

Invisible Cities



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ITALO CALVINO

Calvino was born in 1923 to Italian botanists and agronomists. His father spent time in Mexico before moving to Cuba, and his mother gave Calvino his first name to remind him of his Italian heritage—though Calvino’s family moved back to Europe when Calvino was two years old. His parents were openly derisive of both religion and the ruling National Fascist Party and as such, they exempted Calvino from religious classes at school. During World War II, Calvino enrolled at the University of Turin and then at the University of Florence in their Agriculture departments, hiding his literary interests. He went into hiding rather than join the military, decided that communists had the most convincing argument, and joined the communist Italian Resistance in 1944. Following the war, Calvino returned to Turin, completed a master’s thesis on Joseph Conrad, and became active in communist groups and publications. He began publishing novels and stories to great acclaim in the late 1940s, but his realist novels received poor reviews. After this, he began to write fantastical novels, all of which were well received. He left the Italian Communist Party after the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1957, and though he retained his belief in communism as a concept, he never joined another party. After the death of a close friend and the cultural revolution in France, Calvino went through an “intellectual depression” and joined the Oulipo group of writers. He wrote *Invisible Cities* during this time. Calvino died in 1985 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Marco Polo was born in 1254 and spent much of his life traveling through Asia as a merchant and an explorer. He spent 17 years in China, during which time he developed a good relationship with Kublai Khan, the emperor of the Mongolian Empire. Khan founded the Yuan dynasty and declared himself the Emperor of China, which included much of modern-day China, Korea, and Mongolia. However, *Invisible Cities* is far less concerned with the historical Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, and instead uses these figures as stand-ins for travelers and powerful individuals, respectively. Calvino is far more interested in the expansion of the modern world, the rise of cities and suburbs, and the consequent overcrowding that began during the Industrial Revolution and has continued into the present.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Invisible Cities draws on *The Travels of Marco Polo*, which was

recorded late in the 13th century by Rustichello de Pisa from Polo’s recollections of his travels. Within *Invisible Cities*, Calvino makes direct references to Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, as well as to Guy Debord’s seminal 1967 philosophical work *Society of the Spectacle*, which critiques modern consumer culture and criticizes modern dependence on images to mediate experiences. Calvino wrote his master’s thesis on Joseph Conrad, who is best known for *Heart of Darkness*, and though Conrad wrote in an entirely different style than Calvino, both men focus to a degree on exploration of “new” lands and the consequences of such exploration. Additionally, Calvino was a member of the Oulipo group of writers, founded in 1960, that focused on writing prose and poetry using systems of constrained writing. Constrained writing techniques can include mathematical and cyclical organization of the kind used in *Invisible Cities*, or, as in Georges Perec’s novel *The Void*, using a lipogram (not using one particular letter throughout the novel; in that case, the letter e). In terms of being an investigation of storytelling, *Invisible Cities* is often compared with stories by Jorge Luis Borges (in particular “The Library of Babel”) and several of Samuel Beckett’s novels, including *The Unnamable* and *Malone Dies*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Invisible Cities* (originally published in Italian as *Le città invisibili*)
- **When Written:** 1971
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **When Published:** 1972
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Travel Novel; Philosophical Novel
- **Setting:** Ostensibly Kublai Khan’s court in the Mongol Empire
- **Climax:** Marco Polo admits that he’s talking about Venice
- **Antagonist:** There’s no clear-cut antagonist, but Calvino suggests that what plagues cities are corruption, capitalism, and greed.
- **Point of View:** The conversations between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan are in the third person and in the form of a dramatic script; Polo’s recollections are in first person.

EXTRA CREDIT

Special Privileges. From 1959-1960, Calvino spent six months in the United States—despite tight U.S. restrictions against allowing individuals with communist views into the country.

Opera. Several cities in *Invisible Cities* inspired an experimental

opera produced in 2013. It was performed in an open and operating train station, and performers were stationed throughout the space while audience members wore headphones and could travel around the station as they pleased.



PLOT SUMMARY

Kublai Khan listens attentively as Marco Polo tells him about fantastical cities, even though he doesn't entirely believe everything Marco says. Kublai's empire is huge and he knows that he'll never be able to truly understand his conquered territories, which makes him feel melancholy and as though his empire is an unfixable, corrupt ruin. Through Marco's stories, Kublai begins to see that there's a pattern to his empire.

Marco describes Diomira, a city with towers. It makes people feel envious of others who believe they've experienced similar evenings and think that they were happy. In Isidora, a person can find every delight—but men who arrive there arrive in old age, not in their youth. It's possible to describe Dorothea by listing its exports, but it's also possible to say, as a camel driver once told Marco, that Dorothea opens up horizons. Marco then tells Kublai about Zaira, where the measurements of certain things correspond to events from Zaira's past. In this sense, Zaira's past is written in those things while making people feel as though they can enjoy the city. Marco details his experience in Tamara, a city in which people don't see things. Instead, people see pictures or sculptures of things that refer to other things. Because of this, he insists that people can never discover the city. Zora is a city that is unforgettable, but only because it never changed. This caused it to disappear. Marco tells Kublai about Despina, which looks different depending on where a traveler comes from. Zirna repeats itself so that people can remember it, but different visitors remember different things. Isaura was built over an underground lake, and there's debate as to whether the city's gods live in the wells or in its lake.

When Marco begins describing things to Kublai, he doesn't speak Kublai's language so he uses objects and gestures. Kublai memorizes the meanings of the objects. Eventually, Marco learns the language and Kublai begins to ask if he'll possess his empire once he learns the meaning of every object. Marco insists that at that point, Kublai will become an emblem, just like the objects. As time goes on, Kublai gets annoyed that Marco doesn't tell him anything useful. Both men fall into silence and conduct a conversation in their heads. They imagine Marco saying that when people get lost they better understand where they came from and how they fit into the world.

Marco describes Maurilia, a magnificent metropolis where visitors must look at postcards of Maurilia when it was still provincial. Nobody back then thought provincial Maurilia was charming, but they idealize it now. Marco suggests that the

Maurilia of today and the Maurilia of the past are different cities. In Fedora, the city has a museum filled with model Fedoras. Each model Fedora is someone's ideal version of the city. In describing Zoe, Marco suggests that people expect to be able to figure out a city quickly, but Zoe doesn't allow this: a person can do anything anywhere. Zenobia, meanwhile, is a city on stilts where people generally think that their ideal city looks like Zenobia. 80 miles away is Euphemia, a trading city where merchants gather to exchange stories. However, when merchants leave, they find that they can't remember their own stories—others' stories corrupt their own. Marco describes things with objects and gestures. Kublai finds that this leaves lots of room for him to use his own imagination. As they learn to communicate in the same language, communicating becomes less fun until the two men spend most of their time sitting silently.

Kublai declares that he's going to describe cities and Marco will tell him if they're real. He describes one and Marco says it's real, but it doesn't have a name or location—it's an imagined city with no connecting thread. He insists that cities are built with desires and fears and most think that they were built rationally, but that doesn't keep them standing. Zobeide is a white city. Men dreamed of chasing a naked woman who got away, and so they convened in Zobeide to build the scene of the chase. They now understand that Zobeide is a trap. In Hypatia, Marco can't find things in expected places. Armilla is a city composed entirely of plumbing. Naked women bathe, and Marco wonders if humans built it to atone for abusing the earth's water. In Chloe, people don't talk and instead, imagine encounters. Valdrada, meanwhile, is built so that every action reflects in its water—and those reflections are more important than the actions.

Kublai describes a dream city. Marco says the city is real, but he'll never be able to tell Kublai about it. As time goes on, Kublai feels alternately like his empire is rotting and like it's in a fantastic state. Marco describes Olivia, which can be described as a beautiful city or a nasty one. The city Sophronia is made up of two halves. One is a carnival and the other seems permanent, but the permanent half picks up and leaves for half the year. Eutropia consists of many cities, and its residents move from Eutropia to Eutropia. If a person looks up in Zemrude, they'll see beauty, while if they look down, the view is grim. Most people end up looking down, and few look up again. In Aglaura, people are too caught up in stories of an ancient Aglaura to accurately describe the Aglaura they live in. Kublai and Marco discuss whether they can come up with a model city to figure out all other cities.

Kublai watches his empire grow. At first the edges seem ill but after a while, the empire seems bloated and heavy. Marco tells him about Octavia, a city suspended over a void. Residents know their city won't last forever. In Ersilia, people stretch strings to denote relationships, but they move constantly and

try to rebuild the city and do it better. Baucis is a city on tall stilts. Travelers seldom see the residents, but some believe that they spend their time studying the earth and contemplating their absence. In Leandra, there are two types of gods, the Penates and the Lares. The gods argue about which of them is the soul of the city. In Melania, people are born into roles and conduct the same conversations over and over again over the years. Marco describes a bridge for Kublai, but Kublai wants to know which stone in the bridge is the most important. Marco insists that the bridge is the important part.

One day, Kublai and Marco stay up all night. At dawn, Kublai points out that Marco never speaks of Venice, but Marco insists that he talks about Venice whenever he describes a city. He describes Esmeralda, a city that, if Kublai wants to map it, must include the routes that the **rats** take as well as those of the **swallows**. In Phyllis, Marco insists that travelers who have to stay in a new city become numb to their surroundings. He then explains how he used to think Pyrrha looked one way, but after being there, he can't fathom how he ever thought it looked like that. He details a harrowing experience in Adelma, where everyone looked like a deceased friend. In Eudoxia, Marco says that there's a carpet that the residents believe is a divine map of the city and of the universe, but it's also possible that Eudoxia itself is the map of the universe. Kublai declares that Marco is traveling through memory, but it's possible that both men imagine this.

Marco and Kublai begin to wonder if they aren't in Kublai's garden—their conversation may be taking place in their minds. Marco tells Kublai about Moriana, which has a beautiful side and a dark side. Nearby Clarice has a long history of decay and renewal, but the survivors rebuild Clarice until the city is unrecognizable. Eusapia has a city for the dead below it, but it's possible that the dead Eusapia built the living version—and it's impossible to tell who's alive and who's dead. Beersheba strives to be good, but in reality, it's greedy and corrupt. In Leonia, people throw out their belongings daily and one day, there will be a landslide of garbage. Marco and Kublai wonder if they exist.

Kublai reasons that if he can turn learning about each city into a game of **chess**, he can come up with rules that will let him understand his empire. He asks Marco to describe cities using chess pieces, which Marco does. Kublai begins to question the point of playing chess, since people win and lose but the board remains. Marco describes Irene, a city he's never visited—if he were to visit, it would warrant a new name. Argia is made of earth and travelers must trust that it exists. In Thekla, builders build their city to mimic the stars, believing that if they build forever, Thekla can never decline. Marco details arriving in Trude and learning that Trude covers the whole world. In Olinda, it's possible to find the heart of the city, which grows in concentric circles. Kublai continues to think about the point of chess as Marco “reads” the wood of the chessboard. Kublai

pulls out his **atlas**. He and Marco discuss that the listener dictates the course of a story, and Kublai admits that he feels like a prisoner of human society. Marco is able to identify cities on the map and plot routes to some, and he can see that in the future, San Francisco will be part of an empire bigger than Kublai's.

Marco describes Laudomia, which includes a city for the living, one for the dead, and one for the unborn. The living constantly ask the dead and the unborn for insight into their own lives. Nobody wants to contemplate that humanity might go forever, or that it might end. Astronomers established Perinthia to reflect the gods, but after a few generations, monsters populate the city. Astronomers have to decide if their calculations were incorrect or if the gods are monstrous. Marco stops every year in Procopia and last time he was there, he was in a hotel room with 26 versions of himself. Raissa is a sad city, but it doesn't know that there's a happy one within it. In Andria, life follows the stars and people look for a change in the sky when they change things. People there are prudent and self-confident. Cecelia was once a single city but now, according to a lost goatherd, Cecelia is everywhere. Marozia, meanwhile, is composed of a city of rats and of swallows, and the two cities are locked in a constant struggle of the swallows to free themselves from the rats. Marco then describes Penthesilea, which is impossible to enter—the outskirts go on forever. In Theodora, humans spent years eradicating animals but now, the animals are beginning to take over again. Berenice has two cities within it, one just and one unjust. The just one constantly tries to free itself from the unjust, but within the movement of the just lies a desire to live as corruptly as the unjust do.

Kublai flips through his atlas and looks at cities like New Harmony and Utopia. He asks Marco to chart routes there, but Marco insists that they can't predict which ones will come to pass. Kublai finds nightmare cities like Enoch and Brave New World. He declares that it's inevitable that they'll end up in the infernal city. Marco points out that if the infernal city is real, they're already in it. To keep from being overwhelmed, people can either let the inferno become background or they can look for things that aren't part of the inferno and try to preserve those parts.



CHARACTERS

Marco Polo – Marco Polo was a 13th-century Venetian merchant and explorer who, in real life, did spend many years in China and developed a good relationship with Kublai Khan. The Marco Polo of the novel is an expert communicator; when he first arrives at Kublai's court, he's able to paint verbal pictures of cities using vocal sounds, movement, and various odd objects that he supposedly acquired in the cities he describes. As time goes on, he learns Kublai's language and is able to communicate in it fluently, though the two also communicate with a sort of

sign language at times. Through his descriptions of cities, Marco Polo shows that he's interested in questions of perspective and interpretation, as well as how language and communication function. At the midpoint of the novel, Marco Polo admits that he's actually speaking about his home of Venice when he describes the imaginary cities, but he's unwilling to describe Venice by name since he believes he'll inevitably forget it by speaking of it. Following this midpoint, he paints a picture of humanity that becomes increasingly bleak and corrupt. His stories of cities also become gradually more modern—while early stories mention skyscrapers, in the latter half, Marco Polo describes being trapped in the suburbs and in airports, while other cities grapple with overcrowding and the consequences of their belief in their own righteousness. As far as Kublai Khan is concerned, the purpose of Marco Polo's stories is to help him understand his empire so that he may more fully possess it, but as the cities disintegrate into corruption and horror, Marco Polo implies that powerful individuals like Kublai Khan aren't at all prepared to save the world or humanity from itself. Instead, acting as a symbol of sorts for travelers, Marco Polo suggests that it's necessary for everyone to look for the beautiful aspects of the world, focus on them, and support them whenever possible—the alternative is becoming numb to both the horrors and the delights of the world.

Kublai Khan – The real-life Kublai Khan was the 13th-century emperor of the Mongol Empire who also crowned himself the first emperor of the Chinese Yuan dynasty. The novel introduces Kublai Khan as a powerful leader, intent on learning about every city in his empire so that he may more fully control the empire. He does this by seeking stories of his cities from travelers and merchants, especially the Venetian Marco Polo. As Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan of cities that seem increasingly more fantastical and less likely to be real, Kublai Khan becomes more and more interested in coming up with ways to plan cities, figuring out which cities are real, and ascertaining if certain cities he describes might actually exist in the real world. Marco Polo shuts down all of these attempts, causing Kublai Khan to feel increasingly out of control and morose about the fate of his empire, which he comes to see as bloated, ill, and complacent. He also becomes more interested in Marco Polo as a person at about this same time, and so he asks to hear about Marco Polo's hometown of Venice—though he's confused when Marco Polo insists that whenever he speaks about a city, he's speaking about Venice. Kublai Khan later decides to figure out the true nature of the cities by inviting Marco Polo to describe cities using **chess** pieces, as he sees a chessboard and the game as structures that will give the cities more meaning. But instead of gaining clarity, Kublai Khan comes to question what the point of the chess game is at all, since winning seems to mean little and Marco Polo is still able to draw stories out of the board itself. Through this attempt, and through Kublai Khan's attempts to plot cities and routes in his **atlas**, he comes to the conclusion

that it's pointless to even try anymore—humanity, he laments, is headed for “the infernal city,” or eventual doom and extinction of some sort, and it's impossible to try to save it.



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.



MEMORY, PERCEPTION, AND EXPERIENCE

Invisible Cities is structured as a fictional conversation between the real-life historical figures Marco Polo, a Venetian tradesman, and Kublai Khan, the emperor of the Mongol Empire. Over the course of the novel, Marco leaves to travel the empire and returns to tell Kublai about different cities in the empire, all of which are named after different women. However, Kublai begins to suspect that Marco is making his cities up and indeed, Marco reveals midway through that he's speaking always and only of his home of Venice—the cities he describes to Kublai are, as the novel's title suggests, entirely imaginary. As a travel novel of sorts, even if that travel takes place only in the characters' imaginations, *Invisible Cities* pays close attention to the ways in which travel and experiencing new things influence how a person sees the world, ultimately suggesting that a person's perception of their surroundings is subjective and individualized, informed entirely by their memories, perspective, and experiences—in Marco's case, his memories of Venice.

The novel is clear about the fact that, as far as Marco Polo is concerned, everything from cities to objects exists because of memories. Several cities, like Zirna and Procopia, change depending on how a person remembers them. Zirna, Marco suggests, exists because people repeat their memories of it over and over again in their minds. In Procopia, he talks about being in a hotel room with 26 versions of himself—presumably, every version of himself that's ever been there before. Procopia's quirk of making real a person's past selves suggests that whenever a person travels somewhere they've already been before, they invoke and must contend with who they were when they were there before. In other words, a person's experience of a place is, without exception, filtered through what they remember of it (and of themselves) from the last time. The novel also implies that a person's memories are subject to change as they engage with other people. In Euphemia, travelers share personal stories with each other—but upon leaving the city, they find that their personal memories of past events or experiences have shifted thanks to

the stories they heard from their fellow travelers on the same subject. This indicates that memory as a whole is extremely subjective and very susceptible to change—in other words, memory is wildly unreliable, as almost any experience can change what a person remembers.

At the same time, *Invisible Cities* suggests that, in addition to memories influencing a person's experience of a place, the choices they make while there can have just as much of an impact. This happens in the frame story—the third-person conversations between Marco and Kublai that bookend each chapter—as well as in the cities that Marco describes to Kublai in the first person. As the novel progresses, the conversations between Marco and Kublai become more and more focused on *how* they're interacting with each other, or even *if* they're interacting with each other—it's possible that, like the cities, the dialogue between Marco and Kublai is entirely imagined, even within the world of the already fantastical novel. In cities such as Moriana and Irene, Marco's interpretation of the location depends on how he does or doesn't choose to interact with it. In Zemrude, the city looks different depending on whether a person chooses to look up to the sky or down to the dirty streets, while Marco refuses outright to go to Irene—he knows it from afar, and he suggests that if he were to enter it, it would become a different city entirely and may even deserve a new name. Especially in the case of Irene, wherein Marco has the choice to simply avoid the place altogether, the novel suggests that people have some degree of control over how they experience the world. In other places, though people may technically have control over whether or not they go there, what they find when they arrive is guaranteed and outside of the individual's control. Marco suggests that ultimately, everyone in Zemrude ends up looking down, indicating that enough time somewhere will inevitably lead to disillusionment and pessimism.

Importantly, the fact that Marco admits that all the cities he speaks of are all imaginary and, in fact, are iterations of Venice doesn't diminish his assertion that memory and experience influence how he sees them. Indeed, it's possible to read Venice (and in that sense, every city in the novel) as a stand-in for any city, in which it's possible to find everything from love and wonders to horror and shattered dreams. Marco Polo himself functions as any traveler, discovering the world and how he fits into it as he explores the globe. No matter where a person goes, the novel suggests, they will always be accompanied by past experiences and influenced by the choices they have made before.



STORYTELLING, INTERPRETATION, AND CONTROL

Kublai Khan wants to hear Marco Polo's stories—and those of his other merchants—primarily because he believes that if he can learn

about every city in his empire, he'll be able to control the empire. As Marco returns from his journeys and regales Kublai with tales of yet more cities that seem increasingly unreal, Kublai doubles down on his attempts to make definite sense of what he's hearing. In this way, Calvino seems to suggest that while it may be a natural human inclination to want to pick out patterns and know things for sure, it's not always a fulfilling endeavor—and stories, like this one, are capable of both teaching people how to interpret things while making the case that doing so isn't always entirely useful.

The entirety of the novel is arranged to follow a pattern, which allows the reader to join Kublai's attempts to make sense of Marco's stories. While the first and ninth chapters describe 10 cities each, the inner eight each describe five—and the 55 cities all fall into 11 different categories (cities and memory, cities and desire, cities and signs, thin cities, trading cities, cities and eyes, cities and names, cities and the dead, cities and the sky, continuous cities, and hidden cities). Dividing the cities up into these different categories creates what seems initially to be a natural way to draw similarities between cities of the same category and comparisons between cities of different categories. However, this system of categorization isn't as clear-cut as it seems. For instance, while some of the trading cities like Euphemia, Eutropia, and Ersilia are thematically similar in that they're all explorations of how humans form relationships with each other, the other two trading cities, Chloe and Esmeralda, don't as obviously share this focus on relationships and indeed, they share more imagery or thematic links with cities of other categories. In fact, Esmeralda in particular—the final city of the trading cities—is the first to introduce the imagery of **rats** and **swallows**, which appears later in cities from cities and names and several hidden cities. The fact that this pattern of exploring similar themes in cities of the same category doesn't entirely hold true begins to break down the initial assumption that it's possible to neatly categorize the cities at all. In this way, the reader, like Kublai Khan, must constantly work to piece together how—or even if—things fit together. In guiding the reader through this attempt, Calvino seems to suggest that the endeavor itself is entirely natural and not a bad thing—but is also, in some sense, somewhat futile.

At the same time as parts of the novel seem to deny the reader and Kublai the ability to make sense of what's going on, Marco also describes cities, such as Tamara (of cities and signs), that function as lessons in communication. The way that Marco describes Tamara offers the reader a lesson in semiotics (the study of signs and symbols, and how people know what they mean), while other cities, like Fedora and Zirna, draw out other ways of making meaning and understanding something, as through repetition or assumptions. In particular, Tamara's lesson on semiotics proves extremely important later in the novel, as it paves the way for the reader to understand how

symbols function in later chapters. Marco is upfront about the fact that the vendors' wares in Tamara aren't themselves valuable, but that those items refer to the value of other things, as in "the embroidered headband stands for elegance; [...] the ankle bracelet, voluptuousness." This makes way for, later in the novel, the reader to recognize symbols as they arise naturally, as with Esmeralda's rats and swallows, which symbolize a struggle for freedom. In the frame story of Marco and Kublai's conversations, Kublai's **chessboard** begins to symbolize the futility of trying too hard to understand something by making it fit into a certain system.

Kublai, annoyed by Marco's unwillingness to—in Kublai's mind—tell the truth about the cities or describe them in a way that's useful for him, asks Marco to use chess pieces and the chessboard to tell him about the cities. As the two play—and as Marco is able to successfully describe cities using the chess pieces—Kublai asks himself a question that disturbs him: what's the point of winning at their chess game, especially in light of the fact that Marco is able to draw out such delightful stories by "reading" the grains of ebony and ivory that make up the board? More broadly, this question asks why it's necessary to constantly develop new ways to figure out how the world works, or make existing evidence fit into systems that, possibly, are somewhat ineffective at making that evidence make sense. At the same time, the novel also suggests that this endeavor is still entertaining and therefore, like Marco Polo's stories, is no less worthwhile.



CYCLES AND CIVILIZATION

As Marco Polo describes cities, he pays close attention to cities that contain elements of both wonder and absolute horror. Not every place, he suggests, is entirely good—within every beautiful city, an element of darkness lurks, waiting to manifest itself. Especially in the latter half of the novel, when his cities seem to more closely mimic real ones, Calvino seems to suggest that the course of human history, as well as an individual's experience of their comparatively short life, are cyclical. This cyclical nature, he suggests, is a natural part of not just the world that humans have physically built, but is also an intrinsic part of what it means to be human.

Invisible Cities draws out several cycles that repeat again and again in various cities. One of the cycles is, in a sense, the cycle of civilization itself: Marco Polo explains that in Eutropia, the city isn't just one city—it's a collection of multiple cities and, as its inhabitants become bored and staid, they collectively pack up and move to the next version of Eutropia, where they can find happiness and purpose for a while longer in a "new" locale, with new jobs and new spouses. This type of cycle repeats itself in other cities, offering insight into human nature in the process. People's patterns of behavior in Eutropia suggest that it's part of being human to desire something new and different,

while the people in the city of Melania show that this desire is impossible to satisfy. In Melania, travelers return to find that conversations repeat again and again among different versions of the same people (there's always a braggart soldier and an amorous daughter, for example, but the person acting as the soldier or the daughter changes over time). Considering these and other cities in which things repeat and cycle without end, *Invisible Cities* seems to propose that life is an endless cycle—even when people try to find something new, as in Eutropia, they're still inevitably condemned to repeat the cycle for all time.

Especially in its cities connected to death and to the sky, *Invisible Cities* dives into the intertwined ideas of how people deal with their inevitable demise, and how they fit into the universe while they're still alive. Again, however, Marco doesn't indicate that any of those cities or their inhabitants come to positive, meaningful understandings—but through these two types of cities, the novel begins to question whether it's possible to break the cycles. In both cases, the possibility of breaking any of the cycles is so horrific as to be almost inconceivable to the cities' residents. In Laudomia, inhabitants have access to a version of the city that houses the dead, as well as a version that houses the unborn. Anxious residents turn to the dead or the unborn to try to make sense of their own lives instead of where their city may end up in the future, because, Marco suggests, contemplating humanity on a larger scale requires considering whether people will be around forever—and whether anything they're doing is, if humans may not exist forever, actually meaningful. Meanwhile in Thekla, the city is constantly under construction—and when Marco or other travelers ask the builders when the city will be done, the builders anxiously imply that if they keep building, they'll never be able to peak and then begin to decline. Through these two cities, the novel begins to suggest that, even if the cycles of humanity are constant, it's possible that they will eventually cease to exist. The thought of human extinction is something universally disturbing for people who will, the novel shows, do nearly anything to ignore their own lack of importance.

As Marco's descriptions of cities grow grimmer and grimmer, Kublai Khan begins to share some of the qualities of those in Laudomia and Thekla. He laments that his empire is falling apart and becoming ill, and in his final conversation with Marco, he declares that "It is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us." Essentially, Kublai accepts at this point that he, his empire, and all of humanity are failing. However, Marco offers a remedy to Kublai's existential crisis. He suggests first that "the inferno of the living" won't ever actually come to pass—and if it does, people are already inhabiting it, unbeknownst to them. Instead of dwelling on humanity or civilization's eventual decline, he proposes that people must either accept the inferno until it becomes

background, or else dedicate themselves to looking for the beauty in the world, humanity, and its cycles. Though the cycles may be inevitable, Marco seems to suggest that it's possible to make them bearable by focusing on and promoting the good and beautiful aspects of human life while it lasts.



MODERNITY

Despite the beautiful passages within *Invisible Cities*—and despite the only two characters being from the 13th century—the world that *Invisible*

Cities presents is neither entirely beautiful nor a historically accurate reflection of the world as it was hundreds of years ago. Instead, the novel depicts an attempt by the powerful (as represented by the emperor Kublai Khan) to understand how the modern world came to a state that, the novel suggests, is horrific, out of control, and in many cases, meaningless. Especially given Calvino's philosophical and political leanings—he was an avowed atheist and a lifelong communist, though not always associated with a particular party—*Invisible Cities* reads as much as a scathing condemnation of capitalism, greed, and the ills of the modern, urbanized world as it does a meditation on imagination and storytelling.

At first, the vignettes of cities that Marco Polo creates seem purely magical. Cities float above water, have gates and buildings built of precious metals and gemstones, and are centers of trade and connection between people from different places. However, in the city Anastasia, Marco gives his first clue that he's not just spinning beautiful tales—Anastasia is a place of desires, but a place where people can never actually partake in their desires while somehow, mysteriously, feeling content. This, Marco explains, makes Anastasia's residents slaves to the city. Following Anastasia, which Marco describes in the first chapter, the cities get increasingly darker and more disturbing. In the city Zobeide, men who dream of a woman escaping them arrive to construct the scene of the chase in the city, hoping to one day capture the woman in their dreams. In Octavia, a city suspended above the ground, residents are resigned to the fact that their ropes won't hold forever—one day, the city will crash to the ground. By creating increasingly darker landscapes after showcasing vignettes that are beautiful and seemingly perfect, Calvino draws upon a novel he mentions by name in Marco and Kublai's final conversation: Thomas More's [Utopia](#). [Utopia](#) parodies and critiques exploration and expansion in pursuit of building a utopia, something that both [Utopia](#) and *Invisible Cities* suggest can never actually exist. It's telling, then, that even in Calvino's admittedly imaginary cities, there are none that read explicitly as utopias—even the human mind, he seems to suggest, is incapable of coming up with something that's wholly perfect.

Following the novel's midpoint, at which point Marco Polo admits that he's talking about his home city of Venice, *Invisible Cities* begins to feel increasingly modern and less obviously

fantastical. At this point in the novel, Calvino begins to take issue with the trappings of the modern world, from overcrowding and the suburbs to what he suggests is the constant fight to throw off oppressive systems—presumably, capitalism, greed, and corruption. Building off of the optimism and beauty expressed in the first chapter, Marco introduces the city of Perinthia. The city was founded by people who calculated everything perfectly in order to mimic the stars and the gods—but, within a few generations, the city is populated by monsters, and the founders are left to question whether they were wrong (and the monsters are a product of human error) or whether they were right (and humanity is naturally monstrous). Other cities find themselves trapped in a cycle of freeing themselves from nasty [rats](#), and only some succeed—only to fall back, at some point, to being overrun by rats. Perinthia is suggestive of both urban overcrowding (in it, Marco mentions that the particularly monstrous are kept in overfull closets) and the idea that overcrowding and its consequences come from the belief that humans are right to build and multiply with abandon, something that Calvino suggests may not be correct.

In Trude, Marco gets off the plane and remarks that he wouldn't know he was in a place different from where he came from if there hadn't been a sign—everything, from the people to the buildings, look exactly the same. Meanwhile, in Penthesilea, Marco finds that the suburbs are so extensive that he can never reach the actual city, nor can he ever leave. With these two cities in particular, Calvino seems to lament that places are losing their individuality and, in time, every place in the world will look exactly the same—something that he implies is a product of the modern, capitalist world.

In all of these horrific cities, as well as in Kublai Khan's empire that he so desperately wants to properly control, civilization seems bloated and unwieldy—and figures like Kublai seem less and less suited to the task of saving humanity from itself. Despite the bleak outlook of many of the cities and of Kublai himself, Marco Polo's narration nonetheless suggests that there are several things people can do to reckon with the ills of the modern world. In addition to telling Kublai to always look for the beauty in people and in places, Marco's positive tone and his focus on the cities that are trying to break free and better themselves—even if he knows they'll eventually be subjugated again—suggests that it's always good to fight for a better world, no matter how bleak the current world may seem.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in [teal text](#) throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



RATS

Beginning in the city of Esmeralda, Marco Polo begins to describe a struggle between rats and **swallows**. As they reappear in later cities, the rats become symbolic of corruption, nastiness, and in general, the disgusting underbelly that Calvino suggests is inherent to all cities and, indeed, to the modern world. In the rats' final appearance in Theodora, Calvino seems to suggest that in the end, corruption will reign supreme—and even if people do manage to get rid of it, something will inevitably rise up to replace it, just as, following the rats' extermination in Theodora, other previously exterminated mythical creatures reinvigorate themselves and plan to retake the city.



BIRDS (SWALLOWS)

Birds, and specifically swallows, often appear in opposition to **rats**—thus, while the rats symbolize corruption and doom, the birds represent hope for a better future. Some cities, such as Marozia, use the dichotomy of the rats and the swallows to speak to the cyclical nature of revolt and rebellion, suggesting that corruption and hope are locked in an endless battle in which one may win temporarily, but the other will eventually also see its day on top. In other cities, such as in Raissa and Esmeralda, Marco Polo links the birds directly to hope and makes the point that it's important to focus on the beautiful, hopeful moments in life, as they make the ugly easier to bear.



THE ATLAS

In his atlas, Kublai Khan wants to record every city in his empire—and in the world—so that he can figure out how to get there and ultimately, how to (or if he can) conquer them. The atlas (and Kublai Khan's devotion to it) symbolizes the human tendency to try to categorize and understand everything, even when that effort is clearly a losing battle. Marco Polo insists that while he can name and describe all the cities, real and imagined, in the atlas, it's impossible to conquer all of them. With this, he suggests that trying to make everything fit into a certain system, such as an atlas, is ultimately futile. More important than whether someone can name cities or plan journeys, the novel suggests, is how a person looks at their world.



CHESS

As Kublai Khan becomes increasingly frustrated with Marco Polo's fantastical descriptions of cities (and Marco's inability to speak Kublai's language), Kublai decides to both ask Marco to describe cities using chess pieces and to play chess with him. He discovers at this point that

Marco can not only speak the language, but that he can also describe the cities just as well using chess pieces as he can with the usual assortment of odd objects he supposedly gathered from the cities. And yet, the cities Marco Polo describes with the chess pieces seem just as fantastical as the previous ones. The chessboard, pieces, and game as a whole then come to represent a system that can't give a person any new analysis or understanding about information they have, while also suggesting that the desire to make information work within a system is entirely understandable. Then, as Marco and Kublai play, Kublai begins to wonder what the point even is of playing the game or winning—essentially, nothing happens even if he does win. However, as Marco begins to “read” the ebony and ivory of the chessboard and paints images in Kublai's mind of faraway expeditions to harvest ebony, the novel seems to suggest that systems of analysis—and by extension, storytelling as a whole—aren't any less worthwhile and indeed, can be useful, even if just as entertainment.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harvest Books edition of *Invisible Cities* published in 1978.

Chapter 1 Quotes

“It is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin, that corruption's gangrene has spread too far to be healed by our scepter, that the triumph over enemy sovereigns has made us the heirs of their long undoing.”

Related Characters: Kublai Khan, Marco Polo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, the narrator describes the state of Kublai Khan's empire, which is, by this point, huge and beginning to decline. Through this, the narrator begins to make the case that Kublai's empire is part of a larger cycle of growth and decline, and that it's possible to be both growing and declining at the same time. This is why it's possible to see the empire as both wondrous and as overcome by corruption.

Importantly, the narrator insists that corruption is the major issue with Kublai's empire, which returns to Calvino's assertion that the modern world is something fundamentally corrupt from which humanity cannot

recover. He also paints a bleak picture of what powerful people can do when the narrator insists that Kublai—presumably, the person wielding the scepter—cannot do anything to fix it. In other words, the corruption of the modern world isn't something that the wealthy and powerful can fix. If it's going to be fixed at all, it's up to regular people to create that change.

●● Isidora, therefore, is the city of his dreams: with one difference. The dreamed-of city contained him as a young man; he arrives at Isidora in his old age. In the square there is the wall where the old men sit and watch the young go by; he is seated in a row with them. Desires are already memories.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Marco describes Isidora, a city made up of dreams that people don't reach until they're too old to partake in any of the things they dreamed of in their youth. With this, the novel suggests that it's impossible for people to ever achieve perfection or utopia, if only because such a place is impossible to reach. In other words, even if utopia might exist, it's not possible to get there at a time in one's life to truly enjoy it. This passage also speaks to the power of memory and nostalgia. What makes Isidora a city of dreams for these old men is that it reminds them of what they wanted in their youth, while in their old age, they want to be young again so they can experience those dreams in real life.

●● Such is the power, sometimes called malignant, sometimes benign, that Anastasia, the treacherous city, possesses; if for eight hours a day you work as a cutter of agate, onyx, chrysoprase, your labor which gives form to desire takes from desire its form, and you believe you are enjoying Anastasia wholly when you are only its slave.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In describing Anastasia, Marco Polo makes it clear that while Anastasia makes people *think* that they're happy and getting everything they want, people cannot actually enjoy anything in the city. This description is suggestive of the ills of capitalism, something that Calvino suggests plagues the modern world and makes it nearly uninhabitable and, moreover, not a world in which people can be truly successful. He suggests here that these stonemasons aren't actually fulfilled cutting stones; rather, they're simply creating products that other people desire—and that presumably, won't make those other people happy either. In this way, everyone in Anastasia serves the city (symbolically, the capitalist system), rather than living and working in a way that allows people to find happiness and actually achieve any sense of satisfaction.

●● The wares, too, which the vendors display on their stalls are valuable not in themselves but as signs of other things: the embroidered headband stands for elegance; [...] Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis


In the city of Tamara, Marco Polo gives the reader a brief lesson in semiotics, or the study of how people interpret signs and symbols and how they know what signs and symbols mean. The vendors' wares in particular show how symbols themselves aren't valuable and don't mean anything on their own. Instead, they connote the value or the meaning of something else, as when this headband allows the wearer to broadcast to the world that they're elegant.

By crafting a city entirely out of signs and symbols, and then making visitors "read" those signs and symbols to understand the city, Marco Polo suggests that it's impossible to get to know Tamara the city itself—a visitor only learns the signs and the symbols. This begins to make the case that reading isn't a substitute for experiencing something firsthand, something Marco tells Kublai at various points throughout their conversation. He insists

that the Khan cannot learn about his empire just through hearing about it—if he's unwilling to experience his territories firsthand, he'll never know everything there is to know about his vast empire.

●● *But, obscure or obvious as it might be, everything Marco displayed had the power of emblems, which, once seen, cannot be forgotten or confused. In the Khan's mind the empire was reflected in a desert of labile and interchangeable data, like grains of sand, from which there appeared, for each city and province, the figures evoked by the Venetian's logogriffs.*

Related Characters: Kublai Khan, Marco Polo

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator explains how Kublai Khan tries to interpret Marco Polo's stories of cities, which he tells using objects, and how these stories turn the cities into data in Kublai's mind. A logogriff is a type of word puzzle that often uses anagrams or other similar wordplay, which in this case is represented by the fact that Marco uses the same objects to mean different things and describe different cities. Just as anagrams entail using the same combination of letters to come up with different words or phrases, Marco does much the same thing with his objects.

The fact that these objects turn Kublai's empire into data points speaks to the fact that Kublai is trying to come up with any and every way to understand his empire, as he believes that understanding it means that he'll be able to possess it. However, the novel overwhelmingly proposes that this isn't a fruitful attempt, as this exercise successfully conveys descriptions of cities to Kublai but doesn't get him any closer to full possession. Instead, Kublai goes on to cycle through all sorts of other exercises that, like this one, are entertaining but don't actually help him understand and possess his empire. With this, the novel suggests that it's normal to try to make sense of the world by using these different systems, but that doing so won't always yield the desired results.

Chapter 2 Quotes

●● *"It is evening. We are seated on the steps of your palace. There is a slight breeze," Marco Polo answered. "Whatever country my words may evoke around you, you will see it from such a vantage point, even if instead of the palace there is a village on pilings and the breeze carries the stench of a muddy estuary."*

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

When Kublai Khan gets annoyed that Marco Polo doesn't tell him anything useful, Marco notes that Kublai will always see cities through the lens of a great ruler in a palace. With this, Marco reminds Kublai that he'll never be able to truly know anything, if only because he won't be able to ever fully immerse himself in others' experiences. In other words, Kublai's understanding of the cities that Marco describes is colored by who he is—an emperor. This again makes the case that trying to figure out everything in an empirical way is impossible, as it's impossible to account for all these differences in perspective and experience.

●● *It is pointless to ask whether the new ones are better or worse than the old, since there is no connection between them, just as the old post cards do not depict Maurilia as it was, but a different city which, by chance, was called Maurilia, like this one.*

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 31



Explanation and Analysis

Maurilia is a city that, Marco Polo explains, forces visitors to admire a postcard of the old provincial Maurilia, while the modern Maurilia is a gleaming metropolis. By insisting that the Maurilia of old and the modern Maurilia are actually entirely different cities, the novel shows how people's interpretation of something—in this case, a city—fundamentally changes what that thing is to them. Similarly, the comment about how it's pointless to talk about which city is better or worse suggests that it's not even worth it to compare the two because of the vast amount of

difference between them—and especially when considering that it's likely a number of years went by between the postcard city and the modern one, it is, Calvino suggests, like comparing apples and oranges, since the two cities never could've coexisted anyway.

☞ He infers this: if existence in all its moments is all of itself, Zoe is the place of indivisible existence. But why, then, does the city exist? What line separates the inside from the outside, the rumble of wheels from the howl of wolves?

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis



In Zoe, there are no dedicated places for certain activities, like eating or shopping, which Marco suggests makes the city extremely unsettling. This points to the novel's assertion that it's perfectly normal for people to want to sort, categorize, and understand things by comparing them. Travelers just can't do this in Zoe, however, as everything is the same and therefore cannot be sorted. In particular, Marco's mention of not being able to separate the inside from the outside speaks to the idea that it's important for most people to identify what—or who—is different from them, and if there's no discerning difference between people or places, it's impossible to do this. In this sense, Marco seems to assert that humanity itself, as well as the world it inhabits, is more alike than people like to think it is.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ *"Cities also believe they are the work of the mind or of chance, but neither the one nor the other suffices to hold up their walls. You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours."*

"Or the question it asks you, forcing you to answer, like Thebes through the mouth of the Sphinx."

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33



Explanation and Analysis

In response to Kublai Khan insisting that his dreams are the work of rationality or of chance, Marco suggests that cities function in the same way, but that it's not rationality that keeps cities going. Instead, he argues that what maintains cities is what they can do for people and how they make people think. This again reminds the reader that every person moves through the world with a different perspective that greatly impacts the way they see and interpret the world around them. In this particular case, Marco insists that because everyone comes to a city with some sort of baggage, they will all get something different from the city or learn something different about themselves because of the way they experience the city.

☞ [...] and in the city of Zobeide, they recognized something of the streets of the dream, and they changed the positions of arcades and stairways to resemble more closely the path of the pursued woman and so, at the spot where she had vanished, there would remain no avenue of escape.

The first to arrive could not understand what drew these people to Zobeide, this ugly city, this trap.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

Marco describes Zobeide, a city in which men arrive after dreaming of chasing and losing a naked woman and go on to build a city that resembles where they chased the woman in their dreams. Marco's description of Zobeide begins to show that there's certainly a dark side to human nature, and that this desire to chase and to dominate is something that many people experience. It being somewhat widespread, however, doesn't make it okay—eventually, as the original men in Zobeide ultimately do, it's possible to learn that these desires are ugly and shouldn't be pursued in the first place. That they can construct Zobeide to reflect and allow them to (hopefully) achieve these desires begins to suggest that cities themselves are sites of questionably moral human desire, something that Calvino echoes in later cities that more closely resemble the modern world.

Even when lovers twist their naked bodies, skin against skin, seeking the position that will give one the most pleasure in the other, even when murderers plunge the knife into the black veins of the neck and more clotted blood pours out the more they press the blade that slips between the tendons, it is not so much their copulating or murdering that matters as the copulating or murdering of the images, limpid and cold in the mirror.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Marco Polo describes Valdrada, where the reflections of things and actions matter more than the actions or objects themselves. This city is a veiled critique of the modern world's reliance on images to mediate life through advertising, film, and photography (and in the contemporary reader's world but not Calvino's, social media). In this sense, it matters more how a person is able to present themselves to the world through media than who or what a person actually is. Valdrada suggests that because of this, people don't enjoy something like sex as much as they might otherwise, nor do they think through the implications of what it means to murder someone—what matters is how it looks, not that they're brutally taking someone's life. Through this, people become desensitized to both pleasure and pain.

Chapter 4 Quotes

For everyone, sooner or later, the day comes when we bring our gaze down along the drainpipes and we can no longer detach it from the cobblestones. The reverse is not impossible, but it is more rare: and so we continue walking through Zembrude's streets with eyes now digging into the cellars, the foundations, the wells.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan about how a person's perspective in Zembrude influences how they see the city. This makes it very clear that to some degree, people have control over how they experience the world. A person

can, in this case, choose to keep looking up and through doing so, experience a happier and more fulfilled life. However, Marco also suggests that too much time in one place inevitably leads to a degree of depression and pessimism, hence the fact that most people in Zembrude end up looking down at some point. With this, Marco takes aim at staying in one place and voices his support of traveling, while also suggesting that it might be the city itself—and by extension, the modern world it's a part of—that leads people to look down and become increasingly pessimistic.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Suspended over the abyss, the life of Octavia's inhabitants is less uncertain than in other cities. They know the net will only last so long.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Through Octavia, a city suspended over an abyss, Marco introduces the possibility that humanity won't last forever—and that accepting this fact provides some degree of comfort. In other cities, Marco presents the possibility that humanity might come to an end as universally unsettling. However, in those cases (namely, in Laudomia), it's important to note that people have the option to simply not engage with the idea of human extinction at all. In Octavia, it's impossible to ignore since people can see both the void and the ropes that at some point will likely begin to fray, signaling the end to come. By presenting Octavia in a more positive way than cities like Laudomia, Calvino seems to suggest that it's actually not as discomfiting as people might think to consider the end of humanity—they must simply accept that it will come to an end.

There are three hypotheses about the inhabitants of Baucis: that they hate the earth; that they respect it so much they avoid all contact; that they love it as it was before they existed and with spyglasses and telescopes aimed downward they never tire of examining it, leaf by leaf, stone by stone, ant by ant, contemplating with fascination their own absence.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Marco explains that travelers seldom see the inhabitants of Baucis, who live in a city high on stilts. The possibility that the residents of Baucis spend their days studying their absence reflects real-world anxieties about the fate of the world and nostalgia for the way the world once was before humans inhabited it. However, it's important to note that in Baucis, they simply study and don't ever do anything—something that situates this activity as useless, if still interesting and hopefully fulfilling for the residents of Baucis. Just as with Kublai Khan's attempts to make sense of his empire so he can possess it, it's just as unlikely that anyone in Baucis will come up with anything meaningful through their observations, suggesting that this is another attempt to understand the world that is fundamentally flawed from the start.

☝☝ *Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone.*



"But which is the stone that supports the bridge?" Kublai Khan asks.

"The bridge is not supported by one stone or another," Marco answers," but by the line of the arch that they form."

Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then, he adds: "Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me."

Polo answers: Without stones there is no arch."

Related Characters: Kublai Khan, Marco Polo (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

During their conversation, Marco Polo and Kublai Khan discuss a stone bridge and argue over whether the stones or the bridge itself are more important. Kublai's desire to figure out which stone exactly supports the bridge represents an attempt by a powerful figure to find something that reflects their own sense of importance in the world—he wants to be the single stone holding up the great bridge of his empire. Finding one stone that supports the bridge would give Kublai something to identify with, while Marco dashes these hopes by pointing out that the bridge isn't held together by just one stone but is instead

supported by all of the individual stones put together. With this, Marco shows that while individual people may be less important in the grand scheme of things or in the course of human history, humanity as a whole is nevertheless important.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ For some time the augurs had been sure that the carpet's harmonious pattern was of divine origin. The oracle was interpreted in this sense, arousing no controversy. But you could, similarly, come to the opposite conclusion: that the true map of the universe is the city of Eudoxia, just as it is, a stain that spreads out shapelessly, with crooked streets, houses that crumble one upon the other amid clouds of dust, fires, screams in the darkness.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis



Here, Marco describes Eudoxia, a city with a corresponding carpet that people believe is a map of the universe and can be used as a map to navigate the crumbling city. However, Marco suggests that it's possible to interpret the oracle a different way. By doing this, Marco reminds the reader that depending on one's perspective or experiences, every individual will read a situation or place differently. Because Marco hasn't grown up in Eudoxia and hasn't heard his entire life that the carpet is the divine object, it's easier for him to wrap his head around the possibility that Eudoxia itself is the divine object.

However, accepting that Eudoxia, and not the carpet, is divine also entails accepting that humanity isn't as perfect—or that the stars that the carpet is supposedly modeled after aren't as perfect—as people would like to think. Essentially, believing that Eudoxia is divine means accepting that humanity is fundamentally flawed, violent, and corrupt.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ It is not so much by the things that each day are manufactured, sold, bought that you can measure Leonia's opulence, but rather by the things that each day are thrown out to make room for the new. So you begin to wonder if Leonia's true passion is really, as they say, the enjoyment of new and different things, and not, instead, the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing itself of a recurrent impurity.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 114



Explanation and Analysis


In describing Leonia, a city that gets new items every day, Marco Polo wonders if it takes joy in new things or in discarding old things. This is a clear critique on modern consumer culture and the fact that, in the modern world, it's not hard to replace household items often—and indeed, it's a mark of wealth and success to be able to do so. Put another way, it's a mark of wealth and success to be wasteful and create garbage, something that in Leonia, Marco insists is going to one day destroy the city. This begins to show that consumer culture itself is the “impurity” Marco mentions, but at least in Leonia, the only cure for it is to continue to buy into the system and constantly replace things with everyone else.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ *The Great Khan tried to concentrate on the game: but now it was the game's purpose that eluded him. Each game ends in a gain or a loss: but of what? What were the true stakes? A checkmate, beneath the foot of a king, knocked aside by the winner's hand, a black or a white square remains.*

Related Characters: Marco Polo, Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 123



Explanation and Analysis

After asking Marco Polo to describe cities using chess pieces, Kublai plays chess with Marco and begins to question the entire point of the game. Questioning the point

of the game points to larger questions about both the purpose of conquest, as well as the point of trying so hard to make information about his empire fit neatly into a certain system, as Kublai has been trying to do for much of the novel. The idea that though the king chess piece may disappear, signaling a win, but the board stays the same, again begins to point to the idea that in the grand scheme of the world or of the universe, humanity isn't all that important. The novel suggests that the world will be around long after humans are gone, and long after kings or world leaders have continually taken control for themselves. Not being able to make the system of chess make sense, meanwhile, again suggests that while Kublai isn't wrong to want to know all he can, he'll never be successful in forcing information to fit and make sense.

☞ For those who pass it without entering, the city is one thing; it is another for those who are trapped by it and never leave. There is the city where you arrive for the first time; and there is another city which you leave never to return. Each deserves a different name; perhaps I have already spoken of Irene under other names; perhaps I have spoken only of Irene.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Marco describes the city Irene, which he's never visited—if he visits, Irene will become something different and will need a new name. With this, Marco suggests that experience dramatically changes how a person interprets something. Irene is one thing for him exactly because he's never been to it, while it will certainly become something entirely different if he ever sets foot inside the city's boundaries. Musing about whether he's already spoken of Irene in some sense reminds the reader that Marco Polo could be talking about any city as he takes Kublai and the reader on this journey. The cities exist to resonate with the reader, according to their experiences that they bring to the novel.

☞ If you ask, “Why is Thekla’s constructing taking such a long time?” the inhabitants continue hoisting sacks, lowering leaded strings, moving long brushes up and down, as they answer, “So that its destruction cannot begin.” And if asked whether they fear that, once the scaffoldings are removed, the city may begin to crumble and fall to pieces, they add hastily, in a whisper, “Not only the city.”

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis


Here, Marco Polo describes Thekla, a city that’s constantly under construction so that the city cannot begin to fall. This represents the belief on the part of Thekla’s residents that as long as they continue to build and grow, it’s impossible to peak—and, consequently, impossible to decline or fall altogether. In contrast, Marco’s questions and frustrations point to the idea that Thekla isn’t truly living until it becomes a full city, when the residents stop building. This suggests that while Thekla may make the case that it’s possible for a person or a city to never have to grow, change, and decline, the fear that things will decline anyway is very real and plagues everyone. Notably, Marco never suggests that Thekla will be successful in stopping its decline in this way, suggesting that it’s impossible to do so.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ *And Polo answers, “Traveling, you realize that differences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, distances, a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents. Your atlas preserves the differences intact: that assortment of qualities which are like the letters in a name.”*

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 137


Explanation and Analysis

As Marco Polo and Kublai Khan study Kublai’s atlas, Marco suggests that traveling makes places look similar to each other, while mapping cities keeps them separated and different in his mind. This represents some degree of

support for putting information into a system that makes it easier to understand, something that the novel as a whole suggests is pointless. Here, Marco seems to imply that doing this preserves a version of history, especially since he goes on to say that at some point in the future, all cities will meet and be indistinguishable from each other. He also indicates that while travel may open one’s eyes to differences in the world and give people new experiences, travelers will eventually get to the point where the different places around the globe all look the same—in effect, the positive results of travel have a limit.

☞ Perinthia’s astronomers are faced with a difficult choice. Either they must admit that all their calculations were wrong and their figures are unable to describe the heavens, or else they must reveal that the order of the gods is reflected exactly in the city of monsters.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 145



Explanation and Analysis

Marco Polo explains that while astronomers planned Perinthia to reflect the sky and the gods, society soon became monstrous. Because of this, they have to decide whether they messed up and cannot accurately describe the sky, or if humanity is naturally monstrous. Importantly, accepting that society is naturally monstrous would mean accepting that humans aren’t perfect, something that’s difficult for people to accept—but something that Calvino seems to suggest is the case, especially in the many cities in the novel that paint humanity as at least somewhat monstrous. Accepting that they can’t describe the heavens, meanwhile, means that these astronomers have to resign themselves to the fact that none of their systems of understanding are good enough or detailed enough to make sense of the world around them, something that the novel suggests is nearly as unsettling as the first option.

☞ Was the oracle mistaken? Not necessarily. I interpret it in this way: Marozia consists of two cities, the rat’s and the swallow’s; both change with time, but their relationship does not change; the second is the one about to free itself from the first.

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 155


Explanation and Analysis

After recounting an oracle that said that Marozia is composed of a city of the rats and one of the swallows, Marco notes that the version of the city that seemed like that of the swallows began to take on rat-like tendencies. Because of this, he insists that it's not appropriate to simply delineate the city by dividing it into these two different cities. Instead, it's more appropriate to view the city as being involved in an endless cycle in which half of the city is always attempting to free itself from the other half. In this way, the half represented by the swallows can always represent hope for the better, while the rats can always represent corruption and greed—something that Calvino implies are present in all humans in varying ratios.

☛☛ *“The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.”*

Related Characters: Marco Polo (speaker), Kublai Khan

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

When Kublai expresses hopelessness that humanity is headed for doom and the end of time (the “infernal city”), Marco insists that this may be true, but not in the way that Kublai thinks of it. Marco proposes that humanity may already be falling, but he makes it clear that it's impossible to know—again, it's impossible to be able to learn everything about the world using human systems, something that Marco has made clear through many of his stories about cities. Then, he insists that people have a choice as to how to deal with the coming doom. People can either allow the knowledge that they're going to end fade into the background, which he suggests turns them into part of the inferno. However, people also have the option to look for the light, look for happiness, and seek out places, people, and things that are beautiful and meaningful. Those things, Marco suggests, aren't part of the inferno, and by focusing on them, it's possible to find a sense of peace.



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

Kublai Khan doesn't believe everything that Marco Polo tells him about cities, but Kublai does listen more attentively to him than he does to anyone else. Kublai is at the point that all emperors come to where, after feeling prideful about his conquered territories, he knows he won't be able to understand them. He feels melancholy in the evenings, even though the final troops of the enemies are falling. He discovers that his wondrous empire is actually just a corrupt ruin—and he can't fix it. Marco's stories, however, help Kublai to see a subtle pattern in his disintegrating empire.

Cities and Memory. 1. Diomira is a three days' journey to the east. It has 60 silver domes, bronze statues of gods, and a golden rooster that crows from a tower. These sights are somewhat normal, but Diomira has a unique quality: when a traveler arrives on a fall evening, they'll feel envious of people who believe they've experienced an evening just like this one and believe they were happy then.

Cities and Memory. 2. Marco Polo asserts that when a person rides through the wilderness, they'll desire a city. Eventually, they'll come to Isidora. In Isidora, buildings have seashell-encrusted spiral staircases and people make telescopes and violins. If a man in Isidora is hesitating between two women, a third woman will inevitably appear. This is the city of a man's dreams, but there's one difference between dreams and reality: he's young in the dream version of Isidora, but in the real Isidora, he's old. His desires are now just memories.

Cities and Desire. 1. It's possible to describe Dorothea in two different ways. First, one could say that it has four aluminum towers, seven gates with drawbridges, and nine quarters separated by canals. In Dorothea, one can find bergamot, amethysts, and sturgeon roe—and with these facts, it's possible to learn everything about Dorothea's past, present, and future. The camel driver who first brought Marco Polo to Dorothea described it differently. He said that he first arrived as a youth and took in the smiling women and the fluttering banners. Prior to arriving in Dorothea, he'd only known the desert. After being in Dorothea, he still looks to the desert, but he also knows that Dorothea showed him other paths.

Calvino begins the novel by making it clear that success like Kublai Khan has experienced isn't actually fulfilling, which begins to suggest that Kublai's empire is at a point where it's beginning to decline. Indicating that there's a pattern to Marco Polo's stories that sheds light on this, however, encourages the reader to begin looking for patterns so that they, too, can figure out how Kublai's empire got to this point.



While Diomira initially looks like it's going to be a wondrous place, Marco Polo implies that this wonder will always be tainted by envy—possibly, shorthand for human nature in its entirety. This suggests that there is no true utopia or perfect place in the world.



Again, as in Diomira, Isidora seems to be what dreams are made of—but in this case, a person can't live their dreams until they're too old to enjoy it. This begins to indicate that perfection exists only in people's dreams and even in a supposedly perfect spot, it's impossible to actually find perfection. Insisting that desires are memories also suggests that in retrospect, things look better than they are in reality.



The two different ways of describing Dorothea begin to introduce the idea that a person's perspective, or how they choose to look at a place, influences how they interpret what they see. To someone interested in trading or architecture, the exports or the construction of the city might be most important. However, to someone interested in the personal aspects of a city and how a city makes a person feel, it's more compelling to hear that Dorothea opened this camel driver's eyes to the fact that there are a number of different worlds out there to experience.



Cities and Memory. 3. Marco Polo tries to describe Zaira. Zaira's streets are stairs and roofs are covered in zinc, but that's not what Zaira is about—Zaira consists of relationships between measurements and past events. For example, the height of a lamppost corresponds to the distance from the ground of a hanged man's feet, while the height of a railing corresponds to the leap of an adulterer sneaking out a window. The rips in fishnet correspond to three old men who talk about the city's history. Memories flow in like waves and Zaira soaks it all up. As such, to describe Zaira in the present means describing all of Zaira's past. However, Zaira doesn't *recite* its past—the past is written in every object in the city.

Cities and Desire. 2. Three days south is the city of Anastasia, which is composed of concentric canals. Here, a person can find excellent pheasant and, according to rumors, beautiful women who invite men to bathe with them. The true essence of Anastasia, however, is that it awakens a person's desires and promptly stifles them. The city's desires are different from humans', so people can only sit with their desire. Some people argue over whether this power is malignant or benign. People who cut agate and onyx give form to others' desires, and a visitor believes they're enjoying Anastasia when really, they're a slave to it.

Cities and Signs. 1. Marco Polo describes walking and seeing nearly nothing but signs of other things: paw prints indicate tigers; marshes indicate water. Eventually, he comes to Tamara. In Tamara, a person doesn't see things. Instead, they see pictures of things that mean other things, such as a picture of scales denoting the grocer's. Statues depict lions and dolphins, signifying that something has a lion or a dolphin as its sign. Some signs offer warnings or suggestions. Statues of gods include the god's attributes so pilgrims can pray correctly, while schools, palaces, and prisons are exactly what they look like. Vendors' wares aren't valuable, but connote the value of other things. A person in Tamara reads the city as if it were written, making it so a visitor doesn't actually visit—they just record the words that Tamara uses to define herself, and it's impossible to truly discover it.

Cities and Memory. 4. Nobody can forget Zora, but not because it's unusual or memorable. Instead, Zora is arranged in patterns that can't be altered. A person who knows how Zora was made can imagine walking down the streets and passing shop fronts in a particular order. It's impossible to forget, and some people even use Zora to remember other things, like dates or names of famous men. The most educated men have memorized Zora. Marco Polo says that he didn't succeed in visiting Zora. Since Zora couldn't change if it wanted to be remembered, it disappeared. Now, the earth has forgotten Zora.

Insisting that Zaira's past is written in objects speaks to the way that objects can act as symbols for past events. Calvino suggests here that in order to effectively describe Zaira using the elements in it, one can't just list those elements. Rather, a person must describe everything those elements have done and witnessed over the course of their time in Zaira. In other words, Zaira isn't just made up of objects. Zaira is all of the things that those objects mean, and all the events that those objects were around for. Zaira is its past, not the objects themselves.



Anastasia is the first hint that Calvino isn't just describing fantastical cities. Instead, Anastasia reads as a critique of modern, capitalist society, which holds that people can work to achieve their goals and their dreams—but for most people, especially in the eyes of someone who, like Calvino, isn't enamored of capitalism, capitalism doesn't actually allow people to experience success, even if it has the ability to make people feel as though they're making progress.



Tamara functions as a lesson in semiotics, or the study of signs and symbols and how people know what they mean. To take the novel's example, a paw print is a sign of a tiger because humans know that tigers make prints—otherwise, the print would just be a random shape. In other words, semiotics posits that people move through the world reading things like they read written language, even when those things themselves have nothing to do with what they signify. Calvino seems to suggest that reading, whether signs in the real world or words on the page, keeps a person from truly experiencing a place.



In Zora, Marco Polo makes it clear that in order to survive through the ages, it's absolutely necessary for a city to change and adapt—Zora disappeared because it never changed. This also begins to suggest that memory isn't a particularly effective way to preserve something, as many people remembering Zora evidently wasn't enough to keep the city alive—or even alive just in memory, since the world has now forgotten Zora.



Cities and Desire. 3. A traveler can reach Despina by ship or by camel. A camel driver will see skyscrapers, radar antennae, and belching smoke, but it will look like a ship ready to take him away from the desert. A sailor, meanwhile, will see a camel's saddle and though he knows Despina is a city, he'll think of it as a camel carrying wonderful foodstuffs into the desert, where there are freshwater oases and palaces filled with dancing girls. Marco Polo asserts that each city takes its form from what it opposes. Despina is a border city between two different deserts.

Cities and Signs. 2. People remember specific things about Zirna, such as a blind black man shouting, a lunatic on a skyscraper, or a girl walking a puma. In reality, however, most of Zirna's blind men are black; all skyscrapers house madmen; and there are no girls with pumas. Zirna is redundant and repeats itself so that people can remember it. Marco Polo says that he's returning from Zirna. He remembers dirigibles flying, tattoo shops, and women sitting in hot underground trains. His companions, however, only remember one of each of those things. He suggests that memory is redundant, and that it repeats things so that cities can exist.

Thin Cities. 1. Isaura is the city of a thousand wells and supposedly exists over a deep, underground lake. Wherever people dig wells they can draw water, and it has a dark green border that follows the edge of the underground lake. Because of this, there are two forms of religion in Isaura. Some people believe that the city's gods live in the lake. Others think that the gods live in the buckets that draw water up to pumps, windmills, and rooftop reservoirs. Isaura only moves upward.

Kublai Khan sends ambassadors from all over to inspect the far reaches of his empire. They describe things in languages that Kublai doesn't understand. When Marco Polo arrives, however, they communicate differently. He doesn't know the language, so he expresses himself with gestures, emotional cries, animal sounds, or objects pulled from his bags and arranged like **chess** pieces. Marco performs and Kublai has to interpret what he means. Kublai can understand, but he's never sure whether Marco is describing adventures of his own, someone else's adventures, or an astrologer's prophecy. Despite this, Kublai memorizes the signs and feels as though they turn his empire into data.

Through Despina, Marco Polo seems to suggest that people view things through the lens of what they don't have, hence sailors seeing a desert while camel drivers see a ship. This becomes its own kind of cycle (in that Despina will always be described in these two opposing but related ways) and its own way of defining the city (in that Despina is either a place of ships or camels—or possibly, both).



Zirna seems, at first, to closely resemble *Zora*—but unlike *Zora*, *Zirna* shows that people remember things differently depending on who they are and how they experience something. While there may be some similar threads to Marco Polo and his friends' experiences in *Zirna*, they remember things differently because they're all different people.



In the thin cities, Calvino begins to look at how religion functions and how a person's perspective influences how they think of the divine. The gods in the lake would indicate that humans will never see the gods and can only blindly trust that the water will continue to be there. Gods in the buckets, meanwhile, give people an opportunity to see those gods and choose to mimic them by striving for better, just as the gods continue to rise.



Kublai learning Marco's signs here offers another lesson in semiotics: because the two share an understanding of emotions, animal sounds, and objects, it's possible for Marco to communicate effectively—in other words, they both know what those things stand for. Kublai's thought that the signs are turning his empire into data speaks to the fact that his goal is to understand and interpret, something that the novel seems to suggest he won't be successful in doing, since he's not always sure of what Marco is saying.



Marco eventually learns the Tartar language and his accounts become the most precise of all Kublai's ambassadors. Even though they're able to communicate with words, Kublai still connects everything to the gestures or objects that Marco used early on. One day, he asks if learning all the emblems will allow him to possess his empire; Marco responds that when he learns all the emblems, Kublai himself will become an emblem.

Marco Polo suggests here that learning something through stories isn't enough to truly understand, an idea he also proposed in Zora, the city that disappeared because people only remembered it. Experience, on the other hand, may be an individual experience, but it keeps a person from becoming staid and stuck, as Marco suggests will happen to Kublai.



CHAPTER 2

Kublai Khan grouses that his other ambassadors warn him of famines and conspiracies, or bring news of turquoise mines. He says that Marco Polo only tells stories, and he asks what the point of his traveling is. Marco answers that no matter what he says, Kublai will see things from the perspective of his palace steps, where they're sitting currently. Kublai admits that he's lost in thought, but Marco might as well not travel. Marco knows that Kublai wants to think privately, so the conversation takes place in Kublai's head. Both men sit silently, smoke pipes, and imagine each other's questions and answers.

Kublai doesn't understand that Marco's travels are what give him the knowledge and the ability to be able to tell all these fantastical stories—in essence, it's necessary to have some degree of experience in order to be able to most effectively use one's imagination. Marco's note that Kublai will always see things from his palace steps speaks to the idea that a person's perspective influences how they see the world. As an emperor, Kublai will always see things through that particular lens—it's impossible, per the logic of the novel, for him to truly understand how a layperson sees the world.



Marco imagines answering—or Kublai imagines him answering—that the more a person gets lost, the better they understand where they've been. Kublai imagines interrupting and asks if Marco goes through life looking to the past. Marco either explains or imagines explaining that he always looks forward, but that his past changes depending on where he's going. In each new city, he discovers a new part of his past. Marco enters a city and sees a man whose life he could live, if he'd made a different decision. He thinks that unreached futures are dead branches of the past. Kublai asks if Marco is traveling to relive his past, which the narrator suggests is the same as asking if he travels to recover his future. Marco replies that through travel, a person recognizes what's theirs—and all the things that will never be theirs.

Marco asserts here that by traveling, people can come to a better understanding of how they fit into the world, past and present. Marco is able to see all the paths he didn't take by traveling, as traveling gives him a glimpse of all the ways his life could've gone. Further, Marco suggests that all these lives that never happened are part of him, even if he never actually experienced them—essentially, all of Marco's thoughts make him who he is, not just what he does in actuality. Linking past and future at the end also creates a cycle between the two and suggests that it's not as much a cycle, but that past and future are, within a single person, one and the same.



Cities and signs. 5. When a traveler enters Maurilia, residents invite them to look at postcards of the city in the past. The postcards show chickens where the bus station is and a bandstand where the overpass is now. To make the residents happy, the traveler must say that they prefer the city in the postcards to the real one, but it's a fine line. Maurilia is now a magnificent metropolis, though the old provincial Maurilia was charming—but nobody thought it was charming then.

That nobody thought Maurilia was charming when it was small and provincial speaks to the power of memory and of nostalgia. In Maurilia, the past, as represented by these postcards, seems to hold way more sway for the residents than the magnificent city they actually inhabit. By dwelling on the past, they're likely missing out on enjoying the Maurilia of today.



Marco Polo warns Kublai Khan against telling the residents that sometimes, cities rise and fall on the same spot and share the same name. The people might stay the same, unaware. He suggests it's pointless to fight over whether the new cities are better than the old, since the cities aren't the same. In the case of Maurilia, the city in the postcard is an entirely different city that just happened to be called Maurilia.

Thin cities. 4. Fedora is a gray stone metropolis and in the center, there's a building with a crystal globe in every room. Each globe contains a model of a different Fedora that never came to pass. This building is the city's museum and inhabitants visit to study the globe that best corresponds to their desires. Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan that on his map of the empire, he must make room for the stone Fedora and the tiny Fedoras. All the different Fedoras are just assumptions. The stone one holds what isn't yet necessary but is thought to be necessary; the small ones contain what once seemed possible but isn't possible a moment later.

Trading cities. 3. A traveler journeying toward an unknown city wonders what the palace, the bazaar, and the theater will be like. All cities are different, but as soon as a person arrives in one, they can figure out where everything is. Marco Polo suggests that, according to some, this confirms the idea that every person has a formless city in their mind composed of differences. This is all upended in Zoe. In Zoe, a person can sleep, cook, rule, and sell anywhere. Public baths and hospitals look exactly the same. Travelers roam around, unable to discern Zoe's features. The traveler wonders if Zoe is the place of "indivisible existence," and if that's true, why the city exists at all—there's no line to separate inside from outside.

Thin Cities. 2. Marco Polo describes Zenobia, which is wonderful: houses stand high on stilts with balconies and platforms throughout. Those are connected by ladders and hanging sidewalks. Nobody remembers why Zenobia's founders did this, and it's impossible to tell if they'd be pleased with the Zenobia of today, which is certainly bigger and more sprawling than the original plan. However, if someone were to ask a resident of Zenobia to describe the perfect life, the resident will always talk about a city that draws from Zenobia's basic elements. Marco warns against trying to decide if Zenobia is a happy or unhappy city, emphasizing that these categories are silly. More useful is dividing cities into those that, through their changes, still create desires, and cities where desires destroy the city or are destroyed by the city.

By suggesting that Maurilia is actually multiple different cities, Marco implies that when a city changes so dramatically, it becomes a fundamentally different place. While its past may be a part of Maurilia, the residents' outlook means that the city is something entirely other than its provincial beginnings.



Al though Marco insists that all of these cities—the stone Fedora and the globes—are all Fedora, they're still all not the same one. Again, this speaks to the way in which people's perspectives alter how they see the world: in this situation, they see entirely different cities with the same name. The existence of the globes in the first place again suggests that humans can't achieve perfection, and further, that perfection is different for every person.



Zoe speaks to people's anxieties in regards to telling things apart. Marco suggests that it's extremely unsettling to not have any rules or delineations of what happens where, indicating that it's a natural human inclination to want to sort things into neat categories and make them fit. However, this is impossible to do in Zoe, just as in the novel itself, suggesting that while such an urge may be normal, it's not always fruitful to follow through. No matter what, places that can't be categorized, to a person intent on categorizing, are unsettling and can't be understood.



While Zoe turned ideas of what a city should be on its head, Zenobia seems able to somehow please everyone—though again, each resident presumably describes something slightly different, just with the same elements. While Zenobia itself may not be entirely perfect, it's possible for individual people to find something that feels nearly perfect to them in the city, again showing how a person's perception and experiences color how they interpret their surroundings.



Trading Cities. 1. Eighty miles northwest is the city of Euphemia. Traders of seven nations gather four times per year to trade, but they don't just come to buy and sell. They come for the nightly fires where everyone gathers to tell stories about wolves, sisters, battles, and lovers. Travelers know that when they embark on their long journeys after being in Euphemia and they call up their memories, their memories will have morphed to reflect the stories that others told.

At first, Marco Polo communicates by pulling out objects and then moving and crying out. Kublai Khan can't always figure out how those objects fit into the stories—for instance, a quiver of arrows could signify war, hunting, or an armorer's shop. What is most interesting for Kublai are the spaces in between what Marco says, as he feels he can wander through Marco's stories. Eventually, Marco learns the language—though it's possible that Kublai just learns to understand Marco. Their conversations, however, aren't as happy, and Marco soon returns to using gestures and sounds. He begins giving the basic information on a city in words, and then describes the rest in a sort of sign language. Kublai responds in kind. Their motions become smaller until they can communicate without moving. Communicating in this way becomes less fun, and Marco and Kublai often sit in silence.

CHAPTER 3

Kublai Khan begins to notice that Marco Polo's cities are all similar, as though he's not traveling between them but instead is just changing elements of one city. He begins to mentally dismantle the cities and reconstruct them. Kublai interrupts Marco and says that going forward, he's going to describe cities and Marco will say if the cities exist. The first he describes is a city of stairs on a bay. It has a tall glass tank, a palm tree that plays the harp, and a marble table set with marble foods.

Marco interjects that he was just describing that city. Kublai asks where it is and what it's called, but Marco says it doesn't have a name or a location. This is because they must not consider imaginable cities that aren't constructed with a connecting thread or an inner rule. He suggests that cities are like dreams in that everything can be dreamed, but the most unexpected dreams conceal desires or fears. Cities are also made of desires and fears, even if their threads seem secret. Kublai insists that he doesn't have desires or fears and his dreams are composed rationally, but Marco points out that cities also think that people have composed them rationally—and that doesn't keep them standing. Cities are delightful because of how they answer a traveler's questions or because they ask a question, not because of their wonders.

This note about how traders' memories change speaks to how malleable memory is. Just by hearing someone else's stories about the same subject matter, it's possible to begin forgetting one's own memories, or for one's own memories to alter significantly. This suggests that in some ways, memory is collective among humanity, not individual.



As Kublai and Marco learn to communicate more effectively with each other, they get less and less joy out of communicating at all. In particular, the fact that Kublai feels he can walk within the spaces of Marco's stories shows that stories can be just as meaningful and compelling as experiencing an event firsthand. And that there are spaces between Marco's stories allows Kublai to bring his own experiences to the event, rather than receive extremely detailed information that leaves very little room for him to use his imagination. In other words, it's possible to be too precise when communicating, as it diminishes enjoyment.



By interrupting Marco, Kublai is trying to take control of the conversation so that he can learn how to properly possess all the cities in his empire. Kublai now thinks he knows enough to be able to conjure cities out of thin air, something that, per the logic of the novel, he can't actually do. He needs some experience of these cities in order to properly describe and understand them.



The idea that cities and dreams are both composed rationally, but that this doesn't get them anywhere is another clue that it's futile to try to fully make sense of the world and how things fit together. The idea that cities delight people because of the questions they ask or answer turns this back to the individual's experience and suggests that cities are delightful because they help people understand themselves, not necessarily the cities.



Cities and Desire. 5. After six days and seven nights, a traveler will arrive in the white city Zobeide. The winding streets describe the city's founding, in which men from many places all dreamed of chasing a naked woman through a city and lost her. The men all converged in Zobeide and decided to build the city of their dreams—but in Zobeide, they don't give the woman a way to escape. They all wait for their dream to happen in real life, but none of them ever see the woman again. Eventually, they forget the dream. Other men arrive after having a similar dream. They construct new streets to capture their dream woman. The original men don't understand what draws people to Zobeide, which is ugly and a trap.

Cities and Signs. 4. Marco Polo says that travelers always have to deal with changes in language. In Hypatia, the change is a difference in things, not words. He recalls entering Hypatia and wandering through beautiful lagoons. He expected to see women bathing, but he only found crabs eating dead bodies. Feeling cheated, Marco went to ask the sultan. In the palace, he found convicts. He went to the library to find a philosopher. He found him in a playground. The philosopher told Marco, "signs form a language, but not the one you think you know." Marco realized that he needed to reevaluate how he reads signs. Now, he knows he'll find beautiful women in the stables, and if he wants to leave, he should go to the highest point of the citadel to wait for a ship—but it might not come, as language is about deceit.

Thin Cities. 3. It's impossible to say if Armilla is the way it is because it's unfinished, demolished, or enchanted. It has no walls, ceilings, or floors and instead, it only has water pipes, bathtubs, and sinks rising to the sky. Armilla isn't deserted, however. Young and beautiful women relax in bathtubs or comb their hair in mirrors. The water glistens. Marco Polo has decided that nymphs and naiads inhabit Armilla. They may have driven out humans, or humans may have built Armilla to earn the nymphs' favor after misusing the earth's water.

Trading Cities. 2. In Chloe, everyone is a stranger. Upon meeting someone, people imagine conversations, caresses, and bites—but they never speak or look at each other. Marco Polo describes a scene in which several people converge and something invisible runs through them. Other people arrive. When people end up sheltering from the rain together or listen to music in the square, Chloe's residents engage in seductions, meetings, and orgies without doing or saying anything. The city is chaste, but it vibrates. Marco suggests that if everyone in Chloe began to live their dreams, all their fantasies and stories about the other people would cease.

Zobeide adds another dimension to the idea that human desire is normal by showing that, in this case, desire isn't good—in fact, it's sinister and predatory, but appealing all the same. However, there is some hope in Zobeide, as the original founders seem to have come to the understanding that their desires are ugly, which indicates that it's possible to fight back against the ugly parts of human nature—though, possibly, not until it's too late and places like Zobeide have already been constructed from those desires.



The assertion that language is about deceit ties back to semiotics. As Marco moves through Hypatia, he has to relearn how to read the city in order to find what he wants. This, along with the assertion that language is about deceit, gets at the fact that language, spoken or written, ostensibly has very little to do with what it describes. The word cat, for instance, either written or spoken, looks and sounds nothing like the creature it refers to—rather, people have learned (or have been deceived) to know that the combination of letters, and the sound they make, describes a house pet.



The possibility that people built Armilla to make it up to the nymphs after abusing the earth's water again pulls the novel into the modern world, as it alludes to climate change, water crises, and pollution. It suggests that at some point, humans are going to have to reckon with what they've done to the planet, even if it's as fantastical as building a city composed entirely of plumbing.



The important thing about Chloe is that people continue to conduct themselves silently because, if they were to acknowledge or engage with others, all the stories they've been telling themselves in their heads about other people would immediately become invalid and untrue. The only way for them to exist in a perfect world is to do so in their imaginations, as it's impossible to do it in the real world.



Cities and Eyes. 1. Ancient people built Valdrada on the shores of a lake. Everything rises up over the lake and travelers see both the real city and the reflected city. Everything that happens in the real Valdrada repeats in its reflection, and residents know that everything they do includes their action and its reflection. They never behave absentmindedly, and lovers and murderers know that the reflection of what they're doing matters more than what they're doing. Sometimes the reflection increases an action's value; sometimes it diminishes it. The twin cities aren't equal, as they aren't truly symmetrical. The cities live for each other, but they don't love each other.

Kublai Khan describes a city he dreamed of to Marco Polo. In it, the harbor faces north and the water is black. Boats wait for departing passengers to say a final goodbye to their families on the docks. Everyone cries as the boatman calls the passengers onto the boats. Travelers look back at their loved ones as they board ships further out at sea, and the families watch the ships disappear around the cape. Kublai commands Marco to explore and find this city, but Marco says that he will certainly find it at some point. However, he won't return to tell Kublai about it, as the city is real and people only ever depart from it.

CHAPTER 4

Kublai Khan anxiously smokes and listens to Marco Polo's stories. Sometimes he insists that Marco's cities don't exist and laments that his empire is rotting and infecting everything around it. Marco agrees that the empire is ill but says that, even worse, the empire is trying to get used to it. He seeks to find where there's still happiness and suggests that if Kublai wants to measure the darkness, he needs to look for the light.

Other times, Kublai is euphoric about the state of his empire. He boastfully says that his empire is made up of crystals and chastises Marco for telling sad and disappointing stories. To this, Marco replies that while Kublai builds his final city, he's busy collecting ashes of the possible cities that vanish to make room for the final one. He says that when Kublai is so unhappy that he can't recover, he'll be able to measure his sadness and use that measurement to build a diamond big enough to overcome it. If he doesn't, he'll be wrong from the start.

Valdrada's reflections are a nod to Guy Debord's work Society of the Spectacle, which proposes that in modern society, images mediate how people experience reality—as in Valdrada, where the images mean more than the actual actions do. This begins to round out the idea that the seemingly fantastical cities actually critique modern society and the world as Calvino and the reader know it, not the world that the historical Marco Polo and Kublai Khan knew.



It's possible to read Kublai's imagined city as a representation of the end of his own empire—at which point, Marco suggests, he's not going to come back to chat with the fallen emperor anymore. That Marco knows he's going to find it someday suggests that it's inevitable that an empire like Kublai Khan's will eventually fall, even if it seems all-powerful at this point.



According to Marco, even worse than the empire rotting is that it's trying to get used to it—in other words, complacency with failure or inadequacy is worse than failing or being inadequate in the first place. The suggestion to look for the happiness and the light introduces the idea that there's always something good to look for, even in the worst times.



Kublai's habit of jumping from depression to euphoria speaks to how people can change how they see the world, depending on their moods or perception—Kublai, like anyone else, can see the world as failing or as rising. Marco's warning to measure the sadness so that he can make something big enough to overshadow it is fantastical enough to seem impossible, suggesting that it's not actually possible to build something capable of overcoming sadness.



Cities and Signs. 5. Addressing Kublai Khan, Marco Polo says that no one knows better than he does that cities can't be confused with the words people use to describe them, but that cities and words are linked regardless. As an example he offers Olivia, which is prosperous. It has palaces and lawns with sprinkler systems and white peacocks. However, the words also imply that Olivia is covered in grease and soot, and that pedestrians are crushed in the streets. People are industrious, but he insists that Kublai, being an emperor, thinks of industry in a different way.

Marco says that Olivia is free and refined and that women in canoes glide along at night, but that is only to remind Kublai that when men and women convene on the banks, someone always bursts out laughing sarcastically. Marco insists that he can't use different words to describe Olivia. If Olivia really did have peacocks and industry, it would be a "fly-ridden hole" and Marco would have to describe it by talking about soot and sarcasm. He declares that falsehood is always in things, never in words.

Thin Cities. 4. Sophronia is composed of two half-cities. One half has a roller coaster, a carousel, and a big top. The other half is made of stone, marble, and cement and includes factories and palaces. One half is permanent and every year, the other half moves to find a new half-city. Every year, the half of stone and marble packs up to leave, abandoning the Sophronia of delights to wait until its other half returns so it can be whole again.

Trading Cities. 3. When travelers enter Eutropia, they'll find a number of similar cities. Eutropia is *all* of these cities, but only one is inhabited at a time. When Eutropia's inhabitants feel weary, they all pack up and move to the next Eutropia to get a new job, spouse, and hobby. There aren't major distinctions of wealth or authority, so the system works well. Marco Polo says that Eutropia exists on an empty **chessboard**. Inhabitants repeat the same things over and over again with different actors. Eutropia is always the same. The god Mercury, who is fickle, worked this miracle and is worshiped in the city.

Cities and Eyes. 2. How a person feels influences how they see Zemrude. A person who walks through whistling will look up and see curtains and fountains. A person who goes along hanging their head will become fixated by the gutters, fish scales, and garbage. Neither aspect of the city is truer, but it's more common to hear about the upper Zemrude from people who only remember it. Before too long, everyone looks down. It's not impossible to learn to look up again, but it's rare, so people walk along, looking at cellars, foundations, and wells.

Here, Marco begins to get at the idea that a person's socioeconomic status influences how they understand certain ideas, like industry. To someone like Kublai Khan, who's an emperor and doesn't have to labor physically, work might seem idealized or noble; to people who actually have to sweat and toil, it's likely not as romanticized. The words are the same, but they can mean entirely different things to different people.



Declaring that falsehood is in things, not words, Marco turns what he said earlier about Hypatia (that language is deceit) upside down. In both cases, however, he makes the case that trying to intellectually pick this apart isn't necessarily a fruitful endeavor, even if it's possibly entertaining. Someone is always getting fooled, either through language or through how they interpret what they see.



When the seemingly solid half of Sophronia is the one to pack up every year, it suggests another cycle of civilization—and implies that what a person can find anywhere, no matter where a place is in the cycle, are delights. The bright and fun parts of the world, in essence, are the ones that can always be found, while civilization proper is in shorter supply.



The system in Eutropia suggests that it's normal for people to desire variety and new things, but that it's actually not possible to ever really achieve a life of variety—these people, for instance, never truly get to do anything markedly different when they move cities. That different actors repeat the same things over and over again also suggests that on a grander scale, humanity follows a set pattern.



The idea that a person new to Zemrude will, eventually, end up looking down suggests that enough time in one place will inevitably lead to pessimism and hopelessness. The fact that it's hard to transition to looking up again speaks to how difficult it is to break these cycles, but it does indicate that it's possible to do so—something that becomes important later, as residents of cities contemplate their eventual demise.



Cities and Names. 1. Marco Polo can't say much about Aglaura, except to repeat what residents say about it. Ancient people decided Aglaura's qualities. Marco suggests that the Aglaura that people talk about and the Aglaura in real life haven't changed much since ancient times, but odd things are now normal and virtues are now faults. Because of this, nothing people say about Aglaura is strictly true, even if those accounts create an image of a city. As a result, the city people talk about has most of what it needs to exist, but the city that's there exists less. Marco says that the real Aglaura is colorless and dull. And while sometimes he catches something magnificent, he can't voice it because of what people say about Aglaura. People there don't understand that they live in an Aglaura entirely separate from the one in real life.

Kublai Khan says that he's going to describe cities to Marco Polo so that Marco can tell him if they exist, but the cities that Marco visits are always different from those in Kublai's imagination. Kublai says that he's figured out how to construct a model city from which to deduce all other possible cities. It contains all the normal aspects, so he just needs to figure out the exceptions. Marco answers that his model city contains only exceptions. If his city is the *most* improbable, they only need to subtract exceptions until they get to real cities. However, this has a limit, as he'd eventually end up creating "cities too probable to be real."

CHAPTER 5

From the highest point of his palace, Kublai Khan watches his empire grow. However, the newly conquered territories house emaciated people and dry rivers. Kublai decides that the empire should grow within itself. Now, rivers flood and Kublai can see cities filled with wealth and traffic. He thinks that his empire is being crushed by its own weight. In his dreams, transparent cities appear. Kublai tells Marco Polo that last night, he dreamed of a city with spires built so that the moon can rest on them as it crosses the sky. Marco answers that the city is called Lalage and that its inhabitants built it that way so that the moon would grant the city the power to grow endlessly. Kublai adds that the moon, which is grateful, *also* granted Lalage the ability to grow in lightness.

Thin Cities. 5. Marco Polo explains how Octavia was made. It sits over the void between two mountains, with ropes, chains, and catwalks. There's nothing to see below. Under the city is a giant net. People in Octavia live less uncertainly than other people do. They know their net won't last forever.

Aglaura is another city built on assumptions; people assume that Aglaura is still the exact same city that ancient people described, and because they rely so heavily on those descriptions, it's impossible to accurately describe what Aglaura is in the present. This speaks to the way that storytelling can tell the truth, but it can also obscure the truth by continuing to parrot things that are no longer correct. This, Calvino subtly suggests, is also how people talk about the modern world. People talk about it as though it's the dream of the future, which allows them to ignore the horrors of what it is in actuality.



These logic exercises, notably, don't get either Kublai or Marco any closer to describing cities. In other words, this is still a pointless venture for Kublai, as trying to come up with real cities out of thin air won't help him understand the cities that are definitely a part of his empire.



The idea that Kublai's empire is doing poorly in its furthest, newly conquered territories, as well as in its well-developed parts, takes issue with ideas of expansion and colonialism on one side and the existence of wealthy empires on the other—a situation that Kublai believes is untenable. Lalage is constructed in such a way as to suggest that its inhabitants are trying to mimic what, in theory, is the perfection of the skies and of the universe, while Kublai's comment that Lalage can grow in lightness suggests that there's something to gain from acknowledging powerful entities.



Octavia is a clear indicator that in Calvino's understanding, nothing of human civilization can last forever. Octavia just has a leg up over other cities or empires because it knows full well that it's going to collapse one day.



Trading Cities. 4. In Ersilia, people stretch strings between corners of houses to denote relationships of blood, trade, or authority. They leave when the strings become too thick to pass through, and leave only poles and the strings. Refugees look back; they're still looking at Ersilia. They rebuild Ersilia in another place and stretch strings in a way that they hope is more complex and more regular than the last time. They continue to move from place to place. Travelers will come upon the ruins of these abandoned cities and be able to look at webs of relationships seeking a form.

When people move and rebuild Ersilia again and again, trying to make their relationships with their neighbors increasingly better, it suggests both that people are constantly seeking better and that it's impossible to ever truly achieve anything better by doing this. Further, when the strings remain, it suggests that human connection is more solid than the cities where humans live. It's possible to see how people connected with one another, even if the cities themselves are gone.



Cities and Eyes. 3. Baucis is a march of seven days through the woods. After those seven days, a traveler can't see the city, but they've arrived. Slim stilts rise out of the ground, and the city exists above the clouds. Residents rarely come down. People believe several different things about Baucis—some believe the people there hate the earth, while others believe that they respect the earth so much that they avoid touching it. Others think that the people in Baucis love the earth as it was before they existed, so the people study it with telescopes and contemplate their own absence.

The final possibility of what goes on in Baucis mirrors people's fascination with how humanity and civilization have changed the world. The people in Baucis are essentially doing what today's archaeologists do and looking at the world as it once was before humans changed it. However, the tone of this passage also suggests that this is a selfish endeavor and, because of this, doesn't do anyone much good.



Cities and Names. 2. There are two types of tiny gods in Leandra. One kind, the Penates, follows families from house to house. The other, the Lares, belong to the houses themselves. The two types spend plenty of time together, commenting on family happenings and fighting. It's impossible to tell them apart. Lares have seen numerous different Penates pass through, while Penates try to make places for themselves amongst snobby or distrustful Lares. Penates believe that they're Leandra's soul, no matter how new they are, while the Lares think of the Penates as temporary guests. Both types share a habit of criticizing things. Lares talk about the environment before it was ruined, while the Penates talk about families of the past. At night, it's possible to hear them talking about the future.

The struggle and alliances between the Penates and the Lares can be read as a reflection of how people view immigration depending on whether they're the immigrants (the Penates) or the natives of a country accepting immigrants (the Lares). Immigration is an important aspect of the modern world, but Calvino seems to suggest here that while there may be disagreement as to whether immigrants or natives are the true soul of a place, everyone still looks forward to the future just the same. In this sense, the ways that people divide themselves aren't especially useful, given how similar Calvino suggests people are at their core.



Cities and the Dead. 1. Whenever someone enters the square in Melania, they get caught in a dialogue between a braggart soldier, a young wastrel, a prostitute, and an amorous daughter. If they return years later, they find that the dialogue is still going on. This is because Melania's population constantly renews itself; as someone participating in the dialogue dies, someone is born to take their place. Things change, but the dialogue never pauses. Sometimes one person plays multiple roles; other times, thousands play one role. With time, the roles also change. It's possible to notice that the dialogue changes, but Melania's residents don't live long enough to notice.

What goes on in Melania suggests that in the modern world, almost nothing changes. People play certain roles, those roles are always filled by someone, and the conversation never truly moves forward. This again suggests that the modern world is somewhat staid and stuck.



Marco Polo describes a bridge stone by stone for Kublai Khan. Kublai asks which stone supports the bridge, but Marco answers that there's no one stone that supports the bridge. Rather, the arch, composed of rocks, supports the bridge. Kublai is silent and then asks why Marco is telling him about the stones, since he only cares about the arch. Marco answers that there's no arch without the stones.

Each stone can be read as a representation of an individual person, while the bridge reflects all of humanity, made up of individual human beings. Kublai is looking for proof of his own importance by asking which stone is most important, while Marco suggests that no person is any more important than anyone else.



CHAPTER 6

Kublai Khan asks Marco Polo if he's ever seen a city like Kin-sai, his latest conquest. There are bridges over canals, palaces with doorsteps in the water, and boats unloading vegetables. Marco says that he never imagined a city like this one could exist. That evening, Marco describes cities. Normally Kublai goes to bed when he begins yawning, but tonight, he insists on staying up. At dawn, Marco insists that he's described every city he knows. Kublai points out that Marco never speaks of Venice. With a smile, Marco asks what city Kublai thinks Marco's been talking about, as he describes Venice every time he describes another city. For him, Venice is implicit. Kublai says that Marco should begin his stories with his departure from Venice. Marco says that once memories become words, they disappear. He suggests that in describing other cities, he's already lost Venice.

By essentially admitting that he's really only talking about Venice, Marco suggests that a person always carries their past with them when they travel; it's impossible to escape where one comes from, even as they travel through cities that are very different from home. Marco's refusal to speak explicitly about Venice again speaks to the fleeting, fickle nature of memory. By talking about his memories of Venice, Marco understands that he'll begin to remember it differently and, he seems to imply, not as accurately.



Trading Cities. 5. In Esmeralda, streets and canals intersect. The shortest distance anywhere in Esmeralda is a zigzag, not a straight line, and travelers have infinite options for how to get somewhere. Esmeralda's inhabitants are never bored, especially since they have to climb stairs up and down. Calm lives have no repetition, while adventurous lives face no restrictions. Cats, thieves, and illicit lovers in Esmeralda move along gutters and balconies, while below, **rats** run with smugglers through manholes and ditches. A map of Esmeralda should include all of these routes. More difficult, however, is to record the routes of the **swallows** that swoop overhead and dominate the city.

When Marco Polo begins telling Kublai Khan how to map these various cities, it shows that he's still aware that Kublai is listening so that he can figure out how to possess the cities in his empire. He also seems to suggest that it's nearly impossible to chart routes of birds, even if they're one of the most important parts of a city. Given this and the birds being a symbol of hope, Marco suggests that it's impossible to map out how hope develops in a city, even if they should do so to understand the city.



Cities and Eyes. 4. When a traveler arrives in Phyllis, they gleefully look at bridges over canals and a variety of different windows. The city offers surprises at every turn, and travelers believe that the person who looks at Phyllis daily and can constantly discover new mysteries must be happy. Travelers leave with regret, but some have to stay. For them, the city begins to fade and they stop noticing the windows. They follow zigzag lines and the streets. Phyllis becomes the shortest way to get somewhere, and people follow buried memories rather than what they see. Many eyes scan the skyline, but they may as well be looking at a blank page. Many cities are like Phyllis and are invisible, except when someone catches them by surprise.

Phyllis illustrates how, once a place loses its shine and becomes home, people generally stop engaging with it like they engage with new exciting locales. It becomes boring and normal, even if it once contained any number of delights and new things. When Marco says that people follow their memories rather than what they see, it indicates that people are going off of their interpretations of a place rather than what they actually see—and if they were to really look, they'd see that the city is no less interesting than it used to be.



Cities and Names. 3. Marco Polo explains that, for a long time, Pyrrha existed in his mind as a fortified city on a bay with high windows, a deep central square, and a well in the middle. Even though he'd never actually seen Pyrrha, it existed in his mind like other cities he's never visited. When he eventually visited, everything he'd imagined disappeared and Pyrrha became what it is. At that point, he thought that he'd always known that one can't see the sea in Pyrrha, and that the houses are low and separated by open lots filled with sawmills. Now, when he thinks of Pyrrha, he thinks of the city he saw, but his mind still holds many cities he's never seen and never will see. The city above the bay is still in his mind, but he can't call it by name or remember how he ever called it Pyrrha.

Cities and the Dead. 2. The city of Adelma is the farthest Marco Polo has been. He landed there at dusk and noticed that the sailor who tied his boat looked like a man he fought with and who died. An old man looked like a long-dead fisherman whom Marco remembered from childhood, while a fever victim on the ground reminded Marco of his dying father. Marco reasoned that if Adelma is a dream where he encounters the dead, the dream scares him. If Adelma is real, the resemblances will disappear. He reasoned that at some point, the number of people he knows who are dead will outnumber the number living. He began to wonder if he looked dead to other people, too. Marco wondered if Adelma is where people arrive dying to find people already dead. He reasoned that he was dead too and realized "the beyond is not happy."

Cities and the Sky. 1. Eudoxia spreads upwards and down in confusing alleys, dead ends, and hovels. There's a carpet there that allows people to see Eudoxia's true form. At first, the carpet seems to have nothing to do with the city. When a person studies it, however, they decide that they can find any spot in the city on the carpet. It's easy to get lost in Eudoxia, but with the carpet, people can find their way. Everyone compares it with their own version of the city, hoping to find an answer. Once, they questioned an oracle, and the oracle said that one object—Eudoxia or the carpet—is a map of the universe; the other, a human approximation. People believed that the carpet was divine for a long time, but it's also possible to argue that Eudoxia, which is crooked and failing, is the map of the universe.

While it's possible to imagine any number of things about a place that one hasn't actually seen with their own eyes, once a person has been to a certain place, it's impossible to think of it in the same imaginary way that they once did. This again shows that a person's experience (or lack thereof) directly influences how they think of and interpret a place, even if, as the novel suggests elsewhere, their memories of a place may not also be entirely correct.



In Adelma, Marco Polo begins to contemplate his own impending death, the end of his life cycle. This is extremely disturbing for him, which suggests that contemplating the end, either of one's own life or of humanity on a larger scale, is universally unsettling. Beginning to wonder if he looks dead to Adelma's other residents shows that as he begins to gain this perspective, he's able to look outside himself and think of how other people interpret the world around them in the same way.



Nowhere in the narration does Marco Polo say that the carpet is a direct representation of Eudoxia; rather, the carpet seems to be a representation of Eudoxia because people want it to seem that way—once again, people's perspectives change how they look at the city. However, this city takes things a step further by casting doubt on whether the carpet truly is divine, or if people are just imposing artificial significance on it. The idea that Eudoxia is the map of the universe is far less comforting, given how confusing, dirty, and doomed the city sounds.



Kublai Khan declares that Marco Polo's journey is truly one through memory, and that he's trying to escape nostalgia. Kublai spent the last hour toying with questions about the past and the future, and finally, he demands to know if Marco is smuggling moods or states of grace. It's possible that this exchange was imagined, however, as both men sit and smoke their pipes. Marco watches his pipe smoke and thinks of misty skies over seas and mountains that, when they disappear, reveal cities. Or, he sees heavy smoke that hangs over metropolises haunted by death.

Calvino leaves it up to the reader to decide if this exchange between Kublai and Marco actually happened, thus encouraging readers to apply what he's already explored in terms of experience coloring people's perception to their own reading experience. It's possible to interpret this passage either way; what a reader chooses, however, offers them clues into their own beliefs and past experiences.



CHAPTER 7

Kublai Khan insists that it seems like Marco Polo hasn't left the garden and hasn't had time to visit the places he describes. Marco says that everything he sees and does takes place in a calm mental space and he exists on a river and in Kublai's garden at the same time. Kublai says he's not sure he's in the garden either; he might be conquering more territory. Marco suggests that the garden only exists in their dreams and they haven't stopped fighting or trading, but when they close their eyes, they can think. Kublai suggests that they're actually two beggars digging through garbage they think is treasure and drunk on bad wine. Marco suggests that maybe what's left of the world is a wasteland of garbage and Kublai's garden. Their eyelids separate the two places, but they can't know what's inside and what's outside.

As Kublai and Marco's conversation begins to break down into these theoretical exercises, it again suggests that these exercises, while interesting and entertaining, are somewhat pointless in terms of actually making sense of the world. However, important to this exchange is Kublai's suggestion that he and Marco are beggars, as this shows that he's taking to heart Marco's belief that they can't be sure of what's actually happening. Rather, they can try to interpret events, but they can't ever come to a truly solid conclusion.



Cities and Eyes. 5. When a traveler crosses the river and the mountain pass, they'll come to Moriana. It has alabaster gates, coral columns, and villas of glass. Girls dance beneath chandeliers. Return travelers will know that cities like this have an opposite side: walking in a semicircle will bring a person to an expanse of rusting metal, spiky planks, sooty pipes, and ropes only good for hanging oneself. To move from one to the other makes the city seem like it continues in perspective. Instead, the city has no thickness and, like a sheet of paper, exists as opposites—a person can only look at one side at a time, and can't separate the two.

The first part of Moriana's description recalls some of the first cities detailed in the novel, which seemed more clearly delightful than the bleaker cities that follow. When Marco asserts that all beautiful cities have a dark side, however, it makes it clear that even those early cities weren't entirely good. Rather, all cities and places have a dark underbelly that's an intrinsic part of them, no matter how wonderful and good they may seem on the surface.



Cities and Names. 4. Clarice is a glorious city with an awful history. It has decayed and recovered several times, but it always keeps its original version as the ideal model. Decadence gives way to plagues and slowly, survivors emerge like **rats** to loot but, like **birds**, want to nest. People take things to use them differently, such as using curtains as sheets or funerary urns as plant pots. This creates a "survivors' Clarice," and even though there are hovels, Clarice's splendor is still there—just different. That in turn morphs into a new city, and people move in who didn't know the old Clarice. As this happens, Clarice is destroyed—despite its wealth, it feels alien.

Ascribing both rat and bird imagery to the exact same people suggests that just as cities always have a dark side, so do humans—there's always an inclination to be hopeful, and an inclination to be greedy and gluttonous. The way that people in Clarice begin to reuse items suggests that as time passes, they get further and further away from who they once were. This begins a cycle of renewal and decay, showing again that civilization is bound to repeat itself again and again.



People put shards of the original Clarice under glass so they can use them to remember the old city. The city continues to grow and change as the name stays the same. Each new Clarice shows off items from the old Clarices and now, nobody knows when the tops stood on the columns, since those tops functioned as tables for a while and now are in a museum. People believe that there was an original Clarice, but there's no proof. The only thing they know for sure is that they shift and shuffle the same number of objects. It's possible that Clarice has always been nothing more than a collection of broken objects.

Cities and the Dead. 3. To make the transition to death less abrupt, the inhabitants of Eusapia constructed an identical city underground. They take their corpses there to continue their activities. Plenty of people want a new life in death, so there are lots of duchesses and bankers. There's a hooded group of brothers who take the bodies to the Eusapia of the dead. The brothers exist among the dead, and rumor has it that some are dead and continue to go up and down. Every time they go down, they find that the dead have made new innovations. The living do what they can to keep up with the dead and so the living Eusapia is a copy of the dead Eusapia. Some say that the dead built the living Eusapia in their image. They say that in Eusapia, it's impossible to tell who's alive and who's dead.

Cities and the Sky. 2. In Beersheba, people believe that there's another Beersheba in the sky that's virtuous. If Beersheba would look to the version in the sky, the cities would become one, with silver locks and diamond gates. Beersheba's residents collect precious metals and stones because of this. They also believe that there's another Beersheba underground that contains everything vile and unworthy. They constantly try to diminish anything that resembles this lower city. Some imagine a city with trash everywhere; others imagine that there's a thick sludge that flows down from the sewers, creating a city out of human waste.

Marco Polo says that there's an element of truth to all of this—there is a celestial and an infernal city. However, the residents are wrong about the infernal city, as authoritative architects designed it and it functions perfectly. Beersheba doesn't know that its only good times are when it lets go. The city also contains a planet that glitters with riches that are enclosed in broken umbrellas, candy wrappers, and eggshells. This is the Beersheba in the sky and it's only happy when the residents of Beersheba defecate—only then are the residents not greedy and calculating.

Here, Calvino positions the museums of Clarice in much the same way he positions the people in Baucis, who looked down from the sky to contemplate their own absence. It's impossible in both cases to know what the past was actually like, and because of that, it's impossible to know what the cities are actually like in the present.



The two identical Eusapias recall Valdrada, the city of reflections. In Eusapia, as in Valdrada, the reflection seems to matter more than what people actually do in life, and there's a constant struggle to mimic or try to better what's happening in the reflection. Eusapia takes this a step further than Valdrada does, however, by suggesting that it's impossible to tell which city came first, given how interconnected they are. This, in turn, suggests that humans' reliance on image and imitation will result in being unable to tell reality from fiction at some point.



People in Beersheba strive to be like the city in the sky while scorning the city below them. This suggests that the way people behave hinges largely on how they perceive their own position. The differing opinions of what the lower Beersheba looks like are, notably, different, but both options are made of refuse—the vile part is the part that humans reject.



The revelation that the lower Beersheba was designed on purpose suggests that within Beersheba, the goal is to scare people rather than give them something to strive for. This is made even clearer when Marco notes that the celestial Beersheba is also made of garbage—all versions, in essence, are disgusting and not worth striving for.



Continuous Cities. 1. Leonia changes itself every day. People wake on fresh sheets, wear new clothing, and pull food out of brand new refrigerators. Everything from yesterday, from light bulbs and newspapers to pianos and dinnerware, sits outside in bags for the garbage truck. Marco Polo says that one must measure Leonia by what it throws out rather than its opulence. It's questionable whether the city enjoys new things or whether it enjoys *discarding* things. People welcome street cleaners like angels, but nobody wonders where the refuse goes. As Leonia expands, the garbage piles outside the city rise higher and the trash breaks down more slowly. Leonia's trash would take over the world if other cities weren't fighting for space for their garbage. There could be a landslide at any time. It could destroy Leonia, allowing other cities to expand and take its place.

Marco Polo suggests that the garden overlooks the lake of their minds, while Kublai Khan adds that they both hold this conversation within if they're actually out trading and fighting. Marco suggests that the opposite could also be true: the soldiers and sailors might exist only because he and Kublai are thinking of them. They discuss what other people might exist because they think of them. Kublai admits he never thinks of porters or washerwomen, so Marco says they don't exist. Kublai isn't sure this exercise works, since they need porters and washerwomen to luxuriate in the garden, so Marco declares that everyone else exists and that he and Kublai don't. Kublai insists that they've proved that if they were here, they wouldn't exist. Marco notes that they're here anyway.

CHAPTER 8

Before Marco Polo learns Kublai Khan's language, he spreads out items like helmets, seashells, and fans in a certain order on the black and white tile floor surrounding Kublai's throne. Kublai is a skilled **chess** player, and he understands that moving the items around in certain ways represents a system that tells him about his empire. He reasons that each city is like a game of chess, and when he learns the rules, he'll possess his empire—even if he doesn't know all the cities. The narrator notes that it's actually useless for Marco to use his special items; he could do exactly the same thing with a chessboard and chess pieces by assigning the pieces specific meanings.

Leonia is a clear critique of consumer culture and the huge amount of stuff that people in the modern world own, thanks to a capitalist system that encourages constant purchases. The novel positions this, too, as a cycle, suggesting that as civilizations rise, they eventually get to this point where the goal is to acquire new things and get rid of the old, regardless of the consequences. However, the possibility of a landslide makes it clear that there will be consequences, be it Leonia's demise or the rise of the other cities also fighting for space—which in this case are reminiscent of other empires waiting to rise.



Marco's final point is that no matter what conclusions he and Kublai might come to about the contours or particulars of their existence in the garden or outside of it, the fact remains that they're still here having this conversation. No matter what kinds of philosophical thought or logic they apply to their situation, they still perceive that they're here, telling stories and listening to them, and this belief that they are here in the garden makes it so that they can't comfortably come to conclusions that refute that.



The narrator makes the point yet again that language is malleable by insisting that Marco could describe much the same thing using chess pieces. In this sense, the chessboard and pieces come to represent a language that's fundamentally different from the one Marco's objects represent, but one that nonetheless can convey the same information to someone who, like Kublai, speaks the language.



Marco returns from a mission and finds Kublai waiting for him at the **chessboard**. Kublai instructs him to describe cities using the huge ivory chess pieces. Marco does so successfully, which makes Kublai look for order and reason in how cities rise, adapt, and fall. He sometimes thinks he's going to discover a system that underlies the many ruinous events, but the system of chess is the most straightforward. He stops sending Marco on journeys, and they play chess instead. Kublai knows that the chessboard holds the key to understanding the cities. He begins to wonder what the purpose of the game is, since he wins or loses but the square under the disembodied king remains.

Cities and Names. 5. A person can see Irene from the plateau at dusk. Hermits, shepherds, and travelers all look down at the lights coming on and listen, depending on the time of year, to firecrackers, music, or guns. They wonder if Irene is pleasant or not, though none of them want to visit on account of the bad roads. Kublai Khan asks Marco Polo to tell him what Irene is like inside, but Marco can't: he's never been there, and visiting Irene would turn it into a different city. Irene is one thing for people who pass by and something different for those who never leave it. It's a different city for the first-time visitor and for the person leaving it for the last time. Marco says that each version of the city deserves its own name and it's possible he already described Irene.

Cities and the Dead. 4. Argia is made of earth, not air. The streets and houses are filled with dirt. Nobody knows if the residents can move around, since the dampness is unhealthy for people. From above, it's impossible to see Argia—travelers must believe those who say it's there. Sometimes, if a traveler puts their ear to the ground, they can hear a door slam.

Cities and the Sky. 3. Upon arriving in Thekla, a person will find scaffolding, armatures, and catwalks. If the traveler asks why it's taking so long to build Thekla, the inhabitants will answer that it's so that the city can't begin to fall. If the traveler then asks if they're afraid that the city will fall to pieces, inhabitants reply that it won't just be the city that disintegrates. Frustrated travelers ask what the point is of building a city unless it's a city and ask where the plans are. At the end of the working day, the inhabitants point to the starry sky as their blueprint.

The question of what the point even is of playing chess shows Kublai beginning to question what use there is in trying to ascribe so much meaning to chess and to the individual cities. He sees that even as kings and empires rise and fall, the ground itself that houses empires, kings, and cities remains exactly the same—suggesting, to him, that he's pointless. Instead, what matters is the earth and in a sense, the cities themselves, not just who rules them.



That Marco has a choice to just not go to Irene suggests that travelers have some degree of control over their experiences, but his stated consequences of visiting Irene suggest that travelers will always come up against unforeseen consequences. Going somewhere, he suggests, will inevitably change how a person sees the city and themselves, and cities exist differently for each person who experiences a city.



Argia makes it clear that a city must be inhabited to be a city—in other words, without residents, a city is just a place. The dirt, meanwhile, can be read as a representation of capitalism and the modern world, specifically the way that they subjugate and diminish people.



Continuously building on Thekla again represents humans' anxieties in regards to the end of humankind—in the minds of those in Thekla, if they just keep building, they'll never have to decline and, eventually, end. Further, working to emulate the stars—and failing to ever achieve it—suggests again that it's impossible for humans to achieve perfection.



Continuous Cities. 2. Marco Polo says that if he hadn't seen the sign announcing he arrived in Trude, he would've assumed he was still in the airport from which he departed. The suburbs in Trude were the same, the downtown was the same, and he already knew his hotel and the conversations he'd have with people. He wanted to leave immediately, reasoning that there's no point in being there. People told Marco that he could get back on a plane, but that he'd arrive at another Trude—the world is covered by an unending Trude; just the airport names change.

Hidden Cities. 1. In Olinda, it's possible to go out with a magnifying glass and find a tiny point that reveals elements of the city. This point isn't stationary; rather, a year later, it's the size of a lemon and eventually, it becomes a new city within the old one. Olinda isn't the only city that grows in concentric circles, but in most others the center remains static. In Olinda, the old parts of the city get pushed out and surround the new parts, while new parts also grow on the city's edges. All of this surrounds the heart of Olinda, which contains the lifeblood of all the Olindas that already exist and all the Olindas yet to come.

Kublai Khan continues to contemplate the point of playing **chess**. Marco Polo interrupts and notes that the board is made of ebony and maple. He motions to the square that Kublai is contemplating and says that the tree was cut in a year of drought. Kublai is surprised to learn that Marco is fluent in his language, but he's in awe of Marco's story. Marco points to a spot that may have been the nest of larvae, and another spot where the wood carver scored the edge. Kublai feels overwhelmed by how many things Marco can read in the wood of the chessboard. Marco talks of ebony forests, rafts heavy with wood, and women in windows.

CHAPTER 9

Kublai Khan owns an **atlas** that maps out all his empire's cities and those of the neighboring realms. He realizes that he's not going to hear from Marco Polo about neighboring cities such as Kambalu, the capital of China, or the island of Java. Kublai asks if Marco is going to repeat his stories when he returns to the west. Marco notes that listeners only retain the words they expect to hear, so what Kublai, gondoliers, and possibly, the story he tells to a cellmate after being imprisoned by Genoese pirates will be entirely different. The listener controls the story, not the speaker. Kublai says that sometimes, he feels like Marco is far away and that he himself is the prisoner of "a gaudy and unlivable present," in which human society has reached an extreme. He can hear the invisible reasons why cities live.

Trude takes aim at the rise of the suburbs, a product of the modern world that, Calvino seems to suggest, is all the same no matter where a person goes in the world. In this situation, Marco can cycle through airports all he likes without ever finding anything new, a nod to the possibility that while travel can open up horizons for people, in the modern world, this is harder to achieve because of the sameness of different locales.



By drawing again on imagery of a city's lifeblood that's contained in numerous cities that share the same name, the novel emphasizes that as cities grow and change, they might become something different—but here, it suggests that there are certain parts that do manage to stay the same. The fact that Olinda grows outward in concentric circles is another nod to the suburbs, which tend to surround a city and reach further and further out as time goes on.



Kublai's sense of awe at what Marco can read in the chessboard brings up semiotics again, as Marco is able to "read" signs in the wood of the chessboard that tell him about the wood's story, just as he saw paw prints that he read as evidence of a nearby tiger. That Kublai feels so overwhelmed learning about this suggests that once a person learns to read the world like this, it can be overwhelming and overpowering—and can make a person feel less in control.



Marco's comment about telling stories to a cellmate after being imprisoned by Genoese pirates is a nod to the real Marco Polo, whose adventures were recorded by his cellmate after Polo returned home to find Venice and Genoa at war. This reminds the reader that even if this novel is fantastical, it's still applicable to and draws from the real world. Marco's assertion that the listener really controls what they hear is again an assertion about the importance of perspective, as a person's status and perspective influences how they interpret the same story.



Kublai's **atlas** depicts the entire globe, continents, ships' routes, and illustrious cities. Kublai pulls out his atlas to test Marco. Marco can recognize Constantinople, Jerusalem, and Samarkand. He recognizes Granada, Timbuktu, and Paris. Marco recognizes other cities by studying small drawings on the map. There are some cities that Marco and the geographers aren't sure exist, like Cuzco and Lhasa. Marco still lists names and suggests routes, knowing that names change with every new language and that it's possible to reach a place from anywhere by driving, riding, or flying. Kublai declares that Marco knows cities in the atlas better than he does in person, but Marco insists that through travel, cities all begin to look the same. The atlas preserves the differences.

Kublai's **atlas** contains maps of all the cities, including those that are gone and those that will exist someday. Marco leafs through the pages and points to Troy, where there was once a wooden horse. At Constantinople, Marco sees Mohammad and through Constantinople and Troy, he sees San Francisco—and that in the future, it will be part of an empire greater than Kublai Khan's. That atlas reveals cities' forms, even if they don't yet have a form or a name. Marco can see Amsterdam, York, and New York's skyscrapers and streets. The possible forms are endless and cities will rise until there are no more forms. At the end of the atlas, there are networks without beginning or end in the shape of Los Angeles or Kyoto.

Cities and the Dead. 5. Most cities have a second city in their cemetery. Laudomia doesn't just have a second city; it has a third city of the unborn. As the Laudomia of the living expands and gets crowded, the tombs grow and begin to repeat the patterns of the Laudomia of the living. Both cities get increasingly crowded and the living often visit the dead to look for their own names. The living look for explanations and reasons from the dead. There's also a huge place for the unborn to live. Presumably there are infinite people there, but the area is empty and the unborn could be any size. It's possible to contemplate a thousand years of Laudomia's future in a single vein of marble.

The living of Laudomia visit the house of the unborn often to ask questions. They always ask questions about themselves or their legacies, not about future generations. The future inhabitants seem too unreal. Visitors to the house of the unborn ultimately come to one of two equally alarming possibilities: one is that there are more unborn than dead and living, and the house is filled with invisible hordes; the other option is that at some point, Laudomia and its citizens will disappear. In this option, the Laudomia of the living and that of the unborn are like the two bulbs of an hourglass. Someday, the final inhabitant will be born and the final grain will fall to the bottom.

That Marco mentions flying as a mode of transportation is another reminder that the novel is drawing on and critiquing the reader's modern world, where air travel is a fact of life. In this sense, Marco is especially correct, as air travel has made the world far smaller and more accessible than it ever was in the historical Marco Polo's day. His aside that the atlas preserves the cities' differences suggests again that the modern world deprives cities of any unique qualities, while recording them like this becomes a record of a time when cities were still different.



The assertion that cities will rise until there are no more forms begins to suggest that the rise and fall of civilizations will only continue until people stop innovating and run out of ideas—which suggests that at least in the short term, there's a lot to be said for coming up with new ways of knowing and understanding. It is, Calvino suggests, what moves the world forward, even if it's one day going to bring the world to humanity's final rise (of having cities everywhere) and fall (the end of humanity).



Significantly, the living only ever go to the dead to look for their own names. This suggests that looking for meaning in regards to one's own life is perfectly normal, but it's also somewhat selfish and narrow-minded. The fact that the unborn could be any size and are somehow invisible makes it easier to ignore the unborn and through doing so, ignore the future, something that Calvino seems to suggest is a bad move given how crowded the living and dead Laudomias already are.



Here, Calvino suggests that the future is simultaneously too abstract and too alarming for many people to want to think about it, as doing so would entail coming to terms with one's own significance (or lack thereof) in either case. If the world is going to end, everything is insignificant; if the world is going to go on forever, the life of a single individual pales in comparison to the long line of humanity that came before and will come after for all eternity.



Cities and the Sky. 4. Astronomers established the lines of Perinthia according to the stars and the zodiac so that the city would be guaranteed to reflect harmony, reason, and the gods' benevolence. People arrived to populate it. Today, travelers find all manner of deformed individuals there, but the most monstrous are hidden in cellars and lofts. The astronomers must either admit that their calculations are wrong and they're unable to describe the heavens, or they must admit that they described the heavens correctly and their monstrous city reflects the gods.

Continuous Cities. 3. Marco Polo says that every year, he stops in Procopia and stays at the same inn. From his window, he can see a ditch, a bridge, a hill, and chickens. The first year, he saw no one outside. The second year, he noticed a face among the leaves. In following years, he noticed more and more faces and now, he can only see faces, not the landscape. He thinks that he should just stop looking out the window, but it's hard to move away—there are 26 people in his room. Fortunately, they're all polite.

Hidden Cities. 2. Life isn't happy in Raissa. People curse at children, spend their lives in bad dreams, and domestic disputes abound. However, at every turn, there seems to be something happy. Children laugh at dogs, and women smile at men on horseback whose horses are thrilled to be flying over jumps. There are **birds** in the sky, having been freed by painters. The painter's picture of the bird will accompany a philosopher's words. The philosopher says that in Raissa, there's an invisible thread binding living beings together, making it so the unhappy city contains a happy city that doesn't know it exists.

Cities and the Sky. 5. Andria was built to follow a planet's orbit. Events flow calmly and nothing is left to human error. Marco Polo recalls telling residents that he can understand why, since they think of themselves as cogs in clockwork, they try not to change anything and rejoice in staying the same. The residents looked at him, dumbfounded, and showed him a new suspended street, theater, river port, and toboggan slide. Marco asked if the new additions disturb the city's rhythm, and the residents responded that any change in Andria corresponds to a change in the stars. Astronomers look for change in the sky when things happen in Andria. Marco notes that residents are self-confident and prudent. They're convinced that every change in the city influences the sky, and before doing new things, they calculate risks and advantages for themselves and for all worlds.

Here, Calvino seems to take aim again at unthinking expansion and colonialism, which was once thought to be an entirely positive thing. The fate of Perinthia a few generations later, however, suggests that it's foolish to believe that humans have a right to expand and reproduce with abandon, given that Calvino suggests there will at some point be consequences.



When Marco notes that in addition to seeing all the people outside he's also in the room with 26 others, it suggests that as people travel, they have to reckon with who they were the last time they traveled somewhere—the other people in his room are presumably the 26 versions of him who have previously visited Procopia. In other words, one's memories never truly disappear.



Raissa shows again that cities are never entirely good, nor are they entirely bad—one's interpretation depends on where they look and on what they focus. Raissa's version of the birds situates birds clearly as a symbol of hope and of happiness, qualities that Calvino seems to suggest exist everywhere without exception. Even in the saddest of places, it's possible to find some upside, and that upside is worth looking for and fighting for.



Andria is one of the closest things to a utopia in the novel, but it's still not quite a utopia. While the residents do think of others, they're also self-centered and focused only on the effects that human events have on the rest of the universe, rather than accepting either their insignificance or that the universe is the one to influence what happens in Andria. Despite this, it's telling that Marco is so confused by the way that people in Andria live their lives, as it suggests that it's not often a person comes across a society that makes such an effort to care for others in the modern, individualistic world.



Continuous Cities. 4. Marco Polo address Kublai Khan and says that in answer to Kublai's comment that he never describes the spaces *between* cities, he'll now describe Cecelia. In Cecelia, Marco once met a goatherd who asked where they were. The goatherd explained that he and his goats pass through cities and can't tell them apart, but he can name all the grazing land in between the cities. Marco explained that he's the opposite; he knows the cities but not the lands between. Many years later, Marco got lost in a neighborhood and asked a passing man where they were. He recognized the man as the old goatherd, and the goatherd explained that they were still lost in Cecelia. Marco exclaimed that he got lost in a different city long ago and asked why he's in Cecelia now. The goatherd explained that the cities have mingled and now, Cecelia is everywhere.

Hidden Cities. 3. Long ago, someone said that there are two cities in Marozia: one of the **rat** and one of the **swallow**. Today, vicious, fighting rats swarm Marozia. A new century is about to start, however, and in it residents will fly like swallows. It's possible to see, beneath the viciousness, that there's already preparation underway for the next phase. Marco Polo returns after many years and sees that though the city is at its height, he senses suspicion and sees that people struggle to fly. He notes that if a person moves through Marozia, they can see different cities in the cracks. He wonders if one person's pleasure is enough to transform the city, but thinks that it must happen by chance. He thinks that Marozia consists of two cities: one of rats, one of swallows. The second is always freeing itself from the first.

Continuous Cities. 5. Marco Polo says that he *should* describe Penthesilea by talking about the city's entrance. Most people believe that until a person reaches the walls of a city, they're still outside—but in Penthesilea, this is incorrect. People advance for hours and it's unclear if they're inside or outside. It's possible to wander and reach places that seem to indicate a change in the city's texture, but beyond that spot is more suburbs, a carnival, or a cemetery. If a traveler asks where Penthesilea is, residents gesture vaguely and point in any given direction. Finally, if a traveler asks for the road out of Penthesilea, they'll pass suburbs and neighborhoods. Travelers will eventually give up on trying to discern if Penthesilea is anything more than suburbs—and, disturbingly, will begin to wonder if a world outside of Penthesilea even exists.

The fact that Cecelia has expanded to pull in the grazing lands in between it and other cities (as well as those other cities) is another nod to the rise of the suburbs and of the connected and constantly expanding modern world. The goatherd, meanwhile, represents a world that exists only in the past, as he hasn't been able to keep up with the changing times and doesn't know how to find his way around the cities. However, the fact that Marco can't find his way around either anymore suggests that the modern world is damaging and confusing for everyone, no matter their generation.



Again, the swallows represent a hopeful future, while the rats are indicative of corruption and greed. However, Marco implies that it's very possible for there to be qualities of both swallows and of rats in one person, suggesting that this, too, is part of a cycle that takes place in the course of a single human lifetime just as it does in the wider arc of human history. It's possible, in this sense, to see how humans can become different people as they take on more of one quality or another, just as cities change depending on how hopeful or corrupt they might be.



Unlike many of the other cities Marco has described that contain both suburbs and a proper city, Penthesilea is just an anxiety-inducing expanse of nothingness—again, something that Calvino seems to suggest is a product of the modern world that can't satisfy any desires properly. In this case, he also shows that it's impossible to get out of the modern world by making it so that Marco can't ever leave Penthesilea. As Marco seeks to understand where he is, he feels even less in control—suggesting that he can't make sense of this senseless modern world.



Hidden Cities. 4. Theodora has been invaded multiple times throughout the centuries. Residents finished with one enemy, only to begin fighting another. They fought off condors, serpents, spiders, flies, and termites. Eventually, it became an exclusively human city. The **rats** were the last to hold on. They were hard to get rid of, as each successive generation became increasingly tougher. Finally, humans massacred them. Theodora became a cemetery of the animal kingdom and humans established the true order of the world. Its library contains records of extinct species—or so the residents believe. Animals that have been hiding for ages are beginning to reemerge and others come out of the library’s basement. Sphinxes, chimeras, dragons, unicorns, and basilisks are retaking their city.

Hidden Cities. 5. Marco Polo refuses to tell Kublai Khan about Berenice, the unjust city. Instead, he’ll describe the Berenice of the just, which is hidden. People handle materials in shadowy back rooms, and when giant cogs jam, a quiet ticking suggests that something else is governing the city. Instead of describing perfumed baths where unjust people in Berenice eye women, he’ll share how the just cautiously evade spies and recognize each other by their punctuation and their cuisine. From this, it’s possible to deduce Berenice’s future, but it’s important to keep in mind that within the city of the just, there’s a malignant seed containing certainty and pride. This seed turns into bitterness, resentment, and the desire of the just to both get revenge on the unjust *and* live the way the unjust do.

Marco warns Kublai that most important in all of this is that there’s *always* an element of the unjust city developing within the just city. Looking more closely at the seed of justice, however, it’s possible to pick out a spreading spot, which is the desire to impose what’s just through unjust means—which might lead to a huge city. Marco says that Berenice is indeed a succession of just and unjust cities, but he wants to warn Kublai that all future Berenices are already present.

Kublai Khan’s **atlas** contains maps of promised lands that haven’t yet been visited or founded. these include New Atlantis, Utopia, and New Harmony. Kublai asks Marco Polo to tell him which of these will become the future. Marco replies that he can’t draw routes or set dates for these places. Sometimes he only needs a glimpse to know that he can set out and put together a city, but he and Kublai cannot stop actively searching for it. It might be rising up right now in Kublai’s empire, but they can only look for it in this way.

Killing off all of the mythical creatures speaks to humanity’s desire to rule and be in charge, like Kublai Khan wants to be in charge of his empire. However, when the creatures begin to return, it implies that humans will never fully be able to possess their cities and their worlds, just as Kublai will never be able to fully possess his empire by learning about all the cities or making them fit into a certain system. Notably, referring to Theodora as a city that belongs to the animals suggests that humans were wrong from the beginning: the world doesn’t belong to humans, it belongs to the animals.



Berenice again points to a cycle in which humans try to overthrow bloated and powerful regimes, but it suggests that it’s not as straightforward as previous battles between the rats and the swallows may have led the reader to think. In this case, Calvino suggests that the premise itself is wrong, since even those who are on the side of good and justice have in them a seed of injustice and want revenge—and to copy the unjusts’ way of life. However, this also suggests that wanting to be rich and powerful is part of the human condition, even if it is universally destructive.



Here, Calvino makes a veiled reference to communism, suggesting that even if “just” regimes try to assert themselves by subjugating others in an unjust way, they’re just as bad as the unjust system they’re replacing. Insisting that all the future cities are already presents points to the continuity of this cycle between just and unjust cities, which, he suggests, will continue forever.



Mentioning Utopia the city is a reference to [Utopia](#), the novel by Thomas More. In it, More critiques expansion and suggests that utopia is impossible, something that Marco echoes in his response to Kublai about not being able to simply map out a route to a utopian place in the world, either in terms of finding it on the globe or finding it in the future.



As Marco says this, Kublai flips through his **atlas** and focuses on the nightmare cities such as Enoch, Babylon, and Brave New World. He cries that it's useless if they're inevitably going to end up in the infernal city. Marco warns that if the inferno is going to come true, they're already living it. He says that there are two ways to keep from suffering in it. Like many, they can accept the inferno and become a part of it. Or, they can take the more difficult route and vigilantly look for people, places, and things that *aren't* part of the inferno and seek to preserve them.

Mentioning *Brave New World* as a city is a reference to Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel [Brave New World](#), which takes a decidedly bleak view on the fate of civilization. However, Marco's advice to Kublai and to the reader is to focus on the good, even if it's fleeting. By doing this, people will be able to enjoy what they have and hopefully, preserve what's good in the world for future generations.





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