

# The Machine Stops by E. M. Forster

12th Grade Lexile: 910

Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) was an English novelist and short story writer. Considered one of the best early examples of science fiction, “The Machine Stops,” first published in 1909, is notable for predicting several modern technologies decades before they became practical, including the Internet and instant messaging.

**As you read, consider how our world is comparable to the one in Forester’s world.**

NOTE: Parts One and Two are a mix of summary and direct quotes. Most of the summary comes from Super Summary. Ms. Wetzel also edited and adapted the text.

## I THE AIR-SHIP

“Part One: The Airship” begins in “a small room, hexagonal in shape, like the cell of a bee.” A small, pale woman named Vashti is listening to music and becomes annoyed when a bell rings—she knows thousands of people and is interrupted often. Her chair, which “like the music, was worked by machinery,” takes her to the other side of the room to answer the call. She is happy to hear from her son **Kuno** but is impatient because he is slow to respond and she has to give a lecture in five minutes about “Music during the Australian Period.” Kuno’s face appears; he wants to speak to his mother in person instead of through the Machine. Kuno urges her to take the airship—a two-day journey to see him on the other side of the world—but Vashti does not want to travel.

Vashti complains to her son that she hates the airship: “I dislike seeing the horrible brown earth, and the sea, and the stars when it is dark. I get no ideas in an airship.” Kuno is inspired in the airship, for that is where he notices the patterns of the stars and discovers the constellation Orion. Vashti is confused, and Kuno admits that he wants to go to the earth’s surface and see the stars again. She reminds her son that although it is permitted to go to the surface, there is nothing to see but “dust and mud, no life remains on it, and you would need a respirator, or the cold of the outer air would kill you. One dies immediately in the outer air.” Vashti adds that “[i]t is contrary to the spirit of the age.” Kuno abruptly ends the conversation.



Picture of the Constellation Orion:

Vashti is momentarily sad, but then looks around her room. Everything is operated by different buttons that call forth music, clothing, food, baths, and communications with her thousands of friends: "The room, though it contained nothing, was in touch with all that she cared for in the world." Vashti turns off the isolation button and voices flood in. She talks to her friends for a moment and then switches the settings to give her 10-minute lecture. All lectures, which mostly concern minute eras (short time periods) in art and history, are given remotely through the Machine. The lecture goes well, and she listens to another lecture about the ocean from someone who went to the surface to see it. Alone in her room, she chats with friends, presses buttons to eat and bathe, and finally to call up her bed.

Vashti thinks about her day and her conversation with Kuno. She picks up a book on her bedside table, taking it "reverently in her hands." The Book is the instruction manual for operating the Machine from her room. She kisses the spine three times, murmuring, "O Machine! O Machine!" Vashti decides she does not have time to visit her son and goes to sleep. In the morning, she wakes up and contacts her son, but Kuno refuses to speak to her unless she visits. Anxiously, she presses the button that opens the door of her room to the tunnel outside. The travel system, which involves calling a car to fly her to the airship, is now rarely used—not since "those funny old days, when men went for a change of air instead of changing the air in their rooms!"

In a panic, Vashti pushes the button to close the door and repeats to her son that she cannot visit, adding that she is ill. Suddenly, an arm of the Machine descends from the ceiling, holding her still and checking her temperature and vital signs. Vashti understands that Kuno must have contacted her doctor. The Machine shoots medication into her mouth and returns to the ceiling. Vashti asks Kuno why he cannot visit her. Mysteriously, he responds, "Because I cannot leave this place. [...] Because, any moment, something tremendous may happen." He tells her that he has not gone to the surface but refuses to say any more until she visits. Vashti reflects on the parenting process; the manual states that parental duties "cease at the moment of birth." Babies are immediately taken to public nurseries where parents may visit. Although she gave birth to several children, "there was something special about Kuno." She realizes she will have to take the trip.

Mentally preparing herself, Vashti holds her Book and calls a car. She takes a seat in the car which is empty except for one fellow traveler—the first person she has seen in months outside of the Machine's communication system. People rarely travel because the earth is the same everywhere. In this time of the Machine, "men seldom moved their bodies; all unrest was concentrated in the soul." The airship system moves smoothly, as scientists have either managed to create machinery that is unaffected by weather and natural disasters or have stopped those disasters altogether. Vashti is uncomfortable with her new surroundings and the presence of other people. A passenger drops his Book and is at a loss for how to retrieve it: "the sacred volume lay motionless. They stopped — the thing was unforeseen — and the man, instead of picking up his property, felt the muscles of his arm to see how they had failed him." If this happened in his room, the Machine would have lifted it up for him. The man leaves his Book and boards the airship.

Nervously, Vashti notices that “the arrangements were old-fashioned and rough.” There is a live attendant, and Vashti becomes silently outraged that the woman did not give her the best cabin. Vashti comforts herself by holding her Book, watching through the window as the dropped Book on the platform is swept up by the Machine. As the airship takes off, the attendant lowers the blinds and turns on the artificial light within the cabin. Vashti is upset to see a gap in the blinds through which she can see a single star. When the sun rises, the foreign light wakes her up. Although scientists managed to speed up the earth’s rotation in order to make the night longer and “defeat the sun,” it was quickly discovered that this was dangerous, and the research subject became punishable by Homelessness. This attempt to control the sun marked the end of man’s connection and curiosity with the outside world. Therefore, sunlight irritates Vashti.

Vashti calls for the attendant, who offers to switch Vashti’s cabin. Vashti notes that although “people were almost exactly alike all over the world,” the attendant is different, perhaps because her job requires her to communicate face-to-face so often. Vashti loses her balance and the attendant reaches out to stop her from falling. Vashti is horrified and yells at the woman who apologizes, confused. In the age of the Machine, “people never touched one another. The custom had become obsolete” (no longer used). The attendant lifts the blinds and shows Vashti the Himalayan mountains, explaining that the mountain range was “once called the Roof of the World” because people believed that only gods could live so high up. Vashti laughs at the name and tells the attendant to close the blinds because “these mountains give me no ideas.” They both praise the machine and Vashti looks around. Most of the other passengers are young men who were raised in public nurseries and are being sent to their new homes on the other side of the world.

“At midday she took a second glance at the earth. The air-ship was crossing another range of mountains, but she could see little, owing to clouds. Masses of black rock hovered below her, and merged indistinctly into grey. Their shapes were fantastic; one of them resembled a prostrate man [lying flat down].

‘No ideas here,’ murmured Vashti, and hid the Caucasus behind a metal blind.

In the evening she looked again. They were crossing a golden sea, in which lay many small islands and one peninsula. She repeated, “No ideas here,” and hid Greece behind a metal blind.”

## II THE MENDING APPARATUS

In "Part Two: The Mending Apparatus," Vashti arrives at Kuno’s room, which looks just like hers. They do not touch. She complains about the trip and insists she can only stay for a few moments. Kuno tells his mother that the Central Committee has threatened him with Homelessness—a death sentence in which a person is left to die in the outside air. Kuno

describes his trip to the surface, which he made illegally without asking for a permit. She is shocked that he would do such a thing, and he accuses her of worshiping the Machine. Vashti argues, "I worship nothing! [...] I am most advanced!" Kuno is stronger than most humans, and strength is hurtful in their sedentary (always sitting) society. Babies born too strong are euthanized (killed without pain): "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; he would have yearned for trees to climb, rivers to bathe in, meadows and hills against which he might measure his body." Kuno points out that their virtual-based lives have caused them to lose awareness of spatiality (awareness of distances and one's location in space).

When he made his illegal trip, Kuno tells Vashti, he had no sense of how far his room was from the surface, so he walked along the rail platform and slowly began to regain an idea of distance. He declares, "Man is the measure," meaning that the human body is the basis for understanding spatial relationships. He realized, Kuno continues, that, because the Machine and underground living system were built when people still breathed outside air, there must still be ventilation systems that reach the surface. Looking for these systems, Kuno walked through the railway tunnels, imagining the voices of the long-dead workmen who built them. He tells his mother that generations of voices urged him on, which reminds Vashti that her son's recent application to become a father has been denied.

Kuno recalls that he found a hole where the tiles were loose, and he started to pull them down until he became tired, returned to his room, and called his mother. Vashti becomes upset, accusing, "You are throwing civilization away." Kuno goes on, describing how he exercised to build up his strength and muscles. Finally, he requested a respirator and made his second journey. This time, he found the tiles easier to remove. He climbed through the hole and found a ladder, which he climbed up, noting the silence. He could no longer hear the ever-present hum of the Machine. Still, Kuno continued to hear the voices of the dead in his mind, and then reached the seal covering the shaft from the outside world. He had to leap, risking his life to reach it.

Vashti responds with worry and shame. She knows her son's actions will lead to his death because "there was not room for such a person in the world."

Kuno continues: He managed to open the seal, and the air from the underground tunnel system blasted forcefully. He landed in the sun, bleeding, his respirator lost. Then he noticed that his respirator was floating, lifted by a column of air, so he breathed from the opening. He was in a hollow indentation in the earth that slowly filled with a mixture of Machine air and surface air, and he was happy, determined to climb up.

Kuno pauses his story suddenly, assuming Vashti does not want to hear more, but she urges him to continue. He talks about the hills and the land that used to be populated with life, hills that "commune [communicate] with humanity in dreams." Desperately, he tells his mother that the Machine is killing humanity, having taken away their relationship to the world and each other:

“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 lies. The Machine proceeds — but not to our goal.”

Kuno insists that the Machine would gladly let humans die out if it did not need them.

Kuno stops again, but Vashti insists that he explain how he made it back to his room. Kuno tells her that his respirator finally fell back to the ground around sunset. The air flowing from the underground tunnel went down and then stopped and he realized that the Machine’s Mending Apparatus (Machine) had discovered the hole and would be coming for him. Determined to run, Kuno looked for his respirator, but it was gone. Then, the Mending Apparatus, which Kuno describes as “a long white worm” came out of the tunnel. He fought as it grabbed him, but he hit his head and passed out. He woke up in his room alone.

Vashti moves to leave, murmuring, “It will end in Homelessness.” Kuno admits that he wishes they would make him Homeless. He reminds Vashti of those who have been made Homeless and of the bones that remain as warnings. Immediately before the Mending Apparatus caught him, he saw a woman die when the worm stabbed her in the throat. Vashti leaves.

### **III THE HOMELESS**

NOTE: Part 3 is entirely the original text by Forster, with synonyms for difficult words in parentheses.

[215] During the years that followed Kuno’s escapade (adventure), two important developments took place in the Machine. On the surface they were revolutionary, but in either case men’s minds had been prepared beforehand, and they did but express tendencies that were latent (hidden or dormant) already.

The first of these was the abolition (ending) of respirator.

Advanced thinkers, like Vashti, had always held it foolish to visit the surface of the earth. Air-ships might be necessary, but what was the good of going out for mere curiosity and crawling along for a mile or two in a terrestrial (relating to the earth) motor? The habit was vulgar (gross) and perhaps faintly improper: it was unproductive of ideas, and had no connection with the habits that really mattered. So respirators were abolished, and with them, of course, the terrestrial motors, and except for a few lecturers, who complained that they were debarred (denied) access to their subject-matter, the development was accepted quietly. Those

who still wanted to know what the earth was like had after all only to listen to some gramophone (sound recording), or to look into some cinematophote (film recorder). And even the lecturers acquiesced (gave in) when they found that a lecture on the sea was nonetheless stimulating when compiled out of other lectures that had already been delivered on the same subject.

“Beware of first-hand ideas!” exclaimed one of the most advanced of them. “First-hand ideas do not really exist. They are but the physical impressions produced by life and fear, and on this gross foundation who could erect a philosophy? Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far removed from that disturbing element — direct observation. ... You who listen to me are in a better position to judge about the French Revolution than I am. Your descendants will be even in a better position than you, for they will learn what you think I think, and yet another intermediate will be added to the chain. And in time” — his voice rose — “there will come a generation that had got beyond facts, beyond impressions, a generation absolutely colorless, a generation seraphically (like an angel) free from taint of personality, which will see the French Revolution not as it happened, nor as they would like it to have happened, but as it would have happened, had it taken place in the days of the Machine.”

Tremendous applause greeted this lecture, which did but voice a feeling already latent in the minds of men — a feeling that terrestrial facts must be ignored, and that the abolition of respirators was a positive gain. It was even suggested that air-ships should be abolished too. This was not done, because air-ships had somehow worked themselves into the Machine’s system. But year by year they were used less, and mentioned less by thoughtful men.

The second great development was the re-establishment of religion.

[220] This, too, had been voiced in the celebrated lecture. No one could mistake the reverent tone in which the peroration (concluding part of a speech) had concluded, and it awakened a responsive echo in the heart of each. Those who had long worshiped silently, now began to talk. They described the strange feeling of peace that came over them when they handled the Book of the Machine, the pleasure that it was to repeat certain numerals out of it, however little meaning those numerals conveyed to the outward ear, the ecstasy (extreme joy) of touching a button, however unimportant, or of ringing an electric bell, however superfluously (unnecessarily).

“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 (all-powerful), eternal; blessed is the Machine.”

And before long this allocution (formal speech) 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 (with careful persistence) avoided, and in theory the Machine was still the creation and the implement of man. But in practice all, save a few retrogrades (old fashioned people), worshiped it as divine. Nor was it worshiped in unity. One believer would be chiefly

impressed by the blue optic plates, through which he saw other believers; another by the mending apparatus, which sinful Kuno had compared to worms; another by the lifts, another by the Book. And each would pray to this or to that, and ask it to intercede for him with the Machine as a whole. Persecution — that also was present. It did not break out, for reasons that will be set forward shortly. But it was latent, and all who did not accept the minimum known as “undenominational Mechanism” lived in danger of Homelessness, which means death, as we know.

... 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 neighbor, 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 (while full of itself), it was sinking into decadence (decay), and progress had come to mean the progress of the Machine.

As for Vashti, her life went peacefully forward until the final disaster. She made her room dark and slept; she awoke and made the room light. She lectured and attended lectures. She exchanged ideas with her innumerable (countless) friends and believed she was growing more spiritual. At times a friend was granted Euthanasia, and left his or her room for the homelessness that is beyond all human conception. Vashti did not much mind. After an unsuccessful lecture, she would sometimes ask for Euthanasia herself. But the death-rate was not permitted to exceed the birth-rate, and the Machine had hitherto (up until now) refused it to her.

[225] The troubles began quietly, long before she was conscious of them.

One day she was astonished at receiving a message from her son. They never communicated, having nothing in common, and she had only heard indirectly that he was still alive, and had been transferred from the northern hemisphere, where he had behaved so mischievously, to the southern — indeed, to a room not far from her own.

“Does he want me to visit him?” she thought. “Never again, never. And I have not the time.”

No, it was madness of another kind.

He refused to visualize his face upon the blue plate, and speaking out of the darkness with solemnity said: “The Machine stops.”

[230] “What do you say?”

“The Machine is stopping, I know it, I know the signs.”

She burst into a peal of laughter. He heard her and was angry, and they spoke no more.

“Can you imagine anything more absurd (ridiculous)?” she cried to a friend. “A man who was my son believes that the Machine is stopping. It would be impious (showing a lack of respect, usually to religion) if it was not mad.”

“The Machine is stopping?” her friend replied. “What does that mean? The phrase conveys nothing to me.”

[235] “Nor to me.”

“He does not refer, I suppose, to the trouble there has been lately with the music?”

“Oh no, of course not. Let us talk about music.”

“Have you complained to the authorities?”

“Yes, and they say it wants mending, and referred me to the Committee of the Mending Apparatus. I complained of those curious gasping sighs that disfigure the symphonies of the Brisbane school. They sound like some one in pain. The Committee of the Mending Apparatus say that it shall be remedied (fixed) shortly.”

[240] Obscurely (Indefinitely) worried, she resumed her life. For one thing, the defect (flaw) in the music irritated her. For another thing, she could not forget Kuno’s speech. If he had known that the music was out of repair — he could not know it, for he detested music — if he had known that it was wrong, “the Machine stops” was exactly the venomous (poisonous) sort of remark he would have made. Of course he had made it at a venture, but the coincidence annoyed her, and she spoke with some petulance (moodiness) to the Committee of the Mending Apparatus.

They replied, as before, that the defect would be set right shortly.

“Shortly! At once!” she retorted. “Why should I be worried by imperfect music? Things are always put right at once. If you do not mend it at once, I shall complain to the Central Committee.”

“No personal complaints are received by the Central Committee,” the Committee of the Mending Apparatus replied.

“Through whom am I to make my complaint, then?”

[245] “Through us.”

“I complain then.”



“Your complaint shall be forwarded in its turn.”

“Have others complained?”

This question was unmechanical, and the Committee of the Mending Apparatus refused to answer it.

[250] “It is too bad!” she exclaimed to another of her friends.

“There never was such an unfortunate woman as myself. I can never be sure of my music now. It gets worse and worse each time I summon it.”

“What is it?”

“I do not know whether it is inside my head, or inside the wall.”

“Complain, in either case.”

[255] “I have complained, and my complaint will be forwarded in its turn to the Central Committee.”

Time passed, and they resented the defects no longer. The defects had not been remedied, but the human tissues in that latter day had become so subservient (obedient), that they readily adapted themselves to every caprice<sup>30</sup> of the Machine. The sigh at the crises of the Brisbane symphony no longer irritated Vashti; she accepted it as part of the melody. The jarring noise, whether in the head or in the wall, was no longer resented by her friend. And so with the moldy artificial fruit, so with the bath water that began to stink, so with the defective rhymes that the poetry machine had taken to emit (give out), all were bitterly complained of at first, and then acquiesced in (accepted) and forgotten. Things went from bad to worse unchallenged.

It was otherwise with the failure of the sleeping apparatus. That was a more serious stoppage. There came a day when over the whole world — in Sumatra, in Wessex, in the innumerable cities of Courland and Brazil — the beds, when summoned by their tired owners, failed to appear. It may seem a ludicrous (ridiculous) matter, but from it we may date the collapse of humanity. The Committee responsible for the failure was assailed (attacked) by complainants, whom it referred, as usual, to the Committee of the Mending Apparatus, who in its turn assured them that their complaints would be forwarded to the Central Committee. But the discontent grew, for mankind was not yet sufficiently adaptable to do without sleeping.

“Someone is meddling with the Machine — ” they began.

“Someone is trying to make himself king, to reintroduce the personal element.”

[260] "Punish that man with Homelessness."

"To the rescue! Avenge (seek revenge for) the Machine! Avenge the Machine!"

"War! Kill the man!"

But the Committee of the Mending Apparatus now came forward, and allayed (calmed) the panic with well-chosen words. It confessed that the Mending Apparatus was itself in need of repair.

The effect of this frank (honest) confession was admirable.

[265] "Of course," said a famous lecturer — he of the French Revolution, who gilded (covered up) each new decay with splendor (glory) — "of course we shall not press our complaints now. The Mending Apparatus has treated us so well in the past that we all sympathize with it, and will wait patiently for its recovery. In its own good time it will resume its duties. Meanwhile let us do without our beds, our tabloids, our other little wants. Such, I feel sure, would be the wish of the Machine."

Thousands of miles away his audience applauded. The Machine still linked them. Under the seas, beneath the roots of the mountains, ran the wires through which they saw and heard, the enormous eyes and ears that were their heritage, and the hum of many workings clothed their thoughts in one garment of subserviency. Only the old and the sick remained ungrateful, for it was rumored that Euthanasia, too, was out of order, and that pain had reappeared among men.

It became difficult to read. A blight (decay or darkness) entered the atmosphere and dulled its luminosity (brightness). At times Vashti could scarcely see across her room. The air, too, was foul. Loud were the complaints, impotent (helpless) the remedies, heroic the tone of the lecturer as he cried: "Courage! courage! What matter so long as the Machine goes on? To it the darkness and the light are one." And though things improved again after a time, the old brilliancy was never recaptured, and humanity never recovered from its entrance into twilight. ... But for the most part panic reigned, and men spent their strength praying to their Books, tangible (physical) proofs of the Machine's omnipotence. There were gradations (varying levels) of terror — at times came rumors of hope — the Mending Apparatus was almost mended — the enemies of the Machine had been got under — new "nerve-centers" were evolving which would do the work even more magnificently than before. But there came a day when, without the slightest warning, without any previous hint of feebleness (weakness), the entire communication-system broke down, all over the world, and the world, as they understood it, ended.

Vashti was lecturing at the time and her earlier remarks had been punctuated with applause. As she proceeded the audience became silent, and at the conclusion there was no sound. Somewhat displeased, she called to a friend who was a specialist in sympathy. No sound: doubtless the friend was sleeping. And so with the next friend whom she tried to summon, and

so with the next, until she remembered Kuno's cryptic (mysterious) remark, "The Machine stops."

The phrase still conveyed nothing. If Eternity was stopping it would of course be set going shortly.

[270] For example, there was still a little light and air — the atmosphere had improved a few hours previously. There was still the Book, and while there was the Book there was security.

Then she broke down, for with the cessation (stopping) of activity came an unexpected terror — silence.

She had never known silence, and the coming of it nearly killed her — it did kill many thousands of people outright. Ever since her birth she had been surrounded by the steady hum. It was to the ear what artificial air was to the lungs, and agonizing pains shot across her head. And scarcely knowing what she did, she stumbled forward and pressed the unfamiliar button, the one that opened the door of her cell.

Now the door of the cell worked on a simple hinge of its own. It was not connected with the central power station, dying far away in France. It opened, rousing immoderate (raising extreme) hopes in Vashti, for she thought that the Machine had been mended. It opened, and she saw the dim tunnel that curved far away towards freedom. One look, and then she shrank back. For the tunnel was full of people — she was almost the last in that city to have taken alarm.

People at any time repelled (disgusted) her, and these were nightmares from her worst dreams. People were crawling about, people were screaming, whimpering, gasping for breath, touching each other, vanishing in the dark, and ever and anon (shortly) being pushed off the platform onto the live rail. Some were fighting round the electric bells, trying to summon trains which could not be summoned. Others were yelling for Euthanasia or for respirators, or blaspheming (cursing) the Machine. Others stood at the doors of their cells fearing, like herself, either to stop in them or to leave them. And behind all the uproar was silence — the silence which is the voice of the earth and of the generations who have gone.

[275] No — it was worse than solitude. She closed the door again and sat down to wait for the end. The disintegration went on, accompanied by horrible cracks and rumbling. The valves that restrained the Medical Apparatus must have weakened, for it ruptured and hung hideously from the ceiling. The floor heaved and fell and flung her from the chair. A tube oozed towards her serpent fashion. And at last the final horror approached — light began to ebb (fade), and she knew that civilization's long day was closing.

She whirled around, praying to be saved from this, at any rate, kissing the Book, pressing button after button. The uproar outside was increasing, and even penetrated the wall. Slowly the brilliancy of her cell was dimmed, the reflections faded from the metal switches. Now she could

not see the reading-stand, now not the Book, though she held it in her hand. Light followed the flight of sound, air was following light, and the original void returned to the cavern from which it has so long been excluded. Vashti continued to whirl, like the devotees (followers) of an earlier religion, screaming, praying, striking at the buttons with bleeding hands.

It was thus that she opened her prison and escaped — escaped in the spirit: at least so it seems to me, ere (before) my meditation closes. That she escapes in the body — I cannot perceive that. She struck, by chance, the switch that released the door, and the rush of foul air on her skin, the loud throbbing whispers in her ears, told her that she was facing the tunnel again, and that tremendous platform on which she had seen men fighting. They were not fighting now. Only the whispers remained, and the little whimpering groans. They were dying by hundreds out in the dark.

She burst into tears.

Tears answered her.

[280] They wept for humanity, those two, not for themselves. They could not bear that this should be the end. Ere silence was completed their hearts were opened, and they knew what had been important on the earth. 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 (worked), and here was his reward. Truly the garment had seemed heavenly at first, shot with colors of culture, sewn with the threads of self-denial. And heavenly it had been 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 (i.e., the five senses) by which we can alone apprehend (understand) — glozing (explaining away) it over with talk of evolution, until the body was white pap (pulp or mush), the home of ideas as colorless, last sloshy stirrings of a spirit that had grasped the stars.

“Where are you?” she sobbed.

His voice in the darkness said, “Here.”

“Is there any hope, Kuno?”

“None for us.”

[285] “Where are you?”

She crawled 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 Ælfrid overthrew the Danes. We know what they know outside, they who dwelt in the cloud that is the color of a pearl.”

[290] “But Kuno, is it true? Are there still men on the surface of the earth? Is 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 midst and the ferns until our civilization stops. Today they are the Homeless — tomorrow — ”

“Oh, tomorrow — some fool will start the Machine again, tomorrow.”

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

As he spoke, the whole city was broken like a honeycomb. An air-ship had sailed in through the vomitory (entranceway) into a ruined wharf (landing place). It crashed downwards, exploding as it went, rending (destroying) 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 (unstained, pure) sky.

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Go on to the next page for the questions you need to answer.



## Discussion Questions

1. On the back of this page, fill in the Venn diagram to compare the world created in this story and the reality in which we now live.
2. Imagine and list the downfalls of relying too heavily on technology. What was lost in the society from this story? What can that look like in our society?
3. In the text, a famous lecturer warns "Beware of first-hand ideas! ... Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand..." (para. 217). Explain what is meant by first- and second-hand ideas. Give examples of both from our world today. To what degree do you agree or disagree with his statement? Why?
4. In addition to progress and technology, isolation is a major concept in "The Machine Stops." In the context of this story, what does it mean to be alone? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature or art in your answer.
5. What hope is there at the end of this story? What hope is there in our society today?

**The world in “The Machine Stops”**

**Our world today**

