaps they had employed the boy as a scout, but why should burglars engage in what sounded more and more like a stealthy form of carpentry?

**Related Characters:** Mr. Thomas, or "Old Misery"

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 20-21

### Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Thomas's out-of-date expectations for how people will act and how the world works have given the boys the means to trick and trap him in his outdoor lavatory. Now he is listening to the sounds coming from inside his house and trying to understand their significance. His professional background as a builder prepared him to hear the noises tools produce and interpret those noises are the sounds of something being created, never considering that they could also be used to destroy. This failure of the imagination is the result of his proud dedication to the traditional. He has no conception of why anyone might want to destroy a house, because he doesn't share the deep resentment harbored among many in England towards the symbols of the past.

## Part 4 Quotes

●● 'I'm sorry,' the driver said, making heroic efforts, but when he remembered the sudden check of his lorry, the crash of bricks falling, he became convulsed again. One moment the house had stood there with such dignity between the bomb-sites like a man in a top hat, and then, bang, crash, there wasn't anything left - not anything. He said, 'I'm sorry. I can't help it. Mr. Thomas. There's nothing personal, but you got to admit it's funny.'

**Related Characters:** The lorry driver (speaker), Mr. Thomas, or "Old Misery"

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 22-23

### Explanation and Analysis

The driver has just freed Mr. Thomas from the lavatory, and now Mr. Thomas is seeing what has become of his house for the first time. Mr. Thomas is furious that the driver is laughing at his misfortune. When the driver says his laughter "isn't personal," that suggests that, like T., he does not hate Mr. Thomas or want to be cruel to him. Instead, the symbolic power of the house is so strong that the thrill of seeing it destroyed is enough to make both T. and the lorry driver forget that this destruction will have grave consequences for Mr. Thomas.

The lorry driver's laughter also shows that the idea to destroy the house does not only hold appeal for rebellious adolescents. As the comparison to a man in a top hat illustrates, the house is a symbol of the rigid and now obsolete class structure of England's past. For the lorry driver, who comes from the lower class, this house's destruction represents a process going on throughout post-

war British society. The relationship between different British classes is being transformed, and British society is becoming more egalitarian. But before this new world can be created, the old one symbolized by houses like Mr. Thomas's must be destroyed. In a sense, the lorry driver is part of an entire society that is going through a kind of adolescence.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

## PART 1

The story begins on the eve of a three-day weekend, when the newest member of a group of tough young boys who call themselves the Wormsley Common Gang becomes its leader. Mike, who is nine and constantly struggles to conceal how many things he finds surprising, is the only one who finds this change surprising.

A boy named Trevor, whose father used to be an architect but whose parents have lost their position in society, is the gang's newest member. Usually the boys would make fun of the name Trevor, but instead, because the menacing way he carries himself inspires their respect, they call the new boy "T." and allow him to enter the group without going through any humiliating process of induction.

The boys gather daily in a parking lot created when bombs destroyed many of the houses that used to stand in the space. Their leader up until the events narrated in the story is a boy named Blackie, who claims to have heard the **sound of destruction** when the bombs fall even though he would have been too young to remember it. On the edge of the lot, one house that survived the war still stands, although it was damaged and is propped up by wooden struts.

T. surprises the group when he breaks his customary silence to tell them that his father, a former architect, told him that the remaining house was designed by the important English architect Christopher Wren, but Blackie responds to this information with scorn.

This house is owned by Mr. Thomas, an elderly, solitary man who used to be a builder and decorator and whom the boys derisively call "Old Misery." The plumbing has been ruined in his house and he won't spend the money for the repairs, so he must go outside to use the toilet in an outdoor **lavatory**. On one occasion, Old Misery looks over the wall at the boys as they play.

*"The Destructors" explores the world of a group of young adolescent and pre-adolescent boys. Mike's character reminds us that the boys in the gang are trying to discard childish innocence in favor of a bold, independent code of behavior respected by their peers (but that they still are children).*



*The boys disdain the upper class, but see qualities in the higher-class T. that raise him in their esteem. Their code of behavior is meritocratic and values toughness, which T. projects by never trying to please others or apologize for anything. T.'s upper class roots, meanwhile, are important for understanding his character as the story progresses.*



*The setting of the story is a public space that was created through the destruction of private spaces (houses) by bombs dropped during the war. This shows that destruction can create new physical realities and in doing so set the stage for a more equal society. Blackie's claim to remember hearing the destruction symbolizes his claim to have mastery over the present world that that destruction created.*



*Blackie suspects that T. is breaking the group's code by expressing respect for the tradition of British architecture that goes back to the pre-war time when class differences were of paramount importance.*



*Mr. Thomas comes from the pre-war world of rigid class distinctions. He would rather hoard his money than fix his plumbing, because he values his home and money more for what they represent as a material possession suggestive of class status than for their functionality. Looking at the boys, he reminisces about his own youth.*



Another day Old Misery sees three of the boys on the common and gives them some chocolates, although he remarks that there may not be enough for all of them. The boys are puzzled by this gesture and a boy named Summers suggests that Old Misery is trying to bribe them, so the boys decide to bounce balls off his house to annoy him.

*Old Misery sees giving the boys chocolates as an act of kindness towards a group of poor boys, while the boys assume this gift has ulterior motives. This interaction represents a clash between pre- and post-war class understandings and codes of behavior, in which the post-war boys instinctually view material possessions as corrupting forces designed to maintain the status quo and keep the upper class in power (though the boys themselves probably wouldn't be able to explain their skepticism in this way).*



The next day T. arrives late to the lot, after the rest of the boys have already put an idea for their day's prank to a vote. They have decided to split into pairs and see who can sneak past the most bus drivers to steal free rides. Blackie interrogates T. about where he has been and it slowly comes out that T. has visited Old Misery and toured the old man's home. Blackie wants to understand T.'s motives for visiting Old Misery, and thinks that the group may need to ostracize T., if his actions are not worthy of the gang. T. uses the word "beautiful" to describe the house, which puts Blackie in mind of a parody of an upper class man in a **top hat** that he has seen at a nearby variety show.

*The boy's practice of voting on each day's activity reflects their belief in a society with a much more egalitarian political and social structure. In this context, Blackie dislikes the idea that T. may be giving respect to things representing pre-war society and its class divisions, especially because of T.'s use of the word "beautiful," a word that focuses on aesthetics (something only the upper class can afford to think about) rather than functionality. That the word "beautiful" puts Blackie in mind of a parody of a pretentious upper-class gent in a top hat also establishes top hats more generally as symbolizing the obsolete and ineffective upper class in the post-war world.*



T. reveals that he has a plan for a prank that will surpass all the gang's past exploits in daring: he wants to destroy Old Misery's house while the old man is out of town for the three-day weekend. Blackie raises objections to this plan, saying that they could be sent to prison, but T. assures him they would not steal anything, and Summers interjects that he's never heard of anyone going to jail for breaking things. T. also says the boys can organize to efficiently get the enormous job of the destruction done. Eventually, the gang puts T.'s plan to a vote and decides to carry it out.

*The boys' code of behavior favors pranks that challenge the traditional in shocking acts of rebellion. This is partially because they are adolescents acting out against the world as they find it. They are all well-aware of the consequences of stealing, and look down upon it as a dishonorable act that subscribes too heavily to belief in the value of things.*



Blackie walks away to ruminate on this sudden turn of events: he sees that T. has replaced him as the leader of the gang. At first he considers abandoning the gang entirely, hoping that they will learn that T.'s plan is actually impossible. But then he thinks the plan over and returns to the group, having decided that if the plan proves possible to execute it would burnish the gang's reputation around London.

*Although he is shocked and jealous at T.'s ascension to lead the group, Blackie sees that T.'s proposal involves the kind of bravery, daring and anti-traditional motivation that he must respect, especially if it will add to the status of the group around London. Blackie's thought process here – in a moment of trauma – reveals that he really does believe in meritocracy, in rewarding and following those who prove themselves successful (as opposed to the old pre-war class system which was based entirely on what class a person was born into).*



T., who suddenly seems to be filled with confidence and leadership skill, instructs the boys to bring tools for the destruction the next day. Blackie promises to borrow a sledgehammer from the storage space of some construction workers, while Mike is told to come after he gets out of church and whistle to be let in. Once each boy has his assignment, they disperse, promising to meet the next day.

*The boys organize to get the task done, showing that this act of destruction will forge new social bonds within the group. The sledgehammer, which is usually used by construction workers building a house but that Blackie will take to destroy one, also links the processes of creation and destruction.*



## PART 2

The next day, Blackie has difficulty locating the tools he has promised to bring, and arrives late. The weather is changing, and it looks like it will rain that day or the next. The house seems abandoned as he approaches it and he wonders if the gang has given up on T.'s idea. But once he comes close, he can hear the **sounds of destruction** going on inside.

*Blackie's initial inability to hear the destruction is connected to his disbelief at the sudden shift that saw an end to his leadership. Properly interpreting the sounds of destruction symbolizes an understanding of the order of things.*



Walking through the house, Blackie notices how methodically the boys are working to destroy everything from the floors to the banisters, while leaving the walls intact. T. is the only one not working, he is sitting in the non-functioning bathroom listening to the **sounds of the destruction**. T. instructs Blackie to destroy the bathroom, while also giving Mike new instructions to take everything out of the drawers and cabinets and destroy it, hacking into anything that's locked. When Blackie asks T. what he will do himself, he replies that he is looking for something special to do.

*The boys are organized, deliberate and focused in their destruction, all qualities usually attributed to creators. Meanwhile, T. is sitting in the bathroom doing nothing. He may be reflecting on the meaning of this rebellion for him in the context of his family's lost class status and the priorities of his parents that have made his own home an unhappy one. (Though it is also interesting how those in leadership roles often end up not actually "doing the work," which lightly hints that class divisions between those in power and those not are natural aspects of human society.)*



As the morning progresses the boys move from the first to the second floor, and after sitting amidst the ruins eating unappealing sandwiches for lunch, they finish all the superficial damage to the floors, doors and furniture in the house. They agree to meet at eight the next morning, and everyone except Blackie and T. hops over the garden wall and goes home.

*Once again, the story emphasizes the boys' organization and focus, qualities accompanying destruction that resemble those usually attributed to creation. The destruction is also forging new social bonds between them.*



T. shows Blackie the special thing he has found: seventy one-pound notes that Mike overlooked when he shredded Old Misery's mattress. Blackie asks T. if he intends to share the money among the members of the gang, to which T. scornfully responds that they aren't thieves.

*This is the only private moment between two boys from the gang and it deepens the understanding and friendship between T. and Blackie. T also affirms that his code of behavior is against stealing.*



Instead, T. says that he and Blackie should burn the notes as a celebration. They burn the notes one by one as gray ash “falls on their heads like age.” Blackie asks T. whether he hates Old Misery, but T. says that hate and love aren’t real, and all that matters are things. Blackie and T. leave the house and race each other home.

*Although T. only states what does not motivate him – he is not a thief and does not hate Mr. Thomas – he considers burning money to be a celebration and says that things are all that matter. This suggests that T.’s rebellion targets the value placed on money and material possessions. The image of the ash turning the two boys’ young heads gray, meanwhile, focuses attention on their age and on the age of the elderly man their destruction may impoverish. The ash, which as a residue of fire symbolizes destruction, also shows how destruction alters the things around it and creates the world that will replace what is being destroyed. That the ash is settling on the boys’ heads subtly suggests that they too will be affected in some way by their actions – whether they’ll eventually feel guilt for what they’ve done or experience some similar kind of loss in their old age. The boy’s carefree, immature childishness in racing home after this stunning act again highlights their youth and immaturity, and by extension how little they understand the impact of what they are doing on either Mr. Thomas or themselves.*



### PART 3

The next day the boys assemble to continue the destruction, but Mike and another boy are not able to come. Rain begins to fall and thunder **sounds**. Summers has become bored and wants to go play on the slot machines, but T. tells him that they are nowhere near finished. The next step is to get each floor of the house to collapse. They make mistakes, like forgetting to remove the windows on some of the lower floors before they remove each floor. Then they turn on the water, which pours down the stairs and through the hollowed-out house.

*The sound of the thunder refers back to the war, when bombs destroyed the neighborhood, while the rain outside is mirrored by the water pouring through the house as the boys flood it. This chain of associations ties the destruction of Mr. Thomas’s house to the destruction of the war, and makes the reader wonder what will happen when the destruction ends.*



At that moment, they hear a whistle. Mike has run away from his mother to let them know that he has seen Old Misery returning early from his holiday due to the rain. Summers says they ought to run away before they get caught, and the rest of the boys seem to agree, but T. is adamant that they finish destroying the house. He says two boys should run to guard the front and back of the house, but he no longer projects certainty and the boys seem about to begin to ignore his commands. Summers begins to mock him, even using his full name “Trevor.” But before the gang has time to laugh, Blackie throws his support behind T. by shoving Summers and volunteering to watch the front of the house. Mike is told to go stand near Old Misery’s **lavatory** and yell.

*Mike, although young, is doing his best to show the bravery and dedication to the group called for by their code of behavior. At the same time, Summers uses the boys’ derision for the upper classes to undermine T.. Blackie, who has become closer to T. after their shared experience of burning of the money and who recognizes that T.’s audacious plan might lead to widespread respect for the gang, steps in and influences the other boys to remain loyal to T.*



Old Misery slowly approaches his house, stopping to wipe mud off his shoes before he enters, because he wants to keep his house clean. He hears a whistle and looks around in suspicion. Then a boy runs out and calls to him. The boy tells Old Misery that another boy is trapped inside the outdoor lavatory.

Mr. Thomas is indignant that his property has been broken into, but realizes he recognizes T. from when he showed the boy around his house. T. hurries Mr. Thomas, who can hear the cries of the boy supposedly locked in the **lavatory**. By rushing him along, T. gets the old man to climb over his own garden wall, first climbing over it himself, then grabbing the man's travel bag and helping him over the wall.

Mr. Thomas stumbles, but T. catches him and Mr. Thomas automatically thanks T. Mr. Thomas tells T. that he likes company, but there are certain rules that ought to be followed before the boys can come onto his property, that the boys have to ask permission first and then come only if Mr. Thomas says they can. As they move through the garden together, Mr. Thomas complains of his rheumatism, and says that he is afraid to trip on the path because his horoscope for the week had told him to beware of a serious crash.

Arriving at the outdoor **lavatory**, Mr. Thomas asks what is wrong, but receives no reply from the boy inside. T. suggests that the boy may have fainted, and Mr. Thomas yanks open the door. He is then shoved into the lavatory and locked in. He calls to be let out, but is told to stay quiet and that he won't be harmed. Mr. Thomas realizes that there is no use in yelling, because it is unlikely that anyone would be nearby enough to hear him, or respond to his cries if they did. He feels old and helpless. After a bit, Mr. Thomas hears **sounds** coming from his house and, peering out through a hole, can see light inside his house. He thinks the sounds resemble the noises made by carpenters. Mr. Thomas yells one more time, but realizes he won't be heard.

*Old Misery's careful attempt to prevent getting his house muddy makes him ridiculous in the eyes of the reader, who knows there is little left of the house to keep clean. This emphasizes the impracticality and obsolescence of Mr. Thomas's dedication to material possessions and to the class status they represent.*



*Mr. Thomas places trust in T. because an obsolete code of behavior guides his expectations. He believes that T. will respect his age and the status that he gets by owning such a fine house.*



*Mr. Thomas's lecture to T. shows that he does not recognize the deep divide between himself and these boys who have grown up with a post-war code of behavior. This makes him look ridiculous. And yet when Mr. Thomas stumbles on the path and worries about the crash predicted by his horoscope, the sharp contrast between his old man's frailty and T.'s fearlessness heightens the sense that what T. has led the boys in doing to him is cruel. The story successfully treads a fine line in portraying Mr. Thomas and his old ideas about class as being obsolete and having to be swept away while also capturing the cruelty, sadness, and personal loss of that destruction.*



*Mr. Thomas's obsolete perspective on the world seems to have completely let him down. His outdated code of behavior led him to trust a boy who has then tricked him and locked him into his own outdated outhouse. The impracticality of Mr. Thomas's relationship to money, which he saved instead of using it to fix his indoor bathroom, is another sign of his obsolescence. Finally, he is unable to decipher what the sounds could be coming from, which suggests he will not be able to create something new to replace what the boys are destroying.*



## PART 4

The boys finish preparing for the house's destruction by chiseling away so at one point in the wall the house is balanced on just a few narrow inches of mortar. The boys then complete the most dangerous part of the job, although it is not made clear what this is. Mr. Thomas **hears** sawing, which he can tell is not coming from inside his house. This reassures him.

One of the boys slips Mr. Thomas a blanket and some food through a hole in the **lavatory** door. Mr. Thomas asks to be let out so he can sleep comfortably, saying he needs to because of his rheumatism. The boy tells him he would no longer be comfortable sleeping in his house, then leaves without providing any further explanation.

The lorry driver comes to the lot to get his lorry early the next morning. He can hear a faint sound of someone shouting, but ignores it. Then he turns on the lorry and backs it up, but when he tries to pull out of the lot it feels as if the lorry is being pulled by something attached to it. Then the lorry moves forward with a huge crashing **sound** and a shower of debris falling all around. The driver gets out to find the house reduced to a pile of rubble, and the back of his lorry tied to a wooden strut.

Now aware of the shouting, the lorry driver goes to the outdoor **lavatory** and lets Mr. Thomas out. Mr. Thomas lets out a sob when he sees the destruction and asks where his house is. The driver begins to laugh, and Mr. Thomas is indignant. But although the driver tries to contain his laughter, he can't help it: the sight of the rubble where just a few minutes before the house had stood "with such dignity between the bomb-sites like a man in a **top hat**" strikes him as hilarious.

*Mr. Thomas allows himself to be reassured by the sounds that the boys make as they arrange for his house's final, irrevocable destruction. This is a further suggestion that the old man lacks the understanding he would need to create a new life out of the destruction that seems about to befall him, and that he does not understand the world he is living in.*



*This boy is presumably T.. By bringing Mr. Thomas the blanket and snack, he proves that he means what he says about not hating Mr. Thomas. Even with this act of kindness, though, T. demonstrates the lack of understanding youth has for age by failing to appreciate how uncomfortable Mr. Thomas will be cooped up in the lavatory all night, and how much more uncomfortable he will be in the future, without a home or money.*



*This section reveals that the boys tied the struts that supported Mr. Thomas's house to the back of the lorry. The lorry driver ignores the sound of Mr. Thomas's shouts, only paying attention after the sounds of destruction have alerted him to their importance.*



*T. said he could not wait to see Mr. Thomas's face when he saw his destroyed house, and so the lorry driver serves as a kind of stand-in for T. in this scene. The driver says his laughter "isn't personal," suggesting that he shares the sentiments of T., who claimed not to hate Mr. Thomas or want to be cruel to him. What he laughs at is the destruction of a house that resembles a man in a top hat and represents to him the rigid class structure of England's past. This shows that the driver, and adults in general who belonged to the formerly "lower classes," also feel themselves to be a part of a group with a code that will help them to reshape their world in the wake of the destruction of the war. It is funny to see the old fall, if you can imagine creating the new in its place.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Levine, Yael. "The Destroyers." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Nov 2016. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Levine, Yael. "The Destroyers." LitCharts LLC, November 30, 2016. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-destroyers>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Destroyers* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Greene, Graham. *The Destroyers*. Penguin Classics. 1993.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Greene, Graham. *The Destroyers*. New York: Penguin Classics. 1993.