

The Machine Stops



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF E.M. FORSTER

Forster was born in London in 1879. His father, an architect, died of tuberculosis when he was a baby, so he was raised by his mother and aunts. From 1897 to 1901, he attended Cambridge University, studying classics and history. After graduation, he worked as a lecturer at the Working Men's College, Cambridge, and the University of London. In 1905, he published his first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, followed by *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with A View* (1908), and *Howards End* (1910). In 1911, Forster published *The Celestial Omnibus*, his first collection of short stories. In 1912, he visited India, an experience that would later inspire *A Passage to India* (1924) and *The Hill of Devi* (1953). In 1913, his encounter with the openly gay socialist activist Edward Carpenter inspired his posthumously published novel of homosexual love, *Maurice* (1971). During the First World War, he worked for the Red Cross's Wounded and Missing Bureau in Egypt. After the war, he briefly worked as a newspaper writer and editor, before again visiting India, where he worked as a private secretary to the Maharaja of Dewas from 1921-22. His final novel, *A Passage to India* (1924), received widespread critical acclaim. In 1926, he started a relationship with a London policeman, Harry Daley. He published a book on writing, *Aspects of the Novel*, in 1927. His second story collection, *The Eternal Moment*, was published in 1928. In 1934, he became president of the National Council for Civil Liberties. He published two essay collections, *Abinger Harvest* (1936) and *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951). During the Second World War, he broadcasted anti-Nazi talks for the BBC, and after the war wrote the libretto for Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*. He died in 1970. Many of his unpublished novels and short stories were published following his death.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Machine Stops" was written at a time of rapid technological change. Major innovations of this period included the telephone (1876), the radio (1895), the phonograph (1877), films (1895), cars (1886), and airplanes (1903). Many of the features of the society in "The Machine Stops"—long-distance video calling, on-demand musical recordings, remote lectures, air-ships—are simply more advanced developments of these technologies that already existed in rudimentary form at the time of the story's writing (1909). The dystopian world of "The Machine Stops" therefore is, on one level, a pessimistic reflection on the dramatic societal transformations that the Second Industrial Revolution (1870-1914) was causing at the

time of its writing. "The Machine Stops" is not only inspired by the technological changes that were taking place at the turn of the twentieth century, but also by the accompanying ideological changes. Older belief systems, such as traditional religion, and older ways of life, with its close connection to natural rhythms, were being replaced by a new emphasis on rationality and factory-like efficiency. These ideological transformations of the modern era are reflected in the ideologies and social structures of the futuristic society in "The Machine Stops." In this way, the story is as much a commentary on Forster's own time as it is a cautionary tale of what humanity could become.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Machine Stops" is the only science fiction work published by E.M. Forster. Most of Forster's novels and short stories, by contrast, are realistic social commentaries, often critiquing contemporary England or British colonialism, such as his three most famous novels, *A Room with A View*, *Howards End*, and *A Passage to India*. However, Forster did incorporate speculative and fantastical elements in other short stories, such as "The Celestial Omnibus" and "The Story of the Siren." Forster wrote "The Machine Stops" as a direct response to the science fiction works of H.G. Wells, writing in the introduction of his *Collected Short Stories* that the story was "a reaction to one of the earlier heavens of H.G. Wells." Forster may have been reacting to the futuristic worlds that Wells depicted in *The Time Machine* (1896) or *A Modern Utopia* (1905), offering a much bleaker vision of technological progress than that provided by Wells. As an early example of the dystopian fiction genre, "The Machine Stops" shares similarities with later works in this tradition, such as *We* (1921) by Yevgeny Zamyatin, *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, and *1984* (1949) by George Orwell.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Machine Stops
- **When Written:** 1909
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1909
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Science fiction, dystopian fiction, short story
- **Setting:** A futuristic society, underground beneath Sumatra and England
- **Climax:** The Machine breaks down, causing the collapse of the society and the deaths of all human beings living underground
- **Antagonist:** The Machine

- **Point of View:** Third person, limited to Vashti's perspective with occasional remarks by the omniscient narrator

EXTRA CREDIT

Adaptations and influences. As a formative work of the science fiction genre, "The Machine Stops" has inspired countless adaptations, including a TV series, two plays, a radio play, a graphic novel, in addition to inspiring aspects of other science fiction works such as Stephen Baxter's "Glass Earth Inc." and Isaac Asimov's *The Naked Sun*.

A prescient story. "The Machine Stops" has received considerable renewed attention in recent years because of its uncannily accurate depictions of modern-day technologies, with the Machine serving as a kind of internet—including capabilities similar to video conferencing and online delivery services. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many noted similarities between Forster's fictional society and the lifestyles required by social distancing, in which people stayed connected via Zoom and other remote means while remaining physically apart.

In the following years, **respirators** (protective equipment) are abolished, making it impossible to visit the earth's surface. Meanwhile, the Machine is increasingly worshipped as a god. Kuno calls Vashti and tells her that "the Machine is stopping," a statement that makes no sense to her. Defects start to appear in the Machine's system, such as flaws in the music, fruit, beds, and other objects that the Machine summons. These defects become worse as time goes on, sparking outrage and panic in the society. The Committee of the Machine reveals that the Mending Apparatus itself has been broken.

One day, the ultimate disaster strikes, and the Machine stops entirely. All lines of communication are cut, and the air and light start to dissipate, condemning all the people living underground to certain death. As Vashti watches the crowds of people dying around her, she reunites with Kuno. He says there is no hope for them, but there are still humans living above-ground—"the Homeless"—who will carry on after this calamity, now that humanity has learned its lesson about the Machine. Vashti realizes that her son has been right all along about the Machine's destructive impact on humanity. Vashti and Kuno embrace as an air-ship crashes into the city, destroying it and killing them.



PLOT SUMMARY

In a future human society, everyone lives in separate, underground rooms, where all their needs and wants are provided by "**the Machine**." One day, a woman, Vashti, receives a call from her son Kuno asking her to visit him in person. She doesn't see the point of visiting him, since they can communicate just as easily through the Machine. Kuno wants to visit the earth's surface (which is now apparently incapable of supporting life), a desire that Vashti, who is perfectly content living underground with the aid of the Machine, doesn't understand. Kuno criticizes Vashti for worshipping the Machine as if it were a divine being. Later, Kuno tells Vashti that he will not talk to her anymore until she comes to visit him. She reluctantly decides to travel on an **air-ship** to the other side of the world where her son lives.

Onboard the air-ship, Vashti is distressed by the need to talk to and touch other people, and she is entirely uninterested in the natural scenery below. When she arrives in her son's room, angry at him for making her undergo such a worthless trip, he tells her that he has been threatened with "**Homelessness**"—a form of execution in which the victim is placed on the earth's surface without protective equipment, killing them. Kuno tells Vashti the story of how he escaped to the earth's surface through a ventilation shaft and stayed there for a short time, fascinated by the natural world around him, before being drawn back underground by the Machine's **Mending**

Apparatus. Feeling that her son's deviations are unforgivable, Vashti leaves and rarely talks to him again.



CHARACTERS

The Machine – The Machine, an enormously complex technological system that seems to provide all of humanity's wants and needs, is in many ways the central antagonist of the story. Human beings may have originally created the Machine in order to survive in the aftermath of an environmental collapse that made Earth's surface uninhabitable. They've since retreated underground, where each person lives in an individual pod. In this underground society, the Machine provides for everything from basic necessities such (air, light, food, beds) to higher desires (music, literature, social interaction). Yet the Machine has also escaped humanity's control because there is no one still alive who understands how the system operates as a whole, the original creators having died long ago. Rather than adapting the Machine to their needs and desires, people increasingly adapt themselves to the Machine, even killing off infants who might not be well-suited to life in the Machine. Because they are so dependent on the Machine, and they no longer understand how it actually operates, human beings begin to worship it as though it were a god, apparently forgetting that it is only humanity's creation. This attitude is ultimately dangerous, as their belief in the Machine's power blinds them to its vulnerabilities, a mistake that eventually causes their whole civilization to come crashing down around them. Even before that final disaster, the Machine had already damaged much of human nature, from the desire for deep connection with other people to the desire for harmony with nature. The destructiveness of the Machine

symbolizes the potential dangers of human-created systems that escape from our control and separate us from what is best in ourselves.

Vashti – Vashti is the main viewpoint character of “The Machine Stops.” She is an “everywoman” of this society, accepting its values and lifestyle. She is perfectly content to spend her whole life in her underground room, listening to music and lectures and calling her friends. She also has a great fondness for her son Kuno, even though she also finds him strange. Despite her hatred of traveling, Vashti nonetheless undergoes the journey to visit her son simply to make him happy. However, she has a falling-out with Kuno after he tells her the story of how he escaped to Earth’s surface, because this, for her, is crossing a line too far. Unlike Kuno, she worships the Machine, finding great comfort in praying to her **Book**. But the Machine’s final collapse transforms her worldview, as she finally recognizes what her son has been trying to warn her of all along: the vulnerability and destructiveness of the Machine. Vashti’s perspective provides the reader with a valuable insight into the values and worldview of this society, but she is also a complex character who does not align completely with this society’s values, such as in her love for her son. The clash between her conformist worldview and Kuno’s rebellious worldview provides the central conflict of the story, while her final transformation as a character is the internal climax that coincides with the external climax of the Machine’s destruction.

Kuno – Kuno, Vashti’s son, is the opposite of Vashti when it comes to his rebellious attitude towards the Machine. Unlike Vashti, he is not satisfied with spending his whole life in his underground room, and has a taste for adventure. He has a deep appreciation for the natural world, drawn to the landscapes and constellations he sees while traveling aboard air-ships, and fascinated by the hills that he sees upon emerging to Earth’s surface. In contrast to Vashti’s compliant attitude, Kuno likes to transgress established boundaries, as demonstrated in his apparently irrational determination to “find his own way out” to Earth’s surface rather than requesting an exit permit through proper channels. He is deeply critical of his society’s worship of the Machine, insisting that the Machine is a creation of human beings, not an inexplicable divine entity. He has a deep faith in humanity, feeling an almost spiritual connection with humanity’s past. He has hope that humanity will survive the Machine’s destructiveness and will one day recognize their errors and reconnect with what is best in their own nature. These beliefs lead him to eventually seek out the “Homeless,” groups of human beings who have somehow adapted to Earth’s surface and live out of the reach of the Machine. In opposition to the shallowness of the society he lives in, Kuno has a desire for authentic human connection, as shown in his desire to see Vashti outside of the mediation of the Machine, and his joy in reuniting with her at the moment of their deaths. While the reader does not have direct access to

Kuno’s perspective, he serves as a voice for the story’s thematic messages, challenging Vashti’s comfortable worldview and catalyzing her ultimate transformation. His hope in the future of humanity is what makes “The Machine Stops” a fundamentally optimistic vision of human nature, rather than simply a pessimistic dystopia.

The Flight Attendant – The flight attendant, whom Vashti interacts with while traveling on an air-ship to visit Kuno, is one of the few characters described in the story who lives a substantial amount of her life above-ground and outside of the direct control of the Machine (although the air-ships themselves are incorporated into the Machine’s system). Although she seems to accept her society’s values, the flight attendant’s unusual profession has nonetheless led to mannerisms that, in Vashti’s eyes, are quite strange—she feels comfortable talking to people directly, and even touches Vashti, which is a great taboo in this society. Vashti’s perceptions of the flight attendant—whose behavior seems entirely normal to the reader, but is seen as unusual and even rude to Vashti—highlights just how differently human behavior and customs have become due to the influence of the Machine.

The Lecturer – The lecturer on the French Revolution serves as a mouthpiece for the official ideology of the society in “The Machine Stops.” When **respirators** are abolished, making it impossible for people to visit Earth’s surface and observe it directly, he celebrates this change, giving a speech explaining why “tenth-hand” knowledge, filtered through a multitude of secondary interpretations, is truer than first-hand knowledge. When defects appear in the Machine, he counsels an attitude of patient suffering, to put up with the Machine’s flaws and have faith that they will soon be fixed, as the Machine has provided so much for them in the past. In this way, the lecturer is the direct opposite of Kuno, who questions the official ideology of his society. The lecturer instead preaches an attitude of blind faith and willful ignorance—an attitude that will eventually mark the downfall of this civilization.

TERMS

Air-Ships – The air-ships are the sole mode of long-distance transportation in the futuristic society of “The Machine Stops,” operating similarly to commercial airlines. The air-ships are remnants of an earlier civilization, in which people still had a desire to travel and see the outside world. They continue to operate as part of **the Machine** simply because they have become so embedded in the system that it would be too much trouble to eliminate them. They also serve a practical purpose, such as when someone has to move from one part of the world to another in order to move to a new room or to reproduce. However, almost no one in this society travels simply for the sake of traveling, because the Machine, which makes it easy to contact anyone in the world instantly, has made travel

seemingly unnecessary.

Homelessness – In the world of the story, “Homelessness” is a term for execution in which the condemned person is exposed to the air at Earth’s surface, which supposedly kills them. This form of execution is a punishment for deviation from the values and rules of this society, as when **Kuno** is threatened with Homelessness for escaping to the surface without a permit. Human beings can apparently no longer survive in this future world without living underground and breathing the artificial air generated by a technological system called **the Machine**. As **Vashti** reveals, Homelessness was once used for the mass executions that put an end to a past “Great Rebellion.” But when Kuno escapes to the earth’s surface, he discovers that Homelessness is not always a death sentence—there are human beings who have somehow adapted to living on the outer surface, outside of the Machine’s control. Kuno finds hope in these “Homeless,” as they are proof that humanity may survive the Machine’s downfall and regain their communion with nature that they lost in their retreat underground.

The Mending Apparatus – The Mending Apparatus is **the Machine**’s mechanism for repairing itself. It first appears in the story as a system of wormlike appendages that attack **Kuno** after he escapes by breaking out of one of the underground ventilation shafts. The Mending Apparatus traps Kuno and nearly kills him by hitting his head as it pulls him back underground, as well as destroying all vegetation in sight and killing a “Homeless” person who tries to help Kuno. This suggests that the Mending Apparatus is designed to eliminate any threat to the Machine, even when that means killing living things. The Mending Apparatus later proves to be a vulnerable part of the Machine—a part that, if damaged, will bring the whole system crashing down. No one really understands how to fix the Machine because the system has become so complex, and the Mending Apparatus has always been able to fix anything that breaks. But when the Mending Apparatus itself breaks, it causes a cascade of other defects that no one knows how to fix, leading to the Machine’s deterioration and eventual collapse.

humanity has retreated into private underground pods where people live their lives entirely dependent on a technological system called “the Machine.” The Machine meets all their basic survival needs (like pumping air and delivering food), in addition to entertaining them and helping them virtually socialize. There is no need—and for most people, little desire—to leave their rooms, which means that many people spend their entire existence without ever interacting with the natural world.

The story’s central character, Vashti, initially embraces the mindset that estrangement from the natural world is good. Her son, Kuno, gives another perspective: that the natural world (no matter how degraded it has become) can provide joy and fulfillment that life within the Machine cannot. To convince Vashti of this, Kuno explains how he illegally snuck onto Earth’s surface with a **respirator** and had an ecstatic experience of the Wessex hills. This experience led him to two urgent revelations: one, that the natural world feels more meaningful and intriguing to him than any experience he’s had within the Machine. And two, that it’s apparently a lie that humankind can’t survive aboveground, since he saw evidence that there are people—the “Homeless”—living on the surface, free of the Machine. Kuno seems to believe that the Machine is deliberately keeping people from Earth’s surface in order to better control them; perhaps if people remembered their innate connection to nature, they might revolt against the artificiality of their lives underground. Vashti finds this notion so threatening and heretical that she cuts off contact with her son.

In the end, though, catastrophe brings Vashti around to Kuno’s perspective. The Machine breaks down, and as everyone in their civilization is dying, the two coincidentally reunite. Kuno explains that while they themselves will die, this isn’t the end of humanity—the Homeless living on the surface will ensure the species’ survival. The implication is that their existence will be happier and more meaningful than the lives of those who died with the Machine’s collapse, since the Homeless are free of the Machine’s sinister control and are living in harmony with the natural world.



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.



TECHNOLOGY VS. NATURE

In “The Machine Stops,” an environmental catastrophe has apparently left Earth’s surface inhospitable to human life. Because of this,



RELIGION AND FAITH

In the story’s futuristic setting, Earth’s surface is apparently no longer habitable. People live underground and depend on a technological system called “the Machine” to provide them with air to breathe, food to eat, and entertainment. The Machine has grown increasingly complex over the years, to the point that no one truly understands how it works. It seems almost divine in its mystery and power, so most people—including Vashti, the story’s central character—worship it like a deity. The story suggests that this society’s worship of the Machine is rooted in humanity’s innate desire to make sense of the unknown, and that traditional religion may share the same origin: “man [...]”

had once made god in his image.” Similarly, people, having created the Machine, forget that they themselves created it, and now they instead see it as a divine being with complete power over their lives.

Vashi’s rebellious (and, in her opinion, sacrilegious) son Kuno believes that for a society that prides itself on its rationality, the worshippers’ attitude is fundamentally irrational. He’s one of the few people from inside the Machine who’s been to the Earth’s surface and seen the “Homeless” people who live aboveground, free of the Machine—proving that people’s faith in and dependence on the Machine might be misguided. Having had this experience, he puts his faith in people instead, believing that humanity will outlast the Machine. And he’s proven right in the end, as the worshippers’ powerless attitude toward the Machine leaves them vulnerable to the technology they have put their faith into: when the Machine breaks down and nobody knows how to fix it, their entire civilization is destroyed. It’s implied that the Homeless will survive by depending on one another and nature instead of technology, whereas the people living underground ironically die because of their unyielding faith in the Machine that was meant to keep them safe. The story thus suggests that since people create what they worship “in [their own] image” and not the other way around, they are the ones in control. So, they would be better off placing their faith in themselves and one another—what is knowable to them—than in incomprehensible technology or mysterious deities.



SIMULATION VS. EXPERIENCE

“The Machine Stops” depicts a future society in which people, believing that Earth’s surface is no longer habitable, live underground in separate pods. Real-life experiences have been replaced by mere imitations via the Machine, a complex technological system that’s capable of producing anything (air, food, music, etc.). But, importantly, everything it produces is an artificial or simulated version of the real thing. For example, the Machine facilitates all communication in this society, but this is limited, as the Machine is incapable of transmitting the full depth of human emotion, such as facial expressions—it can only provide a general impression of people. And most people in the society have no interest in viewing the natural world above them, instead content to listen to lectures and discuss “ideas.” Yet these ideas are always secondhand, never drawn from direct experience. This is even seen as a virtue, as when a lecturer claims that their “tenth-hand” knowledge of the French Revolution, filtered through many secondary perspectives, is far more truthful than the knowledge of those who actually lived during the French Revolution. This attitude is what leads most people in the society to avoid travel, shun in-person interactions, and eventually to accept the abolition of **respirators** (protective equipment needed to breath the air

aboveground), making it impossible to visit Earth’s surface.

Kuno, the central character Vashti’s son, is so unusual because unlike the vast majority of people in his society, he *does* want to experience things directly. He refuses to resign himself to a mere simulation of what human life used to be like. Kuno enjoys traveling on air-ships, wants to see Vashti in person rather than through the Machine, and wants to escape to Earth’s surface even at the risk of his own life. And the story seems to sympathize with Kuno’s viewpoint, at one point describing Vashti’s pod as a “prison” rather than a home that keeps her safe and fulfills her needs. In the end, when the Machine breaks down and everyone underground is dying, even Vashti comes around to her son’s worldview, weeping for the beauty of humanity and worrying that “some fool” might restart the Machine and cut humans off from the outside world again. The story thus suggests that human life is only worth living if it is filled with authentic experiences, and that people’s efforts to withdraw from the real world are self-destructive.



HUMAN CONNECTION

In the future society depicted in “The Machine Stops,” human relationships have become shallow and artificial because they are entirely mediated by a technological system known as the Machine. In this world, everyone lives in individual underground rooms, rarely ever seeing others in person. Instead, they communicate through the Machine, using long-distance calling that conveys images and sound. In this way, the Machine makes it much easier to stay in touch with a large number of people—but for that very reason, it prevents them from forming deep connections with one another. For example, the central character, Vashti, has thousands of acquaintances who are constantly calling her. But because her attention is split so many ways, her conversations never rise above the level of small talk. Vashti clashes with her son Kuno, who wants to see her in person, whereas Vashti is uncomfortable talking to people outside of the Machine. She’s horrified at the prospect of touching another human being (even her own son), since their society has eliminated the custom of physical touch. The absence of deeper human connection is a product of the society’s highly utilitarian social structure, in which all familial obligations have been abolished. The family unit has been replaced by public nurseries, and reproduction is now a bureaucratic matter, eliminating romantic relationships.

However, at the same time that this society has made most human relationships shallow and pragmatic rather than emotional, there are also indications that deeper human connections still persist. For instance, Vashti and Kuno have a close mother-son relationship, so much so that when the Machine breaks down at the end of the story, Vashti leaves her pod (which terrifies her) to reunite with Kuno. The moments before their deaths represent a triumph of human

relationships, as they're able to physically touch and connect with each other on a deeper level than ever before. Even more than that, the two characters experience a sense of connection with all of humanity—past, present, and future. This brief yet poignant moment of unity in “The Machine Stops” suggests that our desire for connection with others is fundamental to our nature, and that neither technological nor social changes can ever eliminate it completely.



EMOTION VS. RATIONALITY

The dystopian society of “The Machine Stops” illustrate the dangers of valuing rationality too highly over human emotions. The people in this society live underground in isolated pods, and a complex technological system called the Machine provides all of their needs and facilitates all communication. Most people in this society, such as the main character, Vashti, value “ideas” but fail to recognize that ideas detached from experience and feelings become stagnant and lifeless. There is no room for human feelings in the Machine, because although this system allows people to communicate with one another, it is incapable of conveying emotional nuance through these communications. Vashti, like most people in the society, values practicality and routine, incapable of understanding her son Kuno’s seemingly irrational desire to have adventures and see the aboveground world with his own eyes. Kuno is deeply moved by the simple sight of the hills of Wessex when he escapes to Earth’s surface. Vashti, on the other hand, is uninterested in the sublime landscapes of the Himalayas, the Caucasus Mountains, and Greece that she flies over as she goes to visit Kuno, simply because there are “no ideas” she can find in them. She, like most people in her society, doesn’t appreciate beauty or anything else that isn’t purely intellectual. Indeed, although Vashti loves music—which is, in essence, an expression of human emotion—even this is fixed into something wholly rational, as Vashti’s engagement with the music she listens to seems to stay entirely at the level of intellectual, never emotional.

But by the end of the story, when the Machine breaks down and everyone underground is dying, Kuno and Vashti both weep over how humanity has devalued their own senses and emotions. They recognize that their society—which has developed the human mind at the expense of the human heart, body, and spirit—has come at a great cost, creating an atrophied humanity that can only enjoy a fraction of what human beings were once capable of experiencing and feeling.



SYMBOLS

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



THE BOOK

The Book, an elaborate user’s manual for the Machine, symbolizes the dangers of blind faith. In the dystopian society of “The Machine Stops,” people live underground because they Earth’s surface is apparently no longer habitable, and the complex technological system known as the Machine ostensibly provides them with all their needs (air, food, shelter, communication, entertainment). Consequently, people have come to religiously worship the Machine as something mysterious and all-powerful, creating an elaborate belief system that substitutes a piece of technology for a deity and treats the Book as its sacred text. Vashti’s attitude toward the Book is typical of a fanatically religious person: she finds a great sense of security in the Book, believing that it contains everything she could ever need to know. The Book becomes the object of Vashti’s prayers, as she kisses it and murmurs “O Machine!” whenever she is in distress.

But the sense of security that the Book provides is clearly misguided. For one, blind worship of the Book distracts humanity from the question they *should* have been asking all along: namely, whether the Machine is actually good for them. By labeling any criticism of the Machine as sacrilege, the Book encourages humanity to embrace a technology that limits them more than it helps them. The Machine ostensibly protects them, but it also cuts them off from authentic human connection, the beauty of the natural world, and their own emotions. Second, the Book does not provide a true understanding of how the Machine actually works, which is a huge problem, since humanity relies on the Machine for survival. Toward the end of the story, the Machine begins to break down, and for humanity to survive, they need to fix it. But no one knows how, because the Book only explains how to *operate* the Machine, not how it functions on a more fundamental level. The knowledge that the Book provides, then, is useful only so long as the Machine continues to function—something that this society took for granted until it was too late to stop the Machine’s collapse. The Machine’s collapse kills everyone who lives underground, driving home the message that blind faith in any system can be disastrous.



RESPIRATORS

Respirators—a form of protective equipment that make it possible to visit Earth’s surface—symbolize humanity’s innate desire to be close to nature. In the world of the story, the air aboveground has become toxic to human beings—whether this is the product of environmental degradation, or changes in human physiology from living underground, or some combination of both, isn’t clear. Because of these conditions, most people live underground in pods, where a technological system called the Machine ostensibly provides all of their basic needs. However, many people still

want to see the surface, and at the start of the story, it is relatively easy to do so by requesting a permit and a respirator. The existence of respirators suggests that even in this society, people still want to experience the natural world, despite their separation from it.

Kuno, who wants to experience the natural world as human beings once did, wishes he could go to the surface “naked,” without the aid of a respirator. This wish is almost fulfilled when his respirator is blown away from him, and he miraculously survives because some of the artificial air blown from underground settles in the valley around him. Kuno’s desire suggests that respirators, however necessary they might be, are still a poor substitute for a more direct experience of the natural world.

But even this imperfect connection to the world above ground is cut off when the Committee of the Machine abolishes respirators. The reason behind this decision seems to be that respirators allow people to escape, however briefly, the Machine’s direct control (even if the respirators are still connected to the Machine). To use respirators seems to be an acknowledgement that the Machine is not everything, and that there is value to experiencing the natural world. However, this decision turns out to be one of the most severe mistakes in the story, because the elimination of respirators makes it so that the Machine’s eventual collapse condemns the underground inhabitants to certain death without the air that the Machine generates. This ending shows how disastrous it can be when humanity tries to deny our fundamental impulse to connect with the natural world.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Selected Stories* published in 2001.

Part 1: The Air-Ship Quotes

“I want to see you not through the Machine,” said Kuno. “I want to speak to you not through the wearisome Machine.”

“Oh, hush!” said his mother, vaguely shocked. “You mustn’t say anything against the Machine.”

“Why not?”

“One mustn’t.”

“You talk as if a god had made the Machine,” cried the other. “I believe that you pray to it when you are unhappy. Men made it, do not forget that. Great men, but men. The machine is much, but it is not everything. I see something like you in this plate, but I do not see you. I hear something like you through this telephone, but I do not hear you. That is why I want you to come. Pay me a visit, so that we can meet face to face, and talk about the hopes that are in my mind.”

Related Characters: Kuno , Vashti (speaker), The Machine

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange, in which Kuno asks his mother, Vashti, to visit him in person, demonstrates the two characters’ opposing worldviews. Vashti’s worldview conforms with most other people in their society: she views the Machine (the complex technological system that provides them with their basic needs) as benevolent and all-powerful. Kuno, on the other hand, challenges this ideology and points out the Machine’s limitations.

Vashti, like most people in her society, is satisfied with the artificial air, simulated experiences, virtual communication, and so on that the Machine provides. She does not see a need to visit Kuno in person when talking through the Machine is just as good, perhaps even better. In contrast, Kuno is unusual in this society in that he values real experience, unmediated by the Machine. He argues that seeing or hearing someone in person is different, and more meaningful, than simply seeing or hearing them as transmitted through the Machine.

Although Kuno does not state this explicitly, it is revealed later in the story that he does not trust the Machine (suggesting that communications might be surveilled) and therefore cannot tell her anything too subversive, unless she comes to see him in person. This is an early hint that life in the society of the story is dystopic rather than utopic, since the Machine limits and suppresses the people living underground as much as it protects them from the

uninhabitable aboveground world. Kuno also recognizes Vashti's attitude toward the Machine as being quasi-religious, referencing her prayers to it. Kuno demonstrates his fundamentally humanistic outlook when he urges Vashti to remember that human beings were the ones to create the Machine. He insists that the Machine should serve humanity, not the other way around.

“In the air-ship—” He broke off, and she fancied that he looked sad. She could not be sure, for the Machine did not transmit nuances of expression. It only gave a general idea of people—an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes, Vashti thought. The imponderable bloom, declared by a discredited philosophy to be the actual essence of intercourse, was rightly ignored by the Machine, just as the imponderable bloom of the grape was ignored by the manufacturers of artificial fruit. Something ‘good enough’ had long since been accepted by our race.

Related Characters: Kuno (speaker), Vashti , The Machine

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Vashti again expresses the dominant worldview in her society, suggesting that reality or direct experience isn't any better than simulated experience. The “imponderable bloom” that Vashti references here refers to some kind of quality about reality that cannot be adequately reproduced or represented except through direct experience. She rejects the notion that reality has any sort of special quality like this and believes it is good that the Machine does not try to take account of it.

Vashti also gives voice to her society's official ideology in that she prioritizes “practicality” over emotion. This emphasis on rationality rather than emotional expression is one of the factors contributing to the shallowness of human relationships in this society: people think of their interactions with others not as deep emotion connections, but as a practical matter. The Machine contributes to this shallowness by discouraging physical contact and emotional expression between human beings, a norm that Vashti is content with but that her son, Kuno, rebels against.

And of course she had studied the civilization that had immediately preceded her own—the civilization that had mistaken the functions of the system, and had used it for bringing people to things, instead of for bringing things to people. Those funny old days, when men went for change of air instead of changing the air in their rooms! And yet—she was frightened of the tunnel: she had not seen it since her last child was born. It curved—but not quite as she remembered; it was brilliant—but not quite as brilliant as a lecturer had suggested. Vashti was seized with the terrors of direct experience. She shrank back into the room, and the wall closed up again.

Related Characters: Kuno , Vashti , The Machine

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 96-97

Explanation and Analysis

This scene occurs after Kuno urges Vashti, for the second time, to come visit him in person, telling her he will not talk to her anymore unless she comes. She tries to work up the courage to travel down the tunnel that will take her to the air-ship station, where she can board a ship that will bring her to her son. But she is too frightened of “direct experience”—she is so accustomed to living in her comfortable room, where all her needs are provided by the Machine, that any attempt to leave it, no matter how mundane, is alarming.

Her fear seems to be rooted in the reliability that the Machine provides, whereas experiences that aren't mediated by the Machine are unpredictable and riskier. This is another point of contrast between Kuno and Vashti: while Vashti is most comfortable with routine, Kuno craves unpredictability and risk, even to the point of endangering his own life. Vashti finds earlier human societies' values and practices strange, especially their appreciation of traveling to different places. And Vashti's attitude is the norm rather than the exception: because the conveniences (food, entertainment, virtual communication, etc.) the Machine provides have now rendered travel unnecessary, most people in this society have lost their taste for adventure and experiencing other places.

●● Few traveled in these days, for, thanks to the advance of science, the earth was exactly alike all over. Rapid intercourse, from which the previous civilization had hoped so much, had ended by defeating itself. What was the good of going to Peking when it was just like Shrewsbury? Why return to Shrewsbury when it would all be like Peking? Men seldom moved their bodies; all unrest was concentrated in the soul.

The air-ship service was a relic from the former age. It was kept up, because it was easier to keep it up than to stop it or to diminish it, but it now far exceeded the wants of the population.

Related Characters: Vashti , The Machine

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 98


Explanation and Analysis

This reflection by the story's omniscient narrator takes place as Vashti finally boards the car that will take her to air-ship station to see Kuno. Here, the narrator notes another reason why travel is valued so little in this society: Earth, in this future world, has been reduced to monotonous uniformity, with all the distinguishing features of different places reduced or eliminated. This is a product of "rapid intercourse," which ultimately "defeat[ed] itself"—in other words, the ability to travel quickly between different places made those different places more and more similar to one another, eventually eliminating the appeal of traveling altogether. In the eyes of this society, this uniformity is an "advance of science"—hinting at this society's narrow-minded, purely practical conception of "science," as opposed to a more adventurous, curiosity-driven version of science in which experience and direct observation is valued rather than dismissed.

Yet despite this society's disdain for travel, the air-ships continue to operate because they have become so embedded in the Machine that it would be too much trouble to eliminate them. In this way, the air-ships serve as a "relic"—a reminder of an earlier period in human history when people still found value in traveling and, by extension, other kinds of direct experience as well. Symbolically, this suggests that some aspects of human nature are fundamental and unchangeable, in spite of the Machine's influence. This message is also hinted at in the statement that humanity's "unrest" continues, even if it is confined now to the soul rather than the body.

●● And, as often happens on clear nights, [the stars] seemed now to be in perspective, now on a plane; now piled tier beyond tier into the infinite heavens, now concealing infinity, a roof limiting for ever the visions of men. In either case they seemed intolerable. "Are we to travel in the dark?" called the passengers angrily, and the attendant, who had been careless, generated the light, and pulled down the blinds of pliable metal. When the air-ships had been built, the desire to look direct at things still lingered in the world. Hence the extraordinary number of skylights and windows, and the proportionate discomfort to those who were civilized and refined.

Related Characters: Vashti , The Flight Attendant, The Machine , Kuno

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

When Vashti goes to visit her son Kuno on an air-ship, the flight attendant forgets to close the window blinds to block out the stars, which angers the passengers. Throughout "The Machine Stops," stars symbolize nature's vastness and also humanity's enduring connection to nature. Even though much of Earth's surface has been destroyed by some sort of environmental catastrophe, the sky remains untouched, showing that there is a part of nature that persists regardless of human actions or technological changes. This society, however, does not view the stars as beautiful or sublime—rather, to Vashti and the other passengers, they are "intolerable." Perhaps they are intolerable precisely because they are a reminder of the limits of humanity's supposed conquest of nature. They are a part of the world that will lie forever beyond human technology's reach.


This society's disdain for direct observation is illustrated again in the passengers' insistence that the flight attendant close the blinds so they don't have to look at the world outside the windows. The air-ships are a relic from the past, a product of a time in history when human beings still felt connected enough to nature to enjoy observing it. Now, society disdains direct experience because the simulated experiences the Machine provides seem like a better substitute for reality. Vashti and others in her society view this tendency as a form of "civilization" and "refinement," an indication of how society has progressed, while the reader is more likely to view it as a loss of something quite valuable.

Part 2: The Mending Apparatus Quotes

☝☝ She might well declare that the visit was superfluous. The buttons, the knobs, the reading-desk with the Book, the temperature, the atmosphere, the illumination—all were exactly the same. And if Kuno himself, flesh of her flesh, stood close beside her at last, what profit was there in that? She was too well-bred to shake him by the hand.

Related Characters: Vashti , Kuno , The Machine , The Flight Attendant

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Vashti's thoughts immediately upon arriving at her son Kuno's room. The description of Kuno's room, which emphasizes its exact similarity to Vashti's room, demonstrates the idea that travel has become "superfluous" in this society because everything seems to be exactly the same everywhere. The Machine is what imposes this monotony. It's controlled by means of the buttons, knobs, and the Book (the Machine's operating manual). The Machine, in turn, controls the temperature, air, and light in all of the underground rooms in this society, ensuring that everyone's environments and experiences are essentially the same.

Vashti's thoughts here also indicate the full extent of the social taboo against physical contact in this society. Not only is it unacceptable for strangers to touch one another, even for benign reasons, such as the flight attendant catching Vashti to prevent her from falling—it is even seen as "uncivilized" for close family members to do something as simple as shaking hands. This physical distance between human beings correlates with an emotional distance in their relationships, as well. Vashti, unlike Kuno, fails to see any meaningful difference between reality itself and the simulation of reality that the Machine provides. Therefore, she sees no value in visiting Kuno in person rather than talking to him virtually through the Machine.

☝☝ "I did not get an Egression-permit."

"Then how did you get out?"

"I found out a way of my own."

The phrase conveyed no meaning to her, and he had to repeat it.

"A way of your own?" she whispered. "But that would be wrong."

"Why?"

The question shocked her beyond measure.

"You are beginning to worship the Machine," he said coldly. "You think it irreligious of me to have found out a way of my own. It was just what the Committee thought, when they threatened me with Homelessness."

At this she grew angry. "I worship nothing!" she cried. "I am most advanced. I don't think you irreligious, for there is no such thing as religion left. All the fear and the superstition that existed once have been destroyed by the machine. I only meant that to find out a way of your own was—Besides, there is no new way out."

"So it is always supposed!"

"Except through the vomitories, for which one must have an Egression-permit, it is impossible to get out. The Book says so."

"Well, the Book's wrong, for I have been out on my feet."

Related Characters: Kuno , Vashti (speaker), The Machine

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange between Vashti and Kuno takes place when Vashti visits her son in person, immediately after he tells her he has been threatened with Homelessness (a form of execution in which people who live underground are sent to the Earth's surface, where the toxic air apparently kills them). It highlights the stark differences in worldview between the two characters. Vashti upholds their society's mainstream values, wanting to do things the practical, socially acceptable way. By contrast, Kuno wants to do things his own way—spontaneously, in opposition to established rules.

This conflict is expressed in Vashti's shock that Kuno would travel to the surface by escaping rather than by receiving a permit. It is not clear from the dialogue whether Kuno tried to obtain an exit permit but was denied, or whether he instead simply preferred to find his "own way" out. The former possibility may suggest that the Committee of the Machine strictly controls people's actions—especially when,


like Kuno, they deviate from this society's norms. The latter possibility would suggest that Kuno wants to free himself as much as possible from this society's established rules.

This dialogue also reflects the conflict between Vashti and Kuno over worship of the Machine. Kuno sees Vashti's strict adherence to the rules established by the Committee of the Machine as a form of blind religious devotion to the Machine. This offends Vashti because she likes to view herself as perfectly rational. She doesn't see how her faith in the Machine is just as "superstitious" as the old traditions she believes have been eradicated by the advance of technology. But Kuno emphasizes that the Book (the Machine's operating manual, which people treat like a religious text)—and consequently the Machine itself—is fallible, because he proves it wrong by escaping through unofficial paths.

☛ For Kuno was possessed of a certain physical strength.

By these days it was a demerit to be muscular. Each infant was examined at birth, and all who promised undue strength were destroyed. Humanitarians may protest, but it would have been no true kindness to let an athlete live; he would never have been happy in that state of life to which the Machine had called him; would have yearned for trees to climb, rivers to bathe in, meadows and hills against which he might measure his body. Man must be adapted to his surroundings, must he not? In the dawn of the world our weakly must be exposed on Mount Taygetus, in its twilight our strong will suffer euthanasia, that the Machine may progress, that the Machine may progress, that the Machine may progress eternally.

Related Characters: Kuno , Vashti , The Machine

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 104-105

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when Kuno tells Vashti the story of how he escaped to Earth's surface. Kuno's physical strength sets him apart as different and potentially dangerous in this society. The underground society where he and Vashti live practices a form of eugenics in which the aim is to produce not a stronger but rather a weaker species, because physical strength isn't compatible with life in the Machine. Babies who are too strong are "destroyed" (presumably euthanized) because they wouldn't be content living in a confined indoor environment. This highlights how separated

humanity has become from nature, since strength is an advantage in the natural world. Kuno's physical strength offers a potential reason why he is restless staying inside the Machine and wants instead to "measure his body" against the natural world.

The cold-blooded infanticide revealed in this passage also indicates the oppression beneath this society's calm exterior. People in this society consider themselves "civilized" because they think of themselves as highly rational, but their disregard for emotions and human relationships blinds them to the aspects of their society that are, in fact, brutal and uncivilized. It also indicates how this society is attempting to alter human nature to meet the Machine's needs, rather than adapting technology to meet people's needs.

☛ "You know that we have lost the sense of space. We say 'space is annihilated,' but we have annihilated not space, but the sense thereof. We have lost a part of ourselves. I determined to recover it, and I began by walking up and down the platform of the railway outside my room. Up and down, until I was tired, and so did recapture the meaning of 'Near' and 'Far.' 'Near' is a place to which I can get quickly on my feet, not a place to which the train or the air-ship will take me quickly. 'Far' is a place to which I cannot get quickly on my feet; the vomitory is 'far,' though I could be there in thirty-eight seconds by summoning the train. Man is the measure. That was my first lesson. Man's feet are the measure for distance, his hands are the measure for ownership, his body is the measure for all that is lovable and desirable and strong."

Related Characters: Kuno (speaker), Vashti , The Machine

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

Kuno tells this to Vashti at the start of his story of how he escaped to Earth's surface. Kuno's observation that human beings have "lost the sense of space" indicates the separation between humanity and nature in this society. The ability to travel quickly from one place to another on a train or an air-ship means that people no longer experience the world around them, or themselves, in the same way as before. Kuno's discovery that spatial terms such as "near" or "far" are based on how quickly human beings, unaided by technology, can travel from one place to another leads him to the revelation that "man is the measure." This sums up

Kuno's fundamentally humanistic outlook, which centers humanity rather than the Machine. This passage suggests that Kuno's motivation for escaping to Earth's surface is rooted in his desire to reconnect with a lost "part of ourselves," to regain the harmony between human beings and the natural world that once existed.

“I loosened another tile, and put in my head, and shouted into the darkness: ‘I am coming, I shall do it yet,’ and my voice reverberated down endless passages. I seemed to hear the spirits of those dead workmen who had returned each evening to the starlight and to their wives, and all the generations who had lived in the open air called back to me, ‘You will do it yet, you are coming.’”

Related Characters: Kuno (speaker), Vashti, The Machine

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis


Kuno tells this to Vashti as he recounts his story of how he escaped to Earth's surface through a ventilation shaft. He feels a connection with the workmen who built the underground tunnels, back during a very different period of human history. He longs for everything that human beings had once had that they have lost in this society: the ability to breathe in the open air, the ability to see the stars every night, and meaningful human relationships. The very fact that he wants these things means that human nature is still fundamentally the same, in spite of how life in the Machine cuts people off from nature and discourages them from connecting deeply with others or pursuing new experiences.

Kuno's experience of the voices of dead and unborn human beings illustrates a kind of spirituality that is at odds with the worship of the Machine. He is only able to hear the voices once he is far enough away from the Machine to no longer hear its hum. This suggests that the Machine stifles the best aspects of human nature, which can only be recovered by escaping from its control.

“The mortar had somehow rotted, and I soon pushed some more tiles in, and clambered after them into the darkness, and the spirits of the dead comforted me. I don't know what I mean by that. I just say what I felt. I felt, for the first time, that a protest had been lodged against corruption, and that even as the dead were comforting me, so I was comforting the unborn. I felt that humanity existed, and that it existed without clothes. How can I possibly explain this? It was naked, humanity seemed naked, and all these tubes and buttons and machineries neither came into the world with us, nor will they follow us out, nor do they matter supremely while we are here. Had I been strong, I would have torn off every garment I had, and gone out into the outer air unswaddled. But this is not for me, nor perhaps for my generation. I climbed with my respirator and my hygienic clothes and my dietetic tabloids! Better thus than not at all.”

Related Characters: Kuno (speaker), Vashti, The Machine

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Kuno says this to Vashti as he tells her the story of how he escaped to Earth's surface through a ventilation shaft. As Kuno escapes from the Machine's reach, he feels a sense of connection with all of humanity—past, present, and future. Kuno gives a clear expression of his philosophy, which is in stark opposition to his society's "mechanical" philosophy. He has a deep appreciation for humanity in itself—the fundamental human nature that persists beneath all the changes created by modern technologies. Kuno expresses his desire to return to this essence of human nature through the metaphor of "nakedness": he wants to shed all the excess amenities that humanity has created for itself and return to what is best in ourselves.



This desire for "nakedness" is also a desire to experience the world directly, rather than filtered through the Machine. Kuno wishes he could live as human beings lived in the past, able to breathe the air and live on the food Earth produces, rather than remaining dependent on the Machine's artificial air and food. It is impossible for Kuno to fully realize this dream because his body, like those of other human beings in this society, has become adapted to the Machine, and he cannot live entirely without it.

The voices that Kuno hears "comforting" him belong to the human beings who once lived outside of the Machine's control, and those who, in the future, might one day live without the Machine as well. This promise of a different and

more fulfilling way of life is what drives Kuno onward in his mission to reach Earth's surface.

“The Machine hums! Did you know that? Its hum penetrates our blood, and may even guide our thoughts. Who knows! I was getting beyond its power. Then I thought: ‘This silence means that I am doing wrong.’ But I heard voices in the silence, and again they strengthened me.”

Related Characters: Kuno (speaker), Vashti, The Machine

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Kuno says this to Vashti in his story of how he reached Earth's surface, before he recounts finally reaching the exit. The Machine's hum is a symbol of the pervasive control that the Machine exercises on everyone in this society—even on someone like Kuno, who is trying to challenge its power. But the fact that the Machine's hum only extends so far, after which it is replaced by silence, also demonstrates the limits of the Machine's power.

Even Kuno, who's unusually independent and rebellious, is susceptible to the Machine's influence, having lived his whole life inside it. Despite his criticisms of Vashti's blind obedience to the Machine, even he has an internalized sense of obedience to it, which almost keeps him from continuing in his attempt to escape. However, Kuno is able to overcome this impulse because of the connection he feels with the past and future of humanity (symbolized by the voices who “strengthen” him), and his conviction that the Machine is not everything.

Tears gathered in his mother's eyes. She knew that he was fated. If he did not die today he would die tomorrow. There was not room for such a person in the world. And with her pity disgust mingled. She was ashamed at having borne such a son, she who had always been so respectable and so full of ideas. Was he really the little boy to whom she had taught the use of his stops and buttons, and to whom she had given his first lessons in the Book? The very hair that disfigured his lip showed that he was reverting to some savage type. On atavism the Machine can have no mercy.

Related Characters: Vashti, Kuno, The Machine

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

These are Vashti's thoughts when Kuno tells her about how, after listening to the voices in the ventilation shaft, he risked his life in order to grab onto the handle that might allow him to escape to the outside world. Kuno's behavior in the story that he tells Vashti seems so irrational to her that she concludes he will certainly be condemned to Homelessness—that is, to execution. She feels sadness at this realization because she does truly care about her son. However, her sense of obedience to the Machine is just as strong a force for her as her love for her son. So, even as she feels pity for her son's fate, she also feels that he deserves it and wonders how she went wrong in raising him.

Vashti describes her son's behavior here as “savage” and “atavistic” (characteristic of an earlier era of humanity), in contrast to what she sees as the “civilized” world of the Machine. Vashti means to insult Kuno (since she sees his attempt to escape the Machine as terrible and unforgivable), but her word choice contains deeper truth. After all, Kuno *does* want to return to a prior state in human existence, one that is closer to nature, as was the case when human beings were “savage” rather than reliant on sophisticated technology. And Vashti is right to conclude, as well, that it is impossible for the Machine to forgive Kuno's rebellion, as it poses a direct threat to its control.

“Cannot you see, cannot all you lecturers see, that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine? We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now. It has robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralyzed our bodies and our wills, and now it compels us to worship it. The Machine develops—but not on our lives. The Machine proceeds—but not to our goal. We only exist as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries, and if it could work without us, it would let us die. Oh, I have no remedy—or, at least, only one—to tell men again and again that I have seen the hills of Wessex as Aelfrid saw them when he overthrew the Danes.”

Related Characters: Kuno (speaker), The Machine, Vashti

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis



Kuno says this to Vashti while telling the story of how he escaped to Earth's surface and saw the hills of Wessex (a region in the southern UK). It is perhaps the clearest expression of Kuno's critique of the Machine. He points out that although humanity created the Machine to suit their needs, it has now escaped their control. The Machine has taken away human beings' ability to directly experience the world, it has made human relationships superficial, and it encourages such dependence that humans feel compelled to worship it as a god. Rather than having the Machine serve humanity, now humanity serves the Machine.


Kuno's critique here advances one of the overall messages of the story—namely, that technology, and indeed any human-created system, is dangerous when it spirals out of humanity's control. Systems become destructive when they separate humans from our natural way of being, from our relationships with others and with nature. Kuno's solution—to recount the story of how he saw “the hills of Wessex as Aelfrid saw them when he overthrew the Danes”—shows how Kuno sees his mission of reconnecting with the natural world (as symbolized by the hills) and with humanity's past (as symbolized by the history of Aelfrid and the Danes) as the only possible response to the Machine's destructiveness, which separates people from both one another and from the rest of the world.

Part 3: The Homeless Quotes

☞ “The Machine,” they exclaimed, “feeds us and clothes us and houses us; through it we speak to one another, through it we see one another, in it we have our being. The Machine is the friend of ideas and the enemy of superstition: the Machine is omnipotent, eternal; blessed is the Machine.” And before long this allocution was printed on the first page of the Book, and in subsequent editions the ritual swelled into a complicated system of praise and prayer. The word “religion” was sedulously avoided, and in theory the Machine was still the creation and the implement of man. But in practice all, save a few retrogrades worshipped it as divine.

Related Characters: The Machine, Kuno, Vashti

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis


In the years that follow Kuno's escape to Earth's surface, some major changes take place in the society of the story, including the increasingly widespread and institutionalized worship of the Machine. In the first two parts of the story, Vashti's quasi-religious attitude toward the Machine had been a source of tension between her and Kuno. Kuno accuses her of viewing the Machine as infallible and of praying to it when she is worried, but Vashti forcefully denies that her attitude toward the Machine is superstitious or religious. Now, it becomes clear that this quasi-religious attitude towards the Machine is by no means limited to Vashti, as most people have the experience of religious ecstasy upon, for instance, touching the Book (the Machine's operating manual) or pressing a button of the Machine. It is Kuno who is unusual, a “retrograde,” for his lack of religious awe toward the Machine.


This religious attitude stems directly from the role that the Machine plays in the lives of everyone in this society, providing them with food, clothing, shelter, and communication. Because they are so dependent on it for all their needs and wants, it seems all-powerful and benevolent like a god. They assume that the Machine is “eternal” and indestructible like a god, a belief that will later turn out to be tragically flawed when the Machine breaks down.

This worship of the Machine is ironic, because this society values rational “ideas” so highly that it ends up worshipping reason itself (as embodied in the Machine) in a way that is entirely irrational. They view the Machine as an “enemy of superstition,” without recognizing that their worship of it is, in fact, highly superstitious. The absurdity of this society's worship of the Machine is demonstrated in their avoidance of the word “religion,” even as they embrace all the trappings of religion such as prayers and rituals. All of this emphasizes that even though the people pay lip service to the idea that humanity created the Machine, in practice they act as though they owe their existence to the Machine.

●● No one confessed the Machine was out of hand. Year by year it was served with increased efficiency and decreased intelligence. The better a man knew his own duties upon it, the less he understood the duties of his neighbour, and in all the world there was not one who understood the monster as a whole. Those master brains had perished. They had left full directions, it is true, and their successors had each of them mastered a portion of those directions. But Humanity, in its desire for comfort, had overreached itself. It had exploited the riches of nature too far. Quietly and complacently, it was sinking into decadence, and progress had come to mean the progress of the Machine.

Related Characters: The Machine

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

The omniscient narrator makes this observation in the context of explaining the developments (such as the abolition of respirators and the official worship of the Machine) that occur in the years leading up to the Machine's final collapse. At this point, the Machine's inventors have died off, and the functioning of the Machine has become so apparently perfected that human control or intervention seem unnecessary. The Machine has also become so complex that it is impossible for any one person to fully understand how it works.

This is a dangerous development, because it means that the Machine has escaped humanity's control, and this makes the system more vulnerable. When the Machine turns out to be not quite so perfect or all-powerful as people believe it to be, they are helpless to fix it because they no longer truly understand it. This advances the story's message that it's dangerous for human-created systems to escape from humanity's control. The idea that humanity has "exploited the riches of nature too far" also suggests how technological "progress" can become destructive of the natural world—a development that can pose a grave danger to humanity, because no matter how much our technology progress, our survival still fundamentally depends on nature.

●● They wept for humanity, those two, not for themselves. [...] Man, the flower of all flesh, the noblest of all creatures visible, man who had once made god in his image, and had mirrored his strength on the constellations, beautiful naked man was dying, strangled in the garments that he had woven. Century after century had he toiled, and here was his reward. Truly the garment had seemed heavenly at first, shot with the colours of culture, sewn with the threads of self-denial. And heavenly it had been so long as it was a garment and no more, so long as man could shed it at will and live by the essence that is his soul, and the essence, equally divine, that is his body. The sin against the body—it was for that they wept in chief; the centuries of wrong against the muscles and the nerves, and those five portals by which we can alone apprehend—glozing it over with talk of evolution, until the body was white pap, the home of ideas as colourless, last sloshy stirrings of a spirit that had grasped the stars.

Related Characters: Vashti , Kuno , The Machine

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 122-123

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Vashti and Kuno reunite just before their deaths, after the Machine's collapse causes the downfall of their civilization. Vashti has gone into the tunnel outside, where hundreds of people are dying from the lack of air that the Machine used to produce. At this sight, Vashti bursts into tears, and she hears her son crying nearby. This moment marks Vashti's final transformation as a character. Up until this moment, Vashti had blindly believed in the Machine's infallibility, opposing every criticism Kuno made of it. Now, as she witnesses the Machine's devastating collapse, Vashti finally comes around to Kuno's viewpoint, and sees that the Machine has actually destroyed what was best in human nature, and along with Kuno, she "[weeps] for humanity."

This passage expresses the humanistic worldview at the heart of "The Machine Stops": the idea that humanity is fundamentally "noble," "divine," "beautiful." But humanity also can create systems—metaphorically referred to here as "garments"—that can destroy that fundamentally good nature. In this case, the "garment" is the Machine, which was originally a positive, even "heavenly" development, when it was something that humanity could take on or off at will. But the Machine became destructive of what was good in human nature when it led them to reject the body in favor of the mind—to turn away from experience, emotion, and physicality in favor of "ideas" that became spiritless as a

result of being so separated from reality.

●● “Is there any hope, Kuno?”

“None for us.”

“Where are you?”

She crawled towards him over the bodies of the dead. His blood spurted over her hands.

“Quicker,” he gasped, “I am dying—but we touch, we talk, not through the Machine.”

He kissed her.

“We have come back to our own. We die, but we have recaptured life, as it was in Wessex, when Aelfrid overthrew the Danes. We know what they know outside, they who dwelt in the cloud that is the colour of a pearl!”

“But, Kuno, is it true? Are there still men on the surface of the earth? Is this—this tunnel, this poisoned darkness—really not the end?”

He replied:

“I have seen them, spoken to them, loved them. They are hiding in the mist and the ferns until our civilization stops. To-day they are the Homeless—to-morrow—”

“Oh, to-morrow—some fool will start the Machine again, to-morrow.”

“Never,” said Kuno, “never. Humanity has learnt its lesson.”

Related Characters: Vashti , Kuno (speaker), The Machine

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

This final exchange between Kuno and Vashti takes place right before their deaths, when they reunite, surrounded by hundreds of people dying from the lack of air following the Machine’s collapse. It is a bittersweet moment, because even as Kuno and Vashti know that they themselves are doomed, along with the rest of their civilization, they nonetheless have hope that humanity will go on.

Even more than that, they are *happy* that the Machine has collapsed, even if this collapse condemns them to death, because it means that humanity is finally free from its grip. Vashti’s final transformation is indicated by her remark that “some fool will start the Machine again, to-morrow,” showing her recognition that the Machine had been a foolish invention. Whereas before she resented Kuno’s faith

in the “Homeless” people who live on Earth’s surface, outside of the Machine’s control, now she holds onto this hope that humanity might survive the Machine’s collapse as a last consolation in her dying moment.

Vashti’s transformation as a character is also revealed through the physical contact between her and Kuno. In Part 1, when Vashti visited Kuno in person, she considered herself too “well-bred” to even shake her own son’s hand. This physical distance revealed a corresponding emotional shallowness in their relationship. Now, in their dying moments, as she takes him by the hand and lets him kiss her, her desire to be close to her son reveals a more profound emotional connection to him as well.

Although “The Machine Stops” is a dystopian story that ends in disaster, it is also a fundamentally hopeful story, as this exchange reveals. Kuno’s words—his happiness that they have been reunited, and not through the Machine, and his conviction that they have “recaptured life”—reveals his belief that the destruction of the Machine has also made possible the liberation of humanity, which will continue after them.

●● As he spoke, the whole city was broken like a honeycomb.

An air-ship had sailed in through the vomitory into a ruined wharf. It crashed downwards, exploding as it went, rending gallery after gallery with its wings of steel. For a moment they saw the nations of the dead, and, before they joined them, scraps of the untainted sky.

Related Characters: Vashti , Kuno , The Machine

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

This final paragraph of “The Machine Stops” describes the moment of Kuno and Vashti’s deaths, when their underground city is destroyed by an air-ship that has spun out of control as a result of the Machine’s collapse. This final moment of destruction displays the fragility of this complex technological system. Because air-ships have been associated throughout the story with humanity’s past, as relics of a time when humans still wanted to travel the world, the fact that it is an air-ship that destroys the city represents the idea that an older way of life will replace the new way of life that the Machine facilitated.

Just before they die, both Vashti and Kuno see the “nations of the dead”—that is, the souls of human beings who lived in

the past. This recalls Kuno's earlier experience in the ventilation shaft, when he heard the voices of dead and unborn human beings encouraging him onward to Earth's surface. Those voices symbolized Kuno's sense of connection to all of humanity—past, present, and future. The fact that Vashti sees them too shows that, in the moment of her death, she has come to embrace Kuno's humanistic worldview and now feels the same connection

he feels to humanity.

The closing detail about the "untainted sky" recalls the earlier symbolism of the sky as a part of nature that humanity could never quite touch or destroy. Here it serves as a reminder of the ultimate triumph of nature over even the most powerful of humanity's technologies—it continues, "untainted," even as the Machine is destroyed.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

PART 1: THE AIR-SHIP

A woman sits in an armchair in a small, hexagonal room, like the cell of a beehive. There are no windows, lamps, or ventilation openings, but it is filled with soft light and fresh air. There are no instruments, but music is playing. The only furniture is the armchair and a reading-desk. The woman, Vashti, to whom the room belongs, is a “swaddled lump of flesh,” with skin “as white as fungus.”

This opening description suggests that Vashti’s room is one of many identical rooms. It also hints that the society she lives in may be underground, which would explain why there isn’t any natural light or ventilation. Vashti’s appearance also gives a sense of how the human body deteriorates in this environment, with no sunlight and seemingly no connection to the outdoors. She is a “lump of flesh” (implying that her muscles have atrophied) and looks “as white as fungus” (implying that her skin is unhealthily pale).



A bell rings, and Vashti turns off the music. She is irritable, having been interrupted multiple times while listening to the music. She knows several thousand people, so she frequently receives calls from friends and acquaintances. But she smiles when she realizes it is her son, Kuno, calling her. She tells him she can speak to him for five minutes, because she must deliver a lecture on music soon. She becomes impatient as she waits for the image of her son to appear on a round blue plate. Kuno is calling from a great distance away, as he lives on the other side of the world.

In this society, human relationships are shallow, as shown by the fact that Vashti knows thousands of people but scarcely has enough time to devote to any of them. She can only spare five minutes to talk to her own son, and she becomes impatient even in this short time. This detail—combined with the fact that Kuno lives so far away—hints that family relationships are not important in this society, although it is also clear from her initial smile that Vashti has affection for her son.



Kuno tells Vashti that he wants her to come and see him. She protests that she can already see him, but he responds that he wants to see her and speak to her outside of the Machine. She is shocked and tells him he shouldn’t say anything against the Machine, but he scoffs at her for speaking as though a god had made the Machine. He believes she prays to it when she is unhappy, and he tells her not to forget that human beings made the Machine, and that it is not everything. Although he can see and hear something *like* her through the plate, he cannot actually see and hear *her*. He wants her to visit in-person so that he can tell her about the hopes in his heart.

This passage reveals that Vashti and her son are living inside a manmade piece of technology called “the Machine,” though it’s not yet clear exactly what the Machine is or how it works. It seems that people live individually in underground rooms or pods (like Vashti’s room in the story’s opening passage), and that the plates people use to communicate are part of the Machine’s technology. Unlike his mother, Kuno does not entirely fit into this society’s social norms. He distrusts the Machine, whereas Vashti worships it as though it’s a deity. Vashti cannot understand her son’s desire to see her in person, but Kuno doesn’t believe that communication via the Machine compares to face-to-face interaction. He seems to want direct experience rather than a simulation.



Vashti claims she doesn't have the time for a visit, but Kuno counters that it takes the air-ship barely two days to fly from where she lives to where he is. She responds that she dislikes air-ships, because she doesn't like to see the "horrible brown earth," or the sea, or the stars. She tells him she "get[s] no ideas" while riding the air-ship, but Kuno says he gets no ideas anywhere else.

This exchange reveals more details about the world of the story: the description of the "horrible brown earth" suggests that some kind of environmental disaster has stripped Earth of all or most vegetation, and the details about air-ships suggests that this futuristic society has a sophisticated transportation system. Moreover, the fact that Vashti and Kuno live a two days' trip apart means that although they both live in the Machine, they probably live on opposite sides of the world—which speaks to how vast the Machine is. The differences between Vashti and Kuno's characters are also revealed in their different attitudes toward the air-ships and the stars. Kuno likes riding aboard the air-ships and gets inspiration from them, while Vashti views them as horrible and boring. Kuno perhaps enjoys riding the air-ship because he, unlike his mother, appreciates the natural world, and this is one of the few places where he can experience it, albeit from a distance. By complaining that the air-ship gives her "no ideas," Vashti seems to mean that she only values logical and rational pursuits, while Kuno is more interested in emotional experiences.



Vashti asks what kinds of ideas the air could give Kuno. He tells her about a constellation of stars he once saw, which he imagined formed the image of a man holding a sword. He explains that men once carried swords to kill animals and other people. Vashti says she dislikes the stars and does not think his idea is very good. She asks when he first saw this constellation.

Kuno's description of the constellation that looks like a man with a sword indicates his interest in human nature and the past, as well as his enjoyment of the natural world. This marks him as quite different from Vashti, who seems to have no interest in the constellation because of her more narrow-minded focus on rational "ideas" over direct experiences.



Kuno trails off, and Vashti imagines he looks sad. But she can only imagine this because the Machine does not communicate "nuances of expression," only the "general idea" of a person. Vashti believes it is proper for the Machine to ignore this "imponderable bloom" of people and things, and instead to convey something that is simply "good enough for all practical purposes." Kuno says that he wants to see the stars again, but not from an air-ship—rather from Earth's surface, as human beings did in the past. Vashti is shocked by this, and Kuno urges her to visit him, if only to explain what is so harmful about visiting Earth's surface.

The fact that the Machine cannot transmit "nuances of expression," only the general idea of things, supports Kuno's earlier point about the difference between seeing or hearing someone in person as opposed to through the Machine's mediation. Vashti's complaint about these "imponderable" nuances (such as facial expressions) shows that she values logic and rationality—"practical" concerns—over emotional connection with other people. Kuno's desire to see the stars from Earth's surface speaks to his desire for direct, unmediated experience of the natural world, as well as his interest in experiencing the world as humanity did in the past.



Vashti tries to dissuade Kuno from visiting Earth's surface, telling him there is "no advantage" in it, since Earth is only "dust and mud," with no life, and it is impossible to breathe the air outside without a **respirator**—its coldness kills unprotected humans immediately. Kuno says that he knows and will take proper precautions. Still trying to convince him not to go on the expedition, Vashti tells him that a visit to Earth's surface is "contrary to the spirit of the age." He asks if she means it is "contrary to the Machine," and then his image fades—he has isolated himself, ending their call.

Vashti's description of Earth's surface suggests that in the world of the story, there has been some kind of dramatic environmental change that makes it impossible for Earth to naturally sustain human life. Although the causes of this environmental catastrophe are not explained, it provides a hint as to why humanity has retreated underground and now must rely on technology, such as the Machine and the respirators, to survive. Whatever the case, human beings have been largely disconnected from nature. Vashti, who does not share her son's desire for direct experience of the natural world, cannot understand why he wants to visit Earth's surface. Her remark that it is "contrary to the spirit of the age" suggests that this whole society has little regard for beauty or emotion, instead valuing logical ideas and practicality. Kuno again hints that his mother is worshipping and dutifully obeying the Machine, and he ends their conversation frustrated at her inability to understand his desire.



Vashti briefly feels lonely now that Kuno has ended their conversation. But then she turns on the light and is comforted by the sight of the room, with all of its buttons that summon food, music, clothing, baths, and literature and that allow her to communicate with all of her friends. She turns off her "isolation-switch," and immediately her friends' calls flood in, peppering her with questions and requests.

This passage reveals the extent of the Machine's involvement in people's lives: it provides the people who live in its underground pods with all of their basic needs, entertainment, and socialization. Though "The Machine Stops" was published in 1909, its dystopian setting echoes present-day critiques of modern technology: that it holds people back from real experiences, makes human relationships too superficial, reduces attention spans, and takes much of the meaning out of life. One might assume that such sophisticated technology would allow people to focus more on creative projects, personal relationships, and so on. But judging from Vashti's isolated lifestyle and superficial relationships with acquaintances, it seems like the Machine makes people's lives shallower rather than richer.



Impatient as most people in this society are, Vashti responds to most of the questions with irritation. Then she turns on the isolation-switch again so she can deliver her lecture on Australian music. She gives this lecture remotely, and afterwards she listens to a lecture on the sea. Finally she summons her bed and isolates herself, trying to think of any new ideas or events that have happened to her since she last slept.

Vashti's love for music and desire to share her passion with other people suggest that, in some ways, human nature has remained the same. People in this society still want to pursue their interests and connect with others. But because of the life she is accustomed to and the values of this society, she is not really able to engage with her interests or relationships on anything but a superficial level, even viewing music and nature as sources of rational "ideas" rather than sources of beauty or outlets for emotional expression.



Vashti picks up **the Book** of the Machine lying beside her on the reading-desk. It contains instructions for everything she can imagine—what buttons to press if she ever needs something. She holds it “reverently,” looks around as if afraid someone might be watching, and then she kisses the Book and murmurs, “O Machine! O Machine!” After performing this “ritual,” she looks up the departure times for the air-ships going from the island in the southern hemisphere underneath which she lives to the island in the northern hemisphere underneath which her son lives. She tells herself she does not have time to travel and goes to sleep.

Vashti continues to follow her predictable daily routine. She talks briefly to Kuno, asking him if he has been on Earth’s surface since they last talked, but he says he will not talk to her until she comes to visit him. She consults **the Book** again and becomes agitated. She presses a button to open her door and looks down a tunnel. To visit her son, she would simply have to summon a car to bring her down this tunnel and into the air-ship station. This air-ship system was established by the previous civilization, before the creation of the Machine. Vashti reflects on the strangeness of that civilization, for trying to bring people to things rather than bringing things to people.

Vashti is frightened of the tunnel. She hasn’t seen it since her last child was born, and it is not quite as she remembered it. Terrified by the prospect of “direct experience,” Vashti closes the door. She lies to Kuno, saying she cannot visit him because she is unwell. Immediately, the medical apparatus in her room provides a thermometer, stethoscope, cool pads, and medicine—apparently Kuno has telegraphed her doctor. Irritated, Vashti asks Kuno why he can’t visit her. He says he cannot leave because “at any moment something tremendous may happen.” She asks if he has been to Earth’s surface, and he tells her not yet. He says he cannot tell her anything more through the Machine.

This passage confirms that Vashti and her son live on opposite ends of the world, though they both seem to live in the underground Machine. Vashti’s “reverent” attitude toward the Book of the Machine, as she performs this “ritual” before looking up the air-ship schedule, shows the truth in her son’s claim that she “worships” the Machine as a god. This religious attitude seems to go against this society’s logical, rational mindset, but it makes sense considering that Vashti (and likely everyone else in the society) doesn’t seem to understand the Machine’s inner workings—only which buttons to press. Therefore, it appears to Vashti as something mystical and all-powerful, keeping her safe from the uninhabitable outside world and providing everything she could possibly need or desire. Her reluctance to travel to visit her son demonstrates the relative unimportance of face-to-face human interaction in this underground society. If Vashti’s attitude is any indication, most people here are rushed, impatient, and uninterested in having experiences outside the confines of their rooms.



Vashti faces a conflict between her desire to maintain a good relationship with her son and her extreme reluctance to travel beyond her room. Vashti’s reflections on the air-ships, which are a remnant of a past civilization, show just how much humanity’s values have changed as a result of the Machine. People no longer want to travel to different places now that it is possible for the Machine to fulfill people’s wants without needing to leave their rooms.



Vashti’s fear of the tunnel, described as a terror of “direct experience,” shows how much the Machine has changed people’s lifestyles and values, to the point that they no longer want to set foot outside their isolated pods. The medical apparatus in Vashti’s room (as opposed to a human doctor) is an example of how simulation has come to be seen as an improvement over reality. Kuno’s statement that “something tremendous” is about to happen, and his reluctance to tell Vashti too much through the Machine, hints at the possibility of surveillance on the Machine’s communications. It also foreshadows a potential catastrophic event.



Vashti thinks about Kuno as a baby and their past visits. In this society, parents have no duties to their children after they are born—instead, they are raised in public nurseries. However, she has stayed in contact with Kuno, even after he was transferred to a room on the other side of the world, because there was “something special” about him, indeed about all of her children. Vashti decides she must “brave the journey” if Kuno desires. She wonders what Kuno meant by saying “something tremendous might happen.” Clasp **the Book**, she opens the door to the tunnel and summons a car.

Few people travel in this society, because Earth, owing to the “advance of science,” is now the same everywhere. Human beings no longer move around physically, and instead “all unrest is concentrated in the soul.” The air-ships are a “relic” of an earlier civilization, remaining in service only because this is easier than putting a stop to the system. So the air-ships continue on their mechanical paths, often empty or with very few passengers. In this world, humanity has apparently conquered nature.

As Vashti catches sight of the air-ship, she is seized by the “horror of direct experience,” unused to the unfamiliar smells and the experiences of walking and being seen and talking directly to other people. As the passengers board the air-ship, the man in front of Vashti drops his **Book**. This disturbs all of the passengers, because they are used to the floors in their rooms automatically raising the Book if it falls, whereas the gangway to the air-ship does not have this capability. So, the “sacred book” remains motionless on the floor. All of the passengers stop, and the man who dropped the book cannot even bring himself to pick it up. One of the passengers says they will be late, and so they all continue to board the ship, walking over the book.

The public nurseries and lack of required parental duties in this society are evidence of its emphasis on utility and convenience over emotion, tradition, or family connections. However, parents still seem to feel naturally affectionate toward their children, as shown by Vashti’s desire to stay in contact with Kuno and her sense that there is “something special” about her kids. Vashti’s willingness to “brave the journey” to see Kuno shows the strength of her love for him. This suggests that Vashti is a complex character rather than simply a cog in the Machine. She is capable of strong human emotions, foreshadowing that she might undergo a change if “something tremendous” does happen.



The importance of direct experience has been so diminished that most people have no desire to even leave their rooms, despite the ease of travel. Indeed, underground society is apparently so uniform that everywhere in the world looks the same. The detail about “unrest concentrated in the soul” suggests that although technological advances and social changes may have transformed human behavior, the human soul remains fundamentally the same. People are still restless and long for novelty and adventure, but they fulfill these desires virtually rather than through direct experience. The details about how the air-ships continue to travel the same paths, even though they have become mostly obsolete, suggests that the Machine operates automatically, requiring little human intervention. This is a potentially dangerous situation, as it means that these systems are taken for granted without any real understanding of how they operate. The air-ships also represent humanity’s apparent conquest of nature, in that people are no longer limited by natural constraints like the inability to fly. But this seems to be a hollow conquest, because humanity is cut off from the natural world’s beauty.



This almost surreal scene highlights how unaccustomed everyone in this society is to venturing outside of their rooms and directly experiencing the world. The incident of a man dropping his Book is particularly shocking to the passengers because of the quasi-religious awe that they for this “sacred” object and, by extension, for the Machine.



Vashti's anxiety increases as she boards the air-ship: there is a female flight attendant whom she will have to talk to if she wants anything during the trip, and Vashti is enraged to feel that she is stuck with an inferior cabin. Frightened, Vashti caresses her **Book** and murmurs "O Machine! O Machine!" to comfort herself.

Vashti's anxiety is caused by the fact that the world outside is strange and unpredictable compared to her routine, isolated life in her familiar room. Vashti is not used to socializing in person, which explains her nervousness about interacting with the flight attendant, a more difficult prospect than simply pressing a button on the Machine and talking through a plate. Meanwhile, Vashti's quasi-religious attitude toward the Machine is again demonstrated in her prayer to her Book.



The air-ship takes off. They fly over the coast of Sumatra, and Vashti looks at the stars, which she finds "intolerable." The passengers are angry at the careless flight attendant, who forgets at first to lower the blinds and turn on the light. When the air-ships were built, people still had a desire to "look direct at things," which no longer exists in this society. The blind in Vashti's cabin is flawed, so she can still see a single star and later is disturbed by the unfamiliar light of dawn.

Though the flight attendant only appears in passing, she's important because she, unlike most of the people in this society, regularly experiences the outside the Machine. Therefore, her behavior deviates slightly from the social norms that the other characters follow. This is first demonstrated in her forgetting to shut the blinds. The windows, like the air-ship itself, are obsolete—a hold-over from the time when people still valued directly observing and experiencing the world. Now the windows—and the views of stars, sunlight, and landscapes that they offer—are nothing but a nuisance.



The previous civilization had tried to build air-ships that could travel as quickly, or even faster, than Earth's rotation, but they found no success. So many accidents occurred because of these high-speed air-ships that the Committee of the Machine, which at the time was only just rising into prominence, outlawed this pursuit as punishable by Homelessness. This failed attempt to "defeat the sun" marked the end of humanity's interest in anything to do with the sky, and after this, science became concerned only with problems that were certain to be solved.

This story about humanity's failed attempt to "defeat the sun" dramatizes the death of how humanity used to approach science, as a field that sought to understand and master the natural world. The present society has lost this vision of science because of its overwhelming focus on practicality, no longer investigating any questions that might have complicated answers.



Annoyed by the light that shines through her blind, Vashti tries to fix it, but she winds up making the blind fly up altogether. She is horrified at the prospect of being hit by the direct sunlight and calls for the flight attendant. The attendant is also horrified, but she cannot fix the blind, and she advises Vashti to move to a different cabin.

Vashti's horror at the possibility that the sun might shine directly on her might simply suggest that people who live in this society are not well-adapted to bright light because they spend all their time underground. However, taking into account Vashti's indifference toward the stars and the scenery she's passing over, her fear of the sunlight also symbolizes her fear of directly experiencing the natural world.



The flight attendant is a bit unusual compared to other people in this society, who are mostly all alike. This is perhaps due to her out-of-the-ordinary occupation, which requires her to frequently talk to passengers directly. When Vashti nearly falls trying to dodge a beam of sunlight, the flight attendant touches Vashti in order to steady her. Vashti views this as “barbaric” and lashes out at the flight attendant, who apologizes. In this society, people never touch one another.

The flight attendant tells Vashti they are flying over Asia and shows her the Himalayas. The attendant says they were once called “The Roof of the World,” a name that Vashti finds foolish. The attendant explains that in the past, no one could imagine anything above the mountains but the gods. Society has advanced dramatically “thanks to the Machine,” a statement that Vashti and another passenger echo. Vashti asks the flight attendant to close the blinds because the mountains “give [her] no ideas.” Below, the forests have all been destroyed, turned to newspaper pulp during the “literature epoch,” and there are also the ruins of old cities.

The passengers avoid one another, impatient to land and go back underground. The other passengers are mainly young men, traveling from public nurseries to inhabit the rooms of people who have died. The man who dropped his **Book** is traveling back home after fathering a child. Vashti is the only passenger who is traveling for private reasons only. She glances at Earth again, seeing mountains—the Caucasus—that resemble a man. She closes the blind, finding “no ideas” there. Later she looks again and sees a peninsula and islands—Greece—and closes the blind, muttering again “no ideas here.”

PART 2: THE MENDING APPARATUS

Vashti arrives at Kuno’s room, which is identical to her own. Vashti still feels that the visit is unnecessary, seeing no value in meeting with Kuno in person rather than through the Machine. After all, she is too “well-bred” to even shake her own son’s hand. She tells him the journey has not been “worth it,” full of terrible experiences and slowing down the “development of [her] soul.” She asks him to tell her what he wants to tell her, and then she must leave.

The fact that Vashti is so horrified by human touch—even when it is simply intended to prevent her from falling—shows how thoroughly human connection has been eroded in this world. The flight attendant, similar to Kuno, serves as a reminder that human nature has not changed, despite society’s efforts to do away with emotion and human connection.



Vashti’s disdain for one of Earth’s greatest natural wonders is a stark indication of how humanity has become separated from nature. Vashti’s single-minded focus on “ideas,” and her inability to see how they could be found in something like natural scenery, show this society’s disregard for emotional experiences of the sublime in favor of more logical thought. The detail about forests being destroyed to make newspaper suggests that this underground society came about after humanity destroyed the environment on Earth’s surface, making it uninhabitable.



Again, people are not interested in traveling because they find no value in the natural world. As a result, most people use the air-ships only infrequently, during major life events such as having to move from the public nurseries to a room of their own, or conceiving a child. These actions are not undertaken solely by personal choice, but rather with the Committee of the Machine’s approval. There seems to be very little emotion attached to these life milestones, because family connections don’t exist the way they used to. Vashti’s indifference to the Caucasus and Greece further emphasizes her separation from the natural world and lack of interest in direct observation.



The minor inconveniences of Vashti’s journey have deeply bothered her, and she’s unable to understand why seeing her son in person is any different from seeing him through the Machine. Her attitudes again emphasize both the shallowness of relationships in this society as well as a lack of interest in direct experience unmediated by technology. It’s ironic that Vashti claims to be interested in developing her “soul,” then, since she’s uninterested in things like love, human emotions, and beauty.



Kuno tells Vashti that he has been threatened with Homelessness. He could not tell her this through the Machine. Homelessness is a form of execution in which the victim is exposed to the outer air, killing them. Since they spoke last, “the tremendous thing” has occurred, and Kuno has been discovered. Vashti doesn’t understand why Kuno has been threatened with homelessness simply for going to Earth’s surface. It is perfectly legal—all one needs to do is summon a respirator and request an “Egression-permit.” But Kuno says he did not get a permit and found a way out “of [his] own.” Vashti, who does not fully understand, says this would be “wrong.” Kuno asks why, and Vashti is shocked.

The mode of execution called “Homelessness” (exposure to aboveground air) again emphasizes humanity’s separation from and hostile relationship with nature. Although the story never directly explains why the air is toxic, it hints that this is the result of humans’ environmental damage. The detail about Homelessness also suggests that the political system in the Machine is oppressive, as anyone who disobeys the Committee of the Machine is harshly sentenced. Kuno never fully explains his motivations for finding his own way out rather than simply requesting a permit. But he is clearly an adventurous character who longs for new experiences, his spirit chafing against his society’s predictable routines. This may have been his sole motive: to do something novel and forbidden.



Kuno tells Vashti that she is starting to “worship” the Machine, and that she sees it as “irreligious” that he does not let the Committee of the Machine control all his actions. This is the same reasoning the Committee used when they sentenced Kuno to Homelessness. Vashti is enraged by this, insisting that she “worships nothing,” and that the Machine has destroyed all religion and superstition. She insists it is impossible to find a new way out—**the Book** says that exit is only possible through the vomitories, which require a permit. But Kuno says the Book is wrong.

Vashti’s blind obedience to the Machine is a kind of “religion,” but it’s a hypocritical one. Most people who live underground seem to value logic and rationality, and these values cause Vashti to look down on traditional religions—and at the same time, she denies that her own attitude toward the Machine is religious. Yet it is clear from her behavior that she believes anything that the Book (which she treats like a religious text) or the Committee says is the unquestionable truth. Kuno’s willingness to question their society’s orthodoxy contrasts sharply with Vashti’s obedience and causes tension between the two characters.



Kuno is physically strong, which is a disadvantage in this society. All infants who seem like they might become too strong are killed at birth, the rationale being that athletic people would grow discontented living in underground rooms, and humans must be adapted to their environments. Just as ancient societies once killed their infants for being too weak, in this society the strong must be euthanized so that “the Machine may progress eternally.”

This detail about how strong infants are killed at birth (which the narrator justifies with cold, detached logic) again suggests that the Committee of the Machine’s rule is oppressive. It also shows how, in this society, technology isn’t adapted to serve human beings—rather, humans are adapted to suit technology, in the name of “progress.”



Kuno tells Vashti that their society has lost “the sense of space,” which, according to Kuno, also means they have “lost a part of ourselves.” In the story that he now begins to tell Vashti, he decided he must regain it, and he started walking outside his room to recapture the meaning of “near” and “far.” He concluded that human beings themselves are the measure of space, as well as the measure of everything else in the world.

Kuno wants to recover part of what has been lost to humanity—namely, direct experience of the world around us. His statement that humans have “lost a part of ourselves” through losing their “sense of space” conveys his belief that people have an innate need for harmony with nature. His conclusion that humanity is the point of comparison for everything in the world reveals his fundamentally humanistic outlook.



As Kuno walked through the platforms, he realized that their cities must have been built at a time when human beings still breathed the outer air, and that there must have been ventilation shafts. As he searched for one of these possible exits, Kuno worried about doing something that was “not contemplated by the Machine,” but he pushed himself on by telling himself “Man is the measure” and eventually found an opening.

Kuno is unusual in this society because of his urge to disobey the Machine and his dissatisfaction with being confined to his room. He wants to experience reality, not merely the simulation of it. Kuno’s behavior shows that this society has not fundamentally altered human nature, despite its emphasis on rationality and conformity. Even though he has internalized the Machine’s norms to some extent (he worries about doing something “not contemplated by the Machine”) he nevertheless pushes past this doubt to do something forbidden. His realization that “man is the measure” again expresses the story’s fundamental humanism—the belief that humans are fundamentally good and valuable.



When Kuno found a patch of darkness in the tunnel, he realized it was a ventilation shaft, because everything else in the underground city is artificially lit. He started to loosen the tiles and climb through the shaft, imagining the voices of the dead workmen who built the underground city in the distant past, when humanity still breathed the outer air. The voices urged him on, saying, “You will do it yet, you are coming.” When Vashti hears Kuno tell this part of his story, she is moved by it. She reflects that Kuno had lately asked to be a father but was refused permission, because the Committee of the Machine did not want to pass on Kuno’s traits to the next generation.

Kuno feels an almost spiritual connection to the past, as indicated by the voices he hears of dead human beings from past civilizations encouraging him. This creates the sense that Kuno has an almost cosmic mission of restoring humanity to its natural roots and recovering what it is that makes humans unique. Vashti’s reflection on Kuno’s failed attempt to become a father reveals his desire for genuine human relationships and again highlights society’s attempts to mold human nature to fit the Machine’s needs.



After digging his way through much of the ventilation shaft, Kuno went back to his room, and at that point he once again called Vashti to ask her to visit him. Here, Vashti interrupts his story and tells him that it’s making her miserable, and that he is “throwing civilization away,” but Kuno ignores Vashti’s objection and continues his story.

Vashti, who is much better adapted to life underground than Kuno is, views her son’s desire to escape to Earth’s surface without permission as incomprehensible and barbaric. She views their society’s values (routine, obedience, practicality, and indifference toward direct experience) as the essence of “civilization.”



Kuno says that “a man cannot rest” after regaining his “sense of space.” He exercised to regain his muscular strength, then summoned a **respirator** and returned to the ventilation shaft. He climbed up through it, feeling as though the spirits of the dead and of the unborn were comforting him. He felt as though humanity was “naked,” realizing that human beings neither come into the world nor leave it attached to machines, and that these machines don’t matter very much while we are here. If he were stronger, he would have liked to take off everything he was wearing as he emerged onto the surface, but he had no choice but to wear his clothes and respirator if he wished to see the surface and survive.

Again, the voices in the tunnel signal Kuno’s almost spiritual connection to past and future generations of humanity. His thoughts about people’s nakedness suggest that he views humans as fundamentally connected to nature rather than machines—something that does not change no matter how much we may try to distance ourselves from nature via technology. Kuno was motivated to reach Earth’s surface out of a desire to regain this connection between humanity and nature, even if his own physiological limitations and the polluted environment posed challenges.



Kuno climbed up a ladder, which cut his hands, until he reached a point that is dark and silent. He realized that the Machine hums, so it is never truly silent underground. He suspected that this humming may even control their thoughts, and now that he could no longer hear it, he was getting farther away from its influence. He wondered if he was doing something wrong by escaping the Machine, but the voices comforted and strengthened him.

The Machine's humming, which is never noticeable to those living underground because it is constantly present, is a metaphor for the inescapable impact of technology on everyone who lives in this society, whose thoughts and emotions are subconsciously shaped by its influence. The fact that Kuno noticed the fading mechanical hum, replaced by natural silence, highlights his journey away from a world that is controlled by the Machine toward a natural world that reminded him of the connection that once existed (and still could exist) between humanity and nature.



Kuno reached a stopper that marked the exit to Earth's surface, but he could not find the handle. A voice told him to jump—there might be a handle in the center, which he could catch onto and come to them. If there was no handle, he would fall and die, but it would still be worth it, as he would still come to them.

The voices in the darkness again demonstrate Kuno's sense of connection with humanity's past and potential. He was willing to risk death simply for the chance to experience Earth's surface without having to rely on the Committee of the Machine for permission, which shows how important his mission was to him. He would rather have been killed than live his whole life within his underground society's limitations.



Kuno jumped, and he did manage to grab the handle. At this point in Kuno's story, tears gather in Vashti's eyes. She knows that he is fated to die, because there was "not room for such a person in the world." She feels ashamed that she gave birth to such a son, so different from her—she has always been so upright. The Machine, she concludes, cannot have mercy on Kuno's "atavism," his reversion to the old, uncivilized ways.

Vashti cannot understand her son's passionate desire to find his own way to Earth's surface, even if it costs him his life. She knows that there isn't "room for such a person in the world," meaning that this aspect of his personality puts him at odds with the society they live in. It is almost inevitable that Kuno will be sentenced to Homelessness—that is, death. In addition to sadness, she also feels shame, because she worships the Machine like a deity (one that won't tolerate Kuno's rebelliousness) and Kuno is eschewing the values that she holds dear.



As Kuno grasped the handle, he felt that everything he had cared about and spoken to through the Machine mattered "infinitely little." Suddenly, he found himself lying outside in the sunshine, bleeding, and with a roaring all around him. By pulling on the handle, he had caused the stopper to explode, and the air from the underground tunnels was escaping into the air of the outer surface like a fountain. His **respirator** had flown away, caught in the air currents above him, and it pained him to breathe the outer air. He was astonished at the beauty of the outside world. He was stranded, unable to leave this hollow spot of ground because he could only survive so long as the artificial air current was nearby.

Even when Kuno was in grave danger of losing his life, he was still able to admire of the beauty of the natural world around him. Though he wants to connect with nature, Kuno is unable to breathe outside air without a respirator—though it's not clear whether this is because of environmental devastation or because living underground has changed humans' physiology (or perhaps both). In any case, his inability to do something as natural as breathe fresh air represents how humanity has become so dependent on technology that they are now entirely disconnected from the natural world that they were once in harmony with.



As Kuno laid helplessly on the ground, he reflected on his knowledge of Wessex—which was once located in this same part of the world—that he had gleaned once from a lecture. He laughed at the absurdity of the situation he was in and considered himself lucky to have emerged in a small hollow, because it meant that the air from below ground could settle in around him, making it possible for him to stay alive and walk around. He remained optimistic and forgot all about the Machine, seeking only to get to the top of the hollow and see whatever lay beyond. He noticed that the air flow was becoming less vigorous, and he pushed himself harder to make it to the top, despite his difficulty breathing the above-ground air.

Kuno breaks off in his story and apologizes to Vashti, realizing that the story doesn't interest her because there are "no ideas" in it. He wishes he had not made her come and listen to it, recognizing that the two of them are "too different." But she tells him to continue, so he does, describing the hills that surrounded him. He says that she, who has just seen the Himalayas, will have no interest in these little hills, but to him they seemed to be living, and that at one time there was an intense connection between those hills and the human beings who lived near them. Now the hills "commune with humanity in dreams."

Kuno asks Vashti how she can't see that it is they, all of humanity, who are dying, and that underground all that lives is the Machine. Humans created the Machine to do their will, but instead it has robbed them of their sense of space and touch, made all human relationships superficial, paralyzed them, and forced them to worship it. The Machine has developed a will of its own. Kuno has no solution, except to hold onto that vision of the hills of Wessex.

Kuno breaks off again, feeling that he cannot tell Vashti the rest, but she insists that he continue. He explains that the Mending Apparatus had fixed the gap in the tunnel, although he did not realize this at first. He saw that his **respirator** had disappeared and decided he must run away, even the outer air killed him.

Kuno was so desperate to see the outside world that he was willing to risk his life, which speaks to how fundamental the connection between humans and nature is. His remarks about Wessex (a region in the southern UK) demonstrate his interest in reconnecting to humanity's past.



Kuno realizes from his mother's indifferent, even disdainful, attitude toward his story that she is too different from him, too steeped in their society's norms, to appreciate what he is saying. She cannot understand his sense of awe at the hills, which comes not only from the hills themselves but from their connection to human history. Kuno's belief that the hills of Wessex "commune with humanity in dreams" suggests that people's innate desire to connect with nature hasn't been eradicated, only repressed.



Although people created technology to serve their needs, technology has developed a will of its own and robbed humanity of everything that once made life meaningful—that is, connection to the natural world and to other human beings. Kuno seems to be suggesting that there is no hope for the people who live underground. Since they can't breathe aboveground air, they can only hope to escape through imagination (like his vision of the Wessex hills).



By breaking the ventilation shaft, Kuno summoned the Mending Apparatus, which is tasked with repairing the Machine. Kuno's willingness to die by running into the outer air without his respirator, rather than be dragged back by the Mending Apparatus, shows how desperate he was to escape the stifling world of the Machine.



Kuno saw a worm-like appendage—the Mending Apparatus—chasing him. It wound around his ankle, trapping him. He struggled against it, crying for help. He tells Vashti that there is a part of the story here that is too awful for him to tell. He saw that the whole landscape was full of the worm-like machines, destroying the vegetation. Before he was pulled back underground, into “hell,” he caught a vision of the stars in the figure of a man.

The purpose of the Mending Apparatus is ostensibly to fix the Machine. But here, it was also destroying both nature (uprooting all the surrounding vegetation) and human life (nearly killing Kuno). Kuno hints that there is an aspect of the story that he is leaving out, implying that the Mending Apparatus is even more destructive than he’s letting on. Since the Mending Apparatus is an extension of the Machine, it seems that the Machine may have something to do with making the outer world uninhabitable. Yet by describing the underground world as “hell,” Kuno still associates it with death, as opposed to the life that exists above. Kuno’s vision of the stars recalls his earlier story to Vashti, about a constellation that reminded him of a man. For Kuno, this seems to symbolize the fundamental connection between humanity and nature. The fact that it was the last thing he saw before being drawn back into “hell” suggests his hope that one day, humanity will return to its natural state.



Kuno fought against the Mending Apparatus until he hit his head, and he woke up in his room. Kuno’s story comes to an end. Vashti tells him it will end in Homelessness, and that the Machine has been merciful to him. Kuno says he prefers the mercy of God, which Vashti interprets to mean he would prefer to live on the surface.

Kuno has become so disillusioned with the Machine that he would prefer the punishment of “Homelessness”—which mean certain death—over his meaningless existence underground. His desire for God’s mercy over the Machine’s once again suggests a desire to experience the uncertainty and novelty of the outside world rather than the stifling “safety” of underground life.



Vashti asks Kuno if he ever saw the bones of those who were executed through Homelessness after the Great Rebellion. Vashti insists that Earth’s surface no longer supports higher forms of life, even if grass and ferns manage to survive. But Kuno says he’s seen human beings who live on the outer surface—a woman came to his aid when he called for help, and the Mending Apparatus killed her. Vashti decides that Kuno is insane and leaves, and after that she falls out of contact with him.

Vashti’s reference to mass executions after a “Great Rebellion” suggests that there were people before Kuno who tried to escape the Machine, and that they were killed for this. This again suggests that humans have a natural desire to live freely and connect with the outside world. Kuno’s experience on Earth’s surface has led him to doubt whether it is really as lifeless as those living underground have been led to believe—he is now certain that there are human beings who are living on the surface. These people could be related to the ones who managed to survive “Homelessness,” the descendants of earlier rebels against the Machine. This possibility again begs the question of whether environmental devastation made aboveground air toxic, or whether living underground has made people unfit to breathe the air—or both. That the Mending Apparatus killed the Homeless woman simply for trying to help Kuno shows the Machine’s fundamental destructiveness—life on Earth’s surface is a threat to its existence.



PART 3: THE HOMELESS

In the years following Kuno's escape to the surface, **respirators** are abolished. Most people are in favor of the change, because people like Vashti always considered the habit of visiting Earth's surface for no reason but simple curiosity to be unnecessary, even "improper." Only some lecturers complain about the change, because they are no longer able to obtain first-hand experience of their subject matter. But even this objection disappears once the lecturers realize that lectures about the outside world are just as interesting when they are compiled from a collection of other sources rather than from first-hand experiences. One lecturer, who specializes in the French Revolution, even proclaims that first-hand ideas are unreliable and dangerous, and that it is better to study the many layers of second-hand interpretations about a subject than to experience it directly.

The second major development that occurs during these years is the reestablishment of religion. People who had worshipped the Machine in private now become more open about it. They worship the Machine because they depend on it for every need, from food to clothing to shelter to communication.

To the people of this society, the Machine is the "friend of ideas," "the enemy of superstition," "omnipotent," and "eternal." Prayers and rituals are created. The word "religion" is carefully avoided, and theoretically everyone still recognizes that human beings created the Machine, but practically everyone but a small minority worships it as a god. Different branches develop that worship different parts of the Machine. There is also the threat of persecution, in the form of Homelessness, against those who do not believe.

These developments are not simply the Central Committee's dictates, but rather the product of trends in society itself—what could be considered "progress." Knowledge of the Machine became so specialized that no one understood the system as a whole. Humanity has "overreached itself," exploiting nature too far. Progress is now linked entirely with the Machine's progress.

In some sense, the respirators represent the separation of humanity and nature—they are only necessary because human beings are no longer able to survive on Earth's surface. But at the same time, the respirators are only necessary in a society that still finds some value in the experience of going to Earth's surface, as Kuno did. Like air-ships, they are a relic of an older time, when humanity was more curious about the world outside of the Machine. Now, this society increasingly rejects the value of nature and of experience, in favor of the simulation of reality that the Machine provides. This disdain for direct experience is summed up by the lecturer's conclusion that future generations will know far more about the French Revolution than those who experienced it directly.



Humanity's utter dependence on the Machine for all their needs and wants contributes to the impression of god-like power. Kuno's earlier suspicions about Vashti's religious attitude toward the Machine become clearer here.



This development of a religion that worships the Machine is paradoxical, because its doctrines reject "superstition" and celebrate rationality, yet the worship itself is entirely superstitious, not rational. Even as people know logically that humans created the Machine—not the other way around—they act as though it is a god. The reason for this attitude is perhaps because no one really understands how the Machine works as a whole, making its operations seem miraculous.



Control in this society is not maintained simply through political oppression. To the contrary, the majority of people in the society worship the Machine and accept its values as their own. Indeed, these attitudes are only natural considering the circumstances in which they live, as they depend on the Machine for their very survival. The story presents a complex dystopia, in which humanity's demise is not simply the fault of a repressive government, but rather the fault of an entire social system—and humanity itself, which has created this system.



Vashti's life continues peacefully until the "final disaster." Some of her friends receive Euthanasia, and she even requests it herself, but so far she hasn't been granted her request because the death rate is not allowed to exceed the birth rate. One day, she receives a call from Kuno, learning that he is still alive and has been transferred to a room near her own. He tells her that "the Machine is stopping." She laughs at the apparent absurdity of his statement, and Kuno ends their call in anger.

Vashti calls a friend and, referring to Kuno as "a man who was my son," tells him about Kuno's statement, saying it would "impious" if it wasn't so insane. Her friend speculates that Kuno's statement might have something to do with the recent problems with the music—Vashti's symphonies have recently been disfigured by interfering sounds, and the Committee of the Mending Apparatus has assured her it will be fixed soon. The defects in the music, combined with Kuno's remark, worry Vashti. She makes a formal complaint to the Committee of the Mending Apparatus. Vashti's friends complain of similar issues—for example, one friend's thoughts are always interrupted by a jarring noise.

As time goes on, the defects are not repaired and only grow worse, but people adapt themselves to them. Humanity, by now, has grown so "subservient" to the Machine that they accommodate its "every caprice." But the failure of the sleeping apparatus—causing everyone around the world to go without a bed—is a more serious defect, as humanity is not yet "adaptable" enough to go without sleep. People begin to panic, suspecting that someone is meddling with the Machine, perhaps out of a desire to establish a dictatorship. People call to "avenge the Machine," punishing anyone who meddles with it with Homelessness.

The normalization of euthanasia in this society suggests that even a process as natural and unpredictable as death has been turned into something controlled and sterile. Human life isn't considered sacred or valuable, so older people like Vashti's friends can simply choose to die if the birth rate exceeds the death rate. Vashti has become so accustomed to worshipping the Machine as an omnipotent god that the idea that it could ever cease to function is entirely nonsensical to her. Yet the mention of a "final disaster" and Kuno's statement that "the Machine is stopping" suggests that people's faith in the Machine is misguided.



Vashti's description of Kuno as a man who "was" her son means that she has disowned him because of his "impiety" toward the Machine. This suggests not only Vashti's fanatical worship of the Machine, but also the superficiality of human relationships in this society, in which family connections can be dissolved at will. Vashti's unwillingness to try to understand her son's warning renders her all the more vulnerable to the Machine's "stop," which is foreshadowed by the issues with her music.



People's reactions to the growing defects show how humanity, rather than adapting the Machine to serve their needs, now adapts their needs to suit the Machine. However, there is a limit to this, which becomes evident when the Machine's defects begin to disrupt more primal needs like sleep, showing that human nature is not totally malleable. The ensuing panic shows how worship of the Machine has reached the point that no one can conceive of the possibility that the Machine itself might fail—instead, they assume that someone must be actively sabotaging it. Indeed, it may be possible that someone, or a group of people—perhaps the "Homeless" that Kuno spoke of—have indeed sabotaged the Mending Apparatus, but this is never explained for certain.



The Committee of the Mending Apparatus admits that the Mending Apparatus is itself in need of repair. The lecturer from earlier gives a speech exhorting people to be patient and make sacrifices while the Mending Apparatus recovers. The world is still linked by the communication that the Machine makes possible. Only the old and sick continue to suffer, because Euthanasia is no longer working, causing human beings to once again suffer pain.

People living underground are made vulnerable by the fact that they have become so dependent on the Machine. They've accepted its role in their lives as a given and view it as a deity rather than a piece of humanmade technology, so no one understands how the Machine as a whole works anymore. This means that they can no longer control the Machine, nor can they fix it if it ever goes awry. The Mending Apparatus is apparently broken, and no one knows how to fix it—so, it's likely that the whole system will fall apart, and Kuno's warning will come true.



The artificial light begins to dim, and the air starts to go foul. People begin to propose more drastic measures, such as establishing a dictatorship. As panic grows, people pray to their **Books**, which contain the “proofs of the Machine’s omnipotence.” There are rumors of hope that the Machine might still be fixed. But then, suddenly, the entire communication system collapses, and the world as they know it ends.

The panic created by the Machine’s demise causes this previously stable society to start falling apart. Many people retreat into worshipping the Machine, which illustrates the core issue: humanity no longer understands and is no longer capable of controlling the technology that they themselves have created. Instead, they believe that the Machine is powerful enough to be “omnipotent” (like a god) and hold out hope that it will fix itself.



At the moment of this complete collapse, Vashti is lecturing, and she does not realize what has happened at first, until she remembers Kuno’s statement: “the Machine stops.” But she holds out hope that everything will be alright, as there is still light and air in the room, and as long as she has her **Book**, there is still security.

Vashti’s feeble belief that the Book could possibly save them from this situation demonstrates how she and the rest of this society cling onto their irrational worship of the Machine, even when the Machine is clearly failing.



But when the Machine’s hum stops, leaving only utter silence, Vashti breaks down, for she has been surrounded by the hum her entire life. This silence even kills many people. In her panic, Vashti presses on the button that opens the door of her cell. The tunnel is filled with crowds of people who are panicking and slowly dying. Surrounding them all is the silence, which is “the voice of the earth and of the generations who have gone.”

Tragically, it takes a disaster of this scope for Vashti to have a shared experience with other people. But this occurs only at the moment of their deaths, and Vashti turns away from the possibility of human connection in terror. The silence that surrounds them in the aftermath of the Machine’s collapse represents the triumph of both the natural world and human nature over the artificial world created by technology.



Deciding that it is better to die in solitude, Vashti closes her door again to “wait for the end.” Her room disintegrates, and the light fades. She prays to the **Book**, but the darkness becomes complete, and the air begins to dissipate. Turning desperate, she screams, prays, and strikes at buttons. By chance, she hits the button that opens the door again, and she sees hundreds of people dying in the tunnel.

Vashti still clings to the hope that the Machine might start working again, relying on her old methods of praying to the Book and hitting buttons. At this point, she still rejects the possibility of human connection, deciding that it would be better to die alone.



Vashti “open[s] her prison and escape[s],” spiritually but not physically. She cries at the sight, and someone else—Kuno—cries close by, both of them “[weeping] for humanity.” They both understand the sublime beauty of humanity, who had “made god in his image,” and how humanity is now dying, “strangled in the garments” they themselves have woven. They weep for society’s “sin against the body,” the devaluation of muscles and nerves and the five senses.

Vashti, who has closely adhered to her society’s norms and values throughout the story, now experiences a transformation in the depths of despair. Only when she has lost everything the Machine provided to her does she realize that it has destroyed, rather than strengthened, humanity. She now finally understands her son’s viewpoint, just as they are finally reunited before their deaths. She sees how beautiful humanity is, but also how they have created the tools of their own destruction through technologies like the Machine. Kuno and Vashti recognize that their society’s “sin against the body”—confining people to underground rooms—has led to the disintegration of the human spirit. In a sense, the people of this civilization emotionally and spiritually died long before they physically died.



Vashti asks Kuno if there is any hope, and Kuno answers that there is none for them. Vashti crawls to him over the dead bodies. Kuno tells her he is dying, but they at least are touching and talking in reality, not simply through the Machine. He kisses her and tells her that even though they are dying, they have “recaptured life” and are “[coming] back to their own.”

This final reunion between Vashti and Kuno is bittersweet, because even though both characters realize they are dying, they also finally reconcile, because Vashti now recognizes that her son was about the Machine all along. Vashti’s relationship with Kuno, which she previously rejected in favor of the Machine, is now mended. The physical contact between them indicates that they have reached a deeper level of connection now than what was possible through the Machine. The idea that they’ve “recaptured life” and are “coming back to their own” seems to mean that once everyone underground has died and the Machine has fully broken down, the Mending Apparatus will stop destroying the natural world. Then, the Homeless living aboveground will be the only people left, and they’ll live in accordance with human nature rather than trying to alter human nature through technology.



Vashti asks Kuno if it is true that there are still humans on Earth’s surface, if this underground darkness is really not the end. Kuno tells her that he has “seen them, spoken to them, loved them,” that they are waiting for this civilization to end, when they will no longer be the Homeless. Vashti says that “some fool” might start the Machine again in the future, but Kuno assures her that “humanity has learnt its lesson.”

Vashti, like Kuno, loves humanity and holds out hope that even if they must die, some essential part of humanity might survive. In saying that he has “seen, spoken to, and loved” people aboveground, Kuno may be referring to communing with the voices of the dead that he heard as he approached the surface. Or it could be that in the years following his initial escape to the surface, he made other journeys and spent time among the Homeless. Although the Homeless people’s ability to survive above the surface is never explained, one possibility is that Earth’s surface is actually still capable of supporting human life, but that the physiology of those who live underground has altered so much that they are no longer adapted to it. Vashti’s worry that someone might simply start the Machine again after this disaster shows her transformation: she now rejects the Machine and embraces Kuno’s alternate vision of humanity reclaiming the world from technology.



As Kuno and Vashti speak, the whole city breaks apart when an air-ship crashes into it. Before they die, they see the “nations of the dead” and a brief glimpse of the “untainted” sky.

The air-ship has a symbolic resonance as both part of the Machine's system and a holdover of an earlier time, when humanity was closer to the natural world. Its destruction of the underground city suggests that this civilization's demise is a product of both the system's failings and aspects of human nature and humanity's past that this society has failed to eradicate. Kuno and Vashti's glimpse of the “nations of the dead” suggest their connection with the past generations of human beings, and their glimpse of the “untainted sky” shows how nature survives, triumphing over technology.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Bennett, Emmaline. "The Machine Stops." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 16 Feb 2022. Web. 16 Feb 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Bennett, Emmaline. "The Machine Stops." LitCharts LLC, February 16, 2022. Retrieved February 16, 2022.
<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-machine-stops>.

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

MLA

Forster, E.M.. *The Machine Stops*. Penguin. 2001.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Forster, E.M.. *The Machine Stops*. London: Penguin. 2001.