The Chrysalids: Stages Of Growth

The novel John Wyndham wrote known as The Chrysalids is a science fiction novel that promotes the ideas of the future. It teaches a crucial lesson on how it is a necessity to learn to adapt to change to prepare for upcoming situations/events. The word Chrysalids comes from the process of insect metamorphosis, (when a caterpillar encloses itself in a cocoon to transform into a butterfly). It is also another way to express the change or state of growth a person, or in this case, society undergoes. Viewing their different perspectives of life and change as a part of it, the Old People, the Waknukians, and the Sealanders can be seen as stages in this butterfly cycle.

The first stage of the caterpillar cycle starts with the Old People, who have no respect for God and no desire to change their arrogant ways. This remains the reason in which the Waknukians and the Fringes people believe that God sent tribulation (punishment) to serve as a response to “a period of irreligious arrogance”. This is confirmed when a man from the Fringes explains how “The Old People thought they were the tops too…. All they had to do was get it fixed up comfortable, and keep it that way; then everybody would be fine, on account of their ideas is a lot more civilized than God’s”- (Wyndham 40,153). This quotation proves that the Old people need to change their ways, becoming forced to recover from their previous behaviors (through the tribulation that God sent) for them to find a new way of life (just as a caterpillar enters into their cocoons to change into something new).

The Waknukianks represent the second stage of the butterfly cycle, the chrysalis; the beginning of the transformation. This society is trying to change to be perfect in the eyes/image of God. Though some of the people from Waknuk (David and his group) develop and evolve through telepathic powers and abilities, the Waknukians refuse to fully accept it. This is because they are still closed off from the world (closed off in the cocoons).

At the beginning of the novel, Uncle Axel tells David, 'It would be best if you could forget it altogether”- (Wyndham 31). His reaction solidifies the idea that terrible things will occur if anyone who internalizes the definition of man were to find out about David's telepathic abilities. Another example that demonstrates how the Waknuk people are trying to neglect this change is through David's father. He is a perfect example of how their society deals with those who defy the beliefs set out by ‘the authorities’. His intolerable behavior is shown during both the splinter incident, as well as when the inspector came to interrogate David about Sophie. During the splinter incident, David accidentally tells his mother that he “could have managed all right by myself if I’d had another hand”- (Wyndham 26). This statement shocked his father. To Joseph, (David’s father), David’s hasty desire for a third hand was a betrayal to God, suggesting that David does not think highly of the 'Norm' (the image of God). This caused his father to burn with rage, demonstrating how his father puts more faith in his beliefs than his own family. More specifically, the fact that his father felt so angry by a few words, used only to express his (David's) frustration of getting his mother's help, is proof of what was previously mentioned.

A similar reaction befell David during the interrogation with the inspector. During the interrogation, Joseph takes the inspector’s whip to punish David physically for his transgressions. This demonstrates how ruthless Joseph Storm is on his beliefs; using a whip to

enforce the rules that his son has broken. Nevertheless, Joseph Storm shows the length he and his community would go to persecute/reject anything considered corrupt. The crops and livestock are equally destroyed despite the fact it is necessary for survival.

At this stage, the people of Waknuk are not able to accept anyone or anything different (having “an eye for the odd”- {Wyndham 5}). Like the Old People, the Waknukians are still unable to see past their own mistakes and look to the future/evolution of their society (being still closed off in the cocoons).

Lastly, the Sealanders are the final stage of the butterfly cycle. At this stage, the Sealanders have finished the transformation. This society, compared to the other two, has an entirely different view on change and evolution.

From the Sealand lady's many statements, it has become clear that her society only welcomes those who can think together since this ability bears power and superiority over a majority of the people. That is why she is unconcerned with making herself perfect in the eyes of God, as the Waknukians do. She tells David and the others that “They were only ingenious half-humans, little better than savages; all living shut off from one another, with only clumsy words to link them.”- (Wyndham, pg. 156). This shows that the Sealand lady has no respect for anyone that does not possess this ability; much less the people who let fear overcome and control them to commit unjustifiable actions (like the Waknukians and the Old People). This is why when the Sealand lady begins to reveal her objectives to the others, she asserts that her kind is united by the ability to think together, and through this ability, her kind will rebuild the world the Old People destroyed. For she implies that “Sometime there will come a day when we ourselves shall have to give place to a new thing. Very certainly we shall struggle against the inevitable just as these remnants of the Old People do. We shall try with all our strength to grind it back into the earth from which it is emerging, for treachery to one’s own species must always seem a crime. We shall force it to prove itself, and when it does, we shall go; as, by the same process, these are going.”- (Wyndham, pg 194-196). This teaches an essential lesson. That life is made up of a series of changes that must be faced to find the strength to fight for the main goal. For, “The essential quality of life is living; the essential quality of living is change; change is evolution: and we are part of it.”- (Wyndham, pg 196). The Sealanders are ready to change the world, representing the butterfly that has finally emerged from its cocoon.

All things considered, The Chrysalids (which additionally means change) is an appropriate title for this novel, because, in this book, change is seen as a major problem in society; each having a respectable opinion on it.

The Old People believe that change is something that can be controlled, although the Waknukians see it in the same way, and try to avoid change by burning any kind of mutated thing alive. It is clear that many of the Waknuk people have agreed to change the harsh ways of punishing the 'Blasphemies' because of what it may have been regarded as (murder). However, while this may be true the Sealanders still whole-heartily disrespect the way the Waknuk people view change as something that can be avoided. Therefore, the Old People, the Waknukians, and the Sealanders each view change in many different ways. Relating these perspectives to the butterfly life-cycle, it is understandable why this is the reason John Wyndham chose the title, The Chrysalids for this book.