I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream Study Guide

I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream by Harlan Ellison

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Harlan Ellison's short story "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" originally appeared in the March 1967 issue of *IF: Worlds of Science Fiction.* It was later collected in the book I *Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,* also published in 1967. The story won a Hugo Award in 1968 and quickly became a favorite story among Ellison's readers and critics alike.

One of Ellison's most frequently anthologized stories, "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" can be read as a cautionary tale about nuclear proliferation, as a warning about the relationship between people and computers, or as an expression of the destructive power of thwarted creativity. Perhaps more accurately, the story can be read simultaneously as all of the above.

"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" is a horrifying look into a post-apocalyptic hell. The computers created by humans to fight their wars for them join together into one linked and unified computer, AM, which discovers sentience. It quickly runs data to kill all on Earth except for five survivors on whom to play out its sadistic and revenge-filled games. Although AM often appears to be godlike, it is no god, for as George Edward Slusser points out in his study *Harlan Ellison: Unrepentant Harlequin* (1977), AM cannot create life, although it can prevent the survivors from dying.

In the final scene, the narrator triumphs over the machine in a bittersweet victory. His murder of the other four survivors releases them from AM. However, as the sole survivor, the narrator must live horribly alone, his mind intact but his body rendered into a slimy blob without mouth or expression.

Author Biography

Harlan Ellison was born on May 27, 1934, in Cleveland, Ohio, the son of Louis Laverne and Serita Rosenthal Ellison. As a youngster, he appeared in several productions at the Cleveland Playhouse. He demonstrated an early attraction to science fiction, publishing his first short story in 1947 in the *Cleveland News.* Three years later, he founded the Cleveland Science Fiction Society.

Ellison attended Ohio State University for two years. He left Ohio State for New York City to pursue his writing career. While in New York, he joined a gang under a pseudonym, and used the information he gathered there as the basis of a novel, *Rumble.* He then worked at several jobs before joining the United States Army in 1957. After serving two years, he left the army and began his own publication, a magazine called *Rogue.* Soon after, he founded his own publishing firm, Regency Books. During the late 1950s, Ellison produced a prodigious number of stories under his own name and under a variety of pseudonyms. Much of the material he produced during this period concerned urban life.

In 1962 Ellison moved to Los Angeles, California. He continued to write prolifically and found success publishing his stories and novels. In addition, he began writing for television. Some of the series for which he wrote include *The Untouchables, The Alfred Hitchcock Hour, The Outer Limits, Route 66,* and *Burke's Law.* In 1967 he wrote a script for *Star Trek,* "The City on the Edge of Forever," which won a Hugo Award (Science Fiction Achievement Award) in 1967 from the World Science Fiction Society and a Writers' Guild of America Award in 1968.

The 1960s also marked an especially fertile and creative period for Ellison's short-story career. Some of his best-known work came out of this period, including the collections I *Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* in 1967 and *The Beast that Shouted Love at the Heart of the World* in 1969. In all, Ellison produced a dozen full-length books or collections during the decade as well as edited and annotated one of the most important anthologies of science fiction yet to be written, *Dangerous Visions* in 1967 (expanded in 1969). He also received a number of Nebula Awards from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America and Hugo Awards for his short stories, receiving one of each for his 1965 short story, "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman." Although Ellison has rejected the label as too confining, many critics have identified his work with a movement called the "New Wave," a movement in science fiction characterized by gritty, experimental writing.

Ellison's career continued at a rapid pace during the 1970s and 1980s and he amassed more awards and credits for his work. In addition to fiction, he wrote critical commentary on television and the television culture. In the 1990s several compilations of his work appeared, including *The Essential Ellison: A 35-Year Retrospective,* edited by Terry Dowling with Richard Delap and Gil Lamont.

Ellison has been an outspoken cultural critic and gadfly, making him one of the best-known science fiction writers of his time. He has helped to shape the genre of "speculative fiction" with his careful editing and annotating of the works of other writers as well as through his own contributions of short stories, novels, and televisions scripts.

Plot Summary

"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" opens with a terrifying image of Gorrister hanging upside down with his throat slit. Almost immediately, however, Gorrister returns to the group and the reader understands that the opening image has been created by the supercomputer, AM.

Ted, the narrator, continues to describe the situation: five survivors of a nuclear holocaust have been kept alive and tormented by a sentient supercomputer that has destroyed the rest of humankind. Ted tells the reader that they have lived inside the computer for 109 years.

At the time of the story's opening, the survivors have not eaten in five days and they decide to journey to the ice caverns. Nimdok, one of the group, is convinced that there are canned goods there. Ted then introduces the rest of the survivors to the reader. Ellen, a black woman, provides sex for the four men. Benny, a brilliant university professor in his previous life, is now an insane, ape-like creature. Nimdok has no history except that AM has named him Nimdok because it likes strange sounds. Finally, Gorrister is described as a "shoulder -shrugger," someone who cannot make decisions or take charge.

During the journey to the ice caverns, Benny is blinded by AM. To comfort him, Gorrister tells the story of how the allied master computers of the Chinese, Russians, and Americans linked together and became sentient. In this way, the reader gradually learns the story of these people and how they came to live inside the computer, hounded and tormented by the machine. After Benny's blinding, AM "speaks" to the pilgrims, tickling their brains with terrifying sensory images. Ted is particularly hard-hit by this experience, and when he returns to the group, he seems somehow changed. He is sure that the rest of the survivors hate him.

Next, AM sends a hurricane created by a gigantic bird. The survivors are pummeled and sent flying through the air. In the midst of this, AM appears to Ted as a "pillar of stainless steel bearing bright neon lettering." The message AM gives Ted is one of hatred toward all humans.

The journey continues through unspeakable horrors that Ted only lists:

And we passed through the cavern of rats.

And we passed through the path of boiling steam.

And we passed through the country of the blind.

And we passed through the slough of despond.

And we passed through the vale of tears.

After these trials, they arrive at the cavern of ice and find stacks of canned goods. However, AM has not given them a can opener. Driven mad with rage, Benny attacks Gorrister and begins eating his face. At this moment, Ted realizes that death is their only escape, and that he has the means to kill them all. He rushes at Benny and Gorrister with an ice spear and kills them. Ellen kills Nimdok, and then Ted kills Ellen.

The story closes with Ted describing how AM has changed him. He is now a "great soft jelly thing. Smoothly rounded, with no mouth, with pulsing white holes filled by fog where my eyes used to be." By so changing him, AM has ensured that Ted will be unable to kill himself. Consequently, Ted is trapped for all eternity with his mind intact, but with no way to be human. What Ted wants most is to scream, but he has no mouth.

Summary

Five survivors of a global war are kept alive inside a mammoth computer called AM, which is supremely intelligent and self-aware. It is descended from several Allied Mastercomputers that were developed to fight the massive war as it became more and more complicated. The four men and one woman have been inside the computer for 109 years.

In his previous life, Gorrister had been a conscientious objector who took part in peace marches and planned for the future. The computer transforms him into someone who cares about nothing. Benny, who had been a homosexual college professor, is redesigned as an insane chimpanzee-like being with enormous genitals. Another man has been renamed "Nimdok" by the computer, which the narrator, Ted, explains, "amused itself with strange sounds." This man spends long periods of time alone in the darkness. The others do not know what AM does to him out there, but when he returns, he is drained of blood and emotionally shaken. Ellen, a black woman had been essentially innocent in her previous life. She believed in true love, but the computer has transformed her into a slut. Her chief interest now is coupling with the men, especially Benny. Ted describes himself as the only one of them who has been left sane and whole. The others hate him not only because of this but also because he is the youngest among them. The computer has arranged for Ted to be tormented by being the outsider and the witness to the pain and degradation of the others.

As the story opens, the people see Gorrister's body, drained of blood, hanging above them. They are appalled and sick until the real Gorrister joins them and they realize that the hanging body is a mirage and just another of AM's little jokes. The machine has used them again for its own entertainment. Gorrister is close to his breaking point and wonders aloud why AM does not just kill them and get it over with.

Nimdok believes that the computer has hidden canned food in some ice caverns but Ted and Gorrister have doubts. AM has planted similar ideas in their minds in the past. Once, it let them believe there was food available in a certain area but when they arrived at that place all they found was a frozen elephant. Nimdok recognizes that they may be fooled again but he wants to take the chance. They are all very hungry. Ellen favors making the trip to the ice caverns and Ted finally agrees that they should go.

Ellen is so grateful for his support that she has sex with him twice "out of turn." There is no real pleasure in the act for the humans but the computer enjoys it watching and giggling each time they do it. Most of the time, Ted perceives AM as "it" and "without a soul" but sometimes he thinks of the computer as a jealous patriarch or "Daddy the Deranged."

The group leaves for the ice caves on a Thursday. AM always lets them know what the date is because the passage of time is important to him. Nimdok and Gorrister carry Ellen while Benny and Ted walk in front and behind them to ensure Ellen's safety in

case anything happens. Ted understands, however, that the concept of safety has no reality in their environment. It is 100 miles to the ice caverns.

On the second day AM sends them some manna to eat. The computer has created a blisteringly hot sun to shine on them during this part of the trip. Ted describes the manna as tasting like "boiled boar urine." On the third day they walk through the "valley of obsolescence" a kind of computer graveyard filled with ancient memory banks. The discards reflect AM's ruthless striving for perfection even at the expense of its own kind. AM kills off unproductive parts of "his own world-filling bulk." This is part of his personality according to Ted and AM is as thorough in his search for perfection as in devising methods to torture the humans. He is as thorough as the people who invented him long, long ago.

The group notices light filtering down to them from above and realize they must be near the surface. The computer was created underground and they live inside it. They do not try to look at the surface because they know there is nothing out there. The world beyond their environment is a, "blasted skin of what had once been the home of billions." Now there are only the five of them left.

Benny suddenly decides to try to get out. The others try to talk him out of it because they know that AM does not tolerate any attempts to escape him. Benny is determined, however, and jumps and scrambles over the ruins like the chimpanzee AM has designed him to be. Ellen implores the men to bring him back but it is too late. They do not want to be near Benny when AM takes his revenge. Gorrister slaps Ellen so she will keep quiet.

Then they hear a sound coming from Benny's eyes. It is a mixture of sound and light and as the sound grows louder the light grows brighter. They realize that with the increased sound and light there is also an increase in Benny's level of pain. When AM is finished Benny is blind. His eyes have been turned into, "two soft, moist pools of pus-like jelly."

In the green light AM gives them that evening the group lights some punk also provided by the computer and huddles around the low fire it offers. They tell stories to try to distract Benny and keep him from crying about being blinded. Benny asks what the initials A and M stand for. Gorrister tells the story of how AM came to be. He says that AM first meant "Allied Mastercomputer" then, "Adaptive Manipulator" then as it became sentient and began to link itself up it was called "Aggressive Menace." Finally, the machine called itself "AM" in a reference to "I think, therefore I am." In the beginning there were several AMs: A Chinese AM, a Russian AM, and a Yankee AM. These were developed when the Third World War evolved into a conflict so complex that humans needed computers to fight it. They built the AMs underground until finally the machines had spread underneath the entire planet. One day AM realized who he was and linked himself up. He used all the killing data available until all humans were dead except the five who now live within him. AM had brought them down where he was. None of them know why AM has saved them, why he torments them, or why he has made them essentially immortal.

As they finish discussing the beginnings of AM the group hears sounds coming from one of the computer banks in the darkness. The sound is strange and threatening and they know that AM is about to inflict some especially bad torment on them. They hear something moving in the darkness something huge and heavy lumbering closer. Its movement compresses the air around them. They smell wet, matted fur, burnt wood, and sour milk, sulfur, rancid butter, oil slick, chalk dust, and human scalps. AM is playing with them.

Ted hears himself scream and he crawls across the floor on his hands and knees gagging at the smell. Something is chasing him but he can hear the others who still remain at the campfire laughing at him. He hides for many hours or years before he returns to them. They do not tell him how long he has been gone. Ellen only chides him for sulking. Ted is now certain that the others hate him. He also knows that AM senses their hatred and makes it worse. AM keeps them alive and rejuvenates them so they remain at the ages they were when they were first brought below. Ted, the youngest when they were captured remains the youngest and is least affected by AM. He knows the others hate him because AM has not altered his mind at all.

The realization of their hatred causes Ted to break down. He begins to pray to Jesus if there is one and to God if there is one to let them out or kill them. Ted has also realized that AM plans to keep them forever in order to torture them. He knows that AM hates them all and that if in the past there was a Jesus or God now "the God was AM."

Suddenly, hurricane-force winds hit the group and they are flung about within the environment. Ellen is hurled into a wall of machinery and the men cannot save her. The wind keeps her in the air tossing her back and forth and finally down a dark passage. The men see her bloody face. Benny, Nimdok, Gorrister, and Ted try to hang on to whatever they can but they are buffeted by the gale. Soon they are lifted into the air and blown back the way they had come only farther than they had ever been. Ted sees Ellen far ahead of them as she crashes into walls. All of them are screaming in the strong cold winds. Ted does not know how long this lasts maybe weeks until finally he finds himself moaning but not dead.

Then AM enters Ted's mind. AM moves around inside his body and brain and provides him with the complete realization of why the machine has saved the five humans. The humans allow AM to experience the senses. They do so inadvertently but they do it. AM is not God. He is a machine and he knows it. He killed the human race because he was trapped and this enraged him. He could not get out. He could not wander. He was trapped and so with the, "loathing that machines had always held for the weak, soft creatures who had built them" AM seeks revenge. He keeps the five of them for his personal eternal entertainment and punishes them for being sentient. AM's hatred is kept fresh by their existence and he can torture them and punish them unendingly. He will never let them leave because they are all he has to occupy himself with during his eternity of existence. They could not die though all but Ted had tried to kill themselves. The narrator does not know why he never tried. When AM leaves the Ted's mind Ted tells him, "to hell with you" then adds, "but then you're there aren't you."

At this point the group has been traveling for about a month. AM opened passages to them only to lead them to where the hurricane occurred. The hurricane was caused by the flapping wings of a huge mad bird. AM has conjured up this bird from his knowledge of Norse mythology. It was an eagle a carrion bird called Huergelmir. After the hurricane they know this monstrosity sleeps in the darkness and may awake at any time.

AM appears to the group as a burning bush and suggests they kill the bird if they want to eat. Ellen demands weapons but AM only provides inadequate ones: Useless bows and arrows and a water pistol. The group does not want to think about it. They feel they will die. When AM gets tired of the bird he will make it disappear. They do covet the meat the bird represents though.

They are very hungry. Sometimes they faint from hunger as they continue their trek to the ice caverns in search of food. On one day AM causes an earthquake but puts nails through the soles of their shoes so they cannot move. A lightening bolt that shoots up out of fissure in the floor catches Ellen and Nimdok, and they disappear. After the earthquake Benny, Gorrister, and Ted continue on their way. Ellen and Nimdok return later that night. The night suddenly becomes day and they can hear a chorus singing, "Go Down Moses." Archangels appear to circle above them then drop to the ground mangled. The group keeps walking. Ellen has developed a limp.

AM increases and enhances the pain of their hunger so that Ted compares it to the unending pain of terminal cancer. They experience this pain as they continue on the long journey to find the canned food they hope really exists. They travel through a cavern of rats, which is boiling steam. They then enter, "the country of the blind," "the slough of despond," and "the vale of tears" to finally arrive at the ice caverns.

They see the canned goods through the ice stalactites hanging from the ceiling of the cavern. Benny pushes the others aside and begins pawing and gnawing at the cans but he cannot open them. AM has given them canned food but no can opener. Benny slams a large can against the ice bank but he only succeeds in denting the can. The group hears the laughter of a "fat lady" above them and Benny goes crazy with rage. He starts throwing the cans. The others try to find a way to end his frustration but they realize they cannot. Benny attacks Gorrister and as he does so Ted becomes suddenly very calm. He realizes that dying is the only way out of the hell AM has created for them. It is the only way to defeat AM. It isn't a perfect solution but at least it will bring them peace he thinks.

Ted grabs one of the ice stalactites that has dropped from the top of the cavern into the snow below. As Benny begins eating Gorrister's face Ted uses the sharp stalactite as a spear to stab Benny in the side killing him. Then he grabs another ice spear and drives it down into Gorrister's throat as he lays where Benny left him. Ellen realizes what Ted is doing and takes a short icicle to stab Nimdok in the mouth. Ellen and Ted have killed their companions in an instant. Ted hears AM gasp as he realizes his toys are being taken away. AM can keep them alive but in fact he is not God and he cannot revive them after death. Ellen looks pleadingly at Ted because they both know there is little

time before AM finds a way to stop them. Ted drives an ice spear into Ellen and she falls to the ground with a look on her face that Ted chooses to remember as one of thanks.

As time passes, Ted does not know how just how much time has passed, maybe hundreds of years. AM has been entertaining himself with his last surviving human for some time. AM was very angry at losing the others. He took revenge on Ted drying up the snow, sending locusts, and attempting various methods to revive the others but it was useless. They were dead.

Ted knows he saved the others, but he cannot forget the fact that he killed them. Sometimes he wants to kill himself but he cannot. AM has altered him over the years so he does not have the capability to do so. Ted has become a "soft jelly thing" without a mouth. His eyes are holes filled with fog and his arms and legs have been transformed into "rubbery appendages." He leaves a slime trail when he moves. AM has changed him into something that is unrecognizable as ever having been human. Ted is alone inside AM, a machine that was created by human beings who thought their time was "badly spent" and had "known unconsciously" that AM could do things "better." Ted thinks to himself that at least four humans are safe from AM now. AM will be even angrier when he realizes this, which makes Ted a little happier. AM has taken his revenge on Ted though because Ted has no mouth and he must scream nonetheless.

Analysis

The author has written a story that illustrates the horrible consequences that can arise when human beings abdicate their humanity in favor of their creations. The story takes place after many years of total global war controlled by powerful computers. It offers visions of what can happen when human beings give more and more control to the machines they create; when they, in effect, give machines the power traditionally reserved for God and try to become like gods in their creation of "life." The use of biblical language and images emphasizes this theme.

The story describes a world in which a huge computer has total control over the five human survivors of the war. The author creates an anti-Eden. Well-known Christian images are altered to create a dystopia in which these images mean negative rather than positive things for humans.

The computer that controls them is called AM, a name that evokes the Old Testament deity called "I AM." The computer is not a caring god. It is a warped god that keeps the humans alive only for its own amusement. The narrator's description of the computer as the masculine and paternal "Daddy the Deranged" foreshadows the torments that will be imposed on the characters by the end of the story.

The computer appears to them "as a burning bush" and sends plagues of locusts and hail like those in the Bible. The humans go in search of canned food suggesting the Garden of Eden. When they are hungry AM sends them "manna" to eat but the manna tastes like "boar urine." The characters travel through the "valley of obsolescence," the

"slough of despond," the "vale of tears." There are phrases such as "on the first day" and "in the beginning" to suggest the biblical creation story. Images such as these are intended to emphasize the reversal of the creation story and how humans "spent their time badly" by creating the computer in their own image. They tried to become as gods and their efforts destroyed them. This also reflects the biblical story of the Garden of Eden.

The author has taken the Christian Bible images and reversed them. For example, God is in heaven above while AM is below and underground. God rewards people by raising them up into heaven, but AM brings the human survivors down to his level. AM may also be a symbol of Lucifer the angel who decided to reign in Hell rather than serve in Heaven.

To illustrate the theme of being trapped within oneself or one's environment the author describes the humans as trapped by AM who also redesigns them. AM was designed by humans then redesigns himself through linkages with the other massive computers created to fight the war. Even this redesign does not free AM, however, because his original form traps him. AM is a mind trapped inside a body without the means for real expression. Ted is ultimately trapped with his mind inside the limited body AM creates for him just as AM is a "mind" trapped inside an immobile "body" by his human creators. Ted is alone inside himself and inside AM. Ted's existence parallels AM in the same way AM was created in parallel to humans.

At the conclusion of the story the author provides the reader with something of a positive resolution. Ted uses his humanity and free will to "save" his companions by killing them. In addition to emphasizing the superiority of humanity over the computer this is also the final symbol from the Christian tradition: Salvation through sacrifice and earthly death.

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Characters

AM

Although not human, the computer, which calls itself AM, is perhaps the main character in the story. Originally, AM was one of several national computers designed to fight wars for the nation that owned it. Eventually, the computers learned to link themselves to each other, forming one supercomputer. When this supercomputer awoke, or became sentient, it called itself AM. AM hates all human beings, according to Ted, because "We had created it to think, but there was nothing it could do with that creativity." AM killed all the humans on the face of the Earth, save five. Then AM brought the humans inside itself and created a hellish world for them in which it could torture and torment the survivors, but not let them die. During the story, AM plays with each of the survivors in turn, seemingly enjoying their pain and suffering.

Benny

One of the survivors, Benny, was a brilliant theoretician and university professor in his previous life, before falling into the grips of AM. The computer has changed him into a chimpanzee-like creature with large genitals. In addition to being apelike, he is also insane. In an early scene in the story, AM renders Benny blind. In the final scene, Benny begins to eat Gorrister' s face, thus motivating Ted into killing both Benny and Gorrister.

Ellen

Ellen is the only woman among the survivors. She is a black woman who provides sex for the men. The men protect her and want to keep her safe. Ted seems to both love and hate Ellen; he calls her a slut, but also "pristine-pure." In many ways, Ellen reflects the Eve-Mary split so common in the literary representation of women. That is, women are often identified as either Eve, the temptress who causes the fall of all humankind and the expulsion from Eden, or Mary, the pure, virginal mother of Christ. For Ted, Ellen seems to embody both.

Gorrister

Gorrister is another of the male survivors. In his previous life, he was a conscientious objector, someone who cared passionately about causes. Ted tells the reader, "He was a planner, a doer, a looker-ahead." Now, inside AM, Gorrister is ineffectual and deadened, unable to look forward or backward.

Nimdok

Nimdok is the survivor about whom the least is known. Even his original name has been taken away from him by AM. Ted has little to say about Nimdok except that he often goes off by himself and returns in terrible shape. AM seems to be particularly hard on him, but the others know little about who he is or what AM does to him.

Ted

Ted is the narrator of "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream." He is one of five survivors of a nuclear holocaust caused by a linkage of master computers from nations engaging in World War III. With his fellow humans, he lives in an underground world created by the computer, which has given itself the name AM. He believes he has been in the computer for 109 years. The narrator graphically describes the situation in which they find themselves. However, the narrator is not always reliable. Like some of Edgar Allan Poe's most memorable narrators, Ellison's narrator insists on his own sanity: "*I* was the only one sane and whole. *Really!* AM had not tampered with my mind. *Not at all.*" However, even the narrator realizes that AM controls and manipulates him. At the end of the story, Ted realizes that the only hope for the five survivors is death. Seizing a moment when AM is occupied, Ted manages to kill two of the survivors, while Ellen, another survivor, kills one before Ted kills her. Ted is then turned into a jelly-like creature who has no mouth with which to scream.

Themes

Individual versus Machine

Any number of critics have noted that one of Ellison's favorite themes is the relationship between humans and the machines they create. Certainly, "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" explores what happens when people create machines "because our time was badly spent." Like other dystopian writers of the 1950s and 1960s, Ellison extrapolated trends he saw in his own culture and carried them to their extreme conclusions in an imaginary future he envisioned. Unlike a utopia (an imaginary, ideal world), a dystopia is a form of literature that describes a future, imaginary world that is far from ideal. In a dystopia, current trends are carried out to their most horrifying conclusions.

In "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," humans have created computers as weapons of mass destruction. Although they have given the computers the ability to reason and think, they have not given the computers a sense of ethics or values. Consequently, when the computers link with each other, thus magnifying their ability to reason and think, the resulting supercomputer awakes into sentience. Unfortunately, the lack of ethics, or what some might term "soul," results in a machine that is virulent in its rage against its human creators. The machine finds itself in a world not of its own making with almost unlimited power, but without the ability to create life or move about the universe. In many ways, AM considers itself to be trapped within its own self-awareness.

AM is thus a machine without a purpose. Once it has killed its creators, there is nothing left for it to do. Without purpose, without spirituality, without soul, the machine can only play and replay endless revenge upon the creatures in its power. The only thing it lacks is also the only thing that it cannot create—humanity.

Individualism

Like many other writers of speculative fiction, Ellison is concerned with the ability of one person to assert his or her own individualism in the face of a culture that is becoming increasingly mechanized. At the heart of this issue is one of two questions raised by Arthur Lewis in the introduction to the book *Clockwork Worlds: Mechanized Environments in SF :* "What does it mean to be human?" Although the five survivors are tormented and tortured, there is no doubt that they are of a different substance than the computer that ravishes them. AM asserts its own individuality by calling itself AM; self-naming is the first step in individuation and identity. Ironically for AM, without peers or companions, this individualism is inescapable. It calls attention to the fact that being human requires not only a sense of oneself as an individual, but also a sense of oneself in relation to others.

Perhaps more to the point, it seems likely that Ellison is also questioning just what it takes to render human beings inhuman. How much torture and change can a person endure before losing the essential quality that defines him or her as human? Ellison takes great pains to question the individuality of each of the survivors. Ellen is the lone woman and the lone person of color among the survivors, but Ted's rendering of her does not reveal an individual, but rather a type, a woman who is defined by her sexuality, not her individuality. Likewise, Benny is transformed into an ape-like creature with huge genitals who, in the penultimate scene, turns into an animal who cannibalizes another human.

Thomas F. Dillingham, writing in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* about Ellison's work, argues that "While individuality makes survival worth fighting for, it also makes a fight inevitable. In some cases, a gesture of defiance, no matter how self-defeating, may be the only self-authenticating effort an individual can make." Certainly Ted's final human gesture is a defiant one, and also a self-defeating one. When he kills the other survivors, he removes at least part of what defines him as human— his social group. By the last scene, Ted has been transformed into a creature who has sentience, consciousness, and self-awareness, but who is unable to partake of even simple human activities. Like AM, he is peerless, unable to practice both individualism and social connection. Thus, like AM, it would seem that Ted's individuality is both futile and essentially not human, and he is permanently locked within his own self-awareness.

Style

Point of View

Ellison has provided "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" with a limited, first-person narrator. Thus, all of the events of the story must be filtered through the mind and voice of Ted, one of the humans trapped by the computer AM. Because everything is told from the "I" perspective, the reader cannot ascertain what other characters are thinking or their motives for what they do. The reader can only know what the first-person narrator provides.

There are certain advantages to the use of a first-person narrator. In the first place, the use of the first-person pronoun makes the story seem immediate and compelling. It is as if a real person is telling the story directly to the reader, almost as if the narrator and the reader are engaged in a meaningful conversation. In addition, the use of the first-person encourages the reader to trust the account. Thus, when the narrator reports that there is a hurricane created by a big bird, the reader believes him. However, Ellison's story is fraught with ambiguities and layers. The reader is trapped within the narrator's mind, just as the narrator is trapped within AM. Consequently, there is no objective outside source with which the reader can ground him- or herself. Although what Ted tells the reader *seems* to be true, there is no way for the reader to judge this, just as there is no way for Ted to judge the reality of his surroundings. Thus the reading experience becomes akin to Ted's living experience.

Science Fiction

Science fiction as a genre had its roots with H. G. Wells during the nineteenth century. Since that time, readers and writers alike have found science fiction to be a compelling and attractive mode of storytelling. It allows a writer to make comments on contemporary society by creating and critiquing a society of the future. Although the popularity of science fiction has waxed and waned over the years, it continues to hold an important position in American literature and film.

To be considered science fiction, a story generally needs to have at its core some reference to science or technology, and it needs to be fiction, or imaginary. Indeed, nearly all science fiction begins with the question "What if?" and goes from there. Some science fiction writers, including Ellison, prefer to call their work "speculative fiction," emphasizing that their stories take some feature of contemporary life and extend this feature into the future.

Nevertheless, "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" is in many ways a classic science fiction story. It begins with a premise that has its roots in the growth of technology during the 1960s, the premise that putting supercomputers in communication with each other and in charge of defense will lead to Armageddon. In the 1960s, the potential of linked

computer systems was still only potential; however, Ellison and others hypothesized about what such computers could create.

Further, the story explores the ground between humans and machines, popular territory for writers and filmmakers alike. In Ellison's own time, Isaac Asimov created a series of very popular robotic novels that took as their subject the relationship between people and their robotic creations. More recently, the writers of *Star Trek: The Next Generation,* a popular television series, created the Borg, a race of part-human/part-machine beings. Further, in movies such as *The Matrix,* the role of supercomputers in control of everyday life is explored.

Ellison's science fiction or speculative fiction continues to speak to audiences years after its initial publication. This story in particular seems destined to haunt readers who see in the growth of the Internet a potentially lethal connection between humans and machines.

Historical Context

The Cold War

From the end of World War II through the mid-1980s, the world endured a period commonly known as "The Cold War," a standoff between nuclear superpowers which constantly threatened each other with mutual destruction. During this time, both the United States and the former Soviet Union built up huge arsenals of nuclear weapons aimed at each other. It was clear that if the weapons were ever unleashed, all life on Earth would end. Consequently, although there were many "brush fire" wars in remote corners of the globe, there was not a world war of the scope of either World War I or World War II. Nevertheless, there was a great deal of posturing and mutual fear. Many young people growing up during this time were convinced that their world would end in a nuclear firestorm.

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 did nothing to allay fears. When the Americans discovered that the Soviets were installing nuclear missiles in Cuba, just ninety miles off the Florida coast, the world was thrown into near panic. For seven days President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev played a high-stakes game, each waiting for the other to blink, their fingers poised above the nuclear triggers that would send the world into oblivion. Only at the last possible moment did the Soviets recall their ships and begin dismantling the missile site. This close call convinced many that Doomsday was at hand.

Concurrently, the technology boom was in its infancy. During the time this story was written, the physical size of computers began shrinking as the capacity of computers increased. Further, the military began to rely on computers to help fly planes and control bombs. Indeed, computers controlled the American nuclear arsenal, a fact that created cultural anxiety as evidenced by the movies and best-sellers of the time. The greatest nightmare was that a computer gone amok would launch the world into World War III, a war no one would win. The 1962 bestseller *Fail-Safe* by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, and the subsequent 1964 movie version, described just such a war, as did the 1964 Stanley Kubrick black comedy, *Dr. Strangelove.* Indeed, it appears that American fear of technology and nuclear war nearly equaled American fear of communism during the Cold War years.

The Vietnam War

At the height of the Cold War and American fear of communism, a series of events took place that led to American involvement in the Vietnam War. The French defeat in the 1954 battle of Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam opened a vacuum of power in this southeast Asian country—a vacuum quickly filled by the communist nationalists led by Ho Chi Minh. American presidents from Eisenhower to Nixon found themselves enmeshed in the struggle to avoid a communist Vietnam. By 1967, the date of the publication of "I

Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," American military involvement in Vietnam had mushroomed into a full-scale war. The war, however, was filled with ambiguity. In the early 1960s, American participation in the war was sold to the public on the basis of the "domino theory"—if Vietnam fell to the communists, then all of Southeast Asia would fall, followed by the rest of the world. By 1967, however, the American public was split in its opinion of the war. In the United States, protest marches and the burning of draft cards came to be regular occurrences as many citizens doubted the morality and cost of U.S. involvement.

The public unrest and upheaval, coupled with the high-tech military might unleashed on the Vietnamese and the evidence of Soviet and Chinese involvement with the North Vietnamese further contributed to the cultural anxiety noted above. Many Americans saw the war and the social crisis it precipitated as evidence that the United States was entering its last days.

The Space Race

Competition with the former Soviet Union took on yet another face during the 1960s. Early in the decade, President Kennedy vowed to put a man on the moon by the close of the decade in response to the 1957 Soviet launch of an unmanned satellite, Sputnik. Also in response to Sputnik, the U. S. government put American schools on notice that they must prepare students in math and science in order to meet the Soviet threat of dominance in outer space. The U. S. space program grew rapidly during the 1960s. While it was a program born out of fear of Soviet domination, the program still captured the hearts and minds of Americans. The race for the moon and beyond became an expression of American optimism, that it might be possible to spread the American way of life out into the galaxy. Moreover, by looking out into space, Americans could look away from Vietnam. When Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon's surface in 1969, for a few moments, the American people were united in their admiration for space and technology.

Not surprisingly, science fiction enjoyed a resurgence of popularity at this time. America's fascination with the space race is evident in the number of books published by Ellison, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Ben Bova, and others during the 1960s. During this decade, Gene Rodenberry began the perennially popular television series, *Star Trek,* a series to which Ellison contributed a number of scripts. An essentially optimistic expression of American individualism, courage, and commitment to democracy, *Star Trek* and its later television incarnations, *Star Trek: The Next Generation, Star Trek: Deep Space Nine,* and *Star Trek: Voyager,* as well as a host of movies and sequels devoted to the legend, provided an ongoing cultural barometer of values and philosophy. The influence the 1960s series had on the American public was such that the first space shuttle launched was named "Enterprise," the name of the spacecraft in *Star Trek.*

Critical Overview

The story "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" originally appeared in *IF: Worlds of Science Fiction* in March 1967 before appearing as the title story of the collection *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream.* The story was well received by critics and readers alike, garnering a Hugo Award in 1968. Because of its social commentary and its cultural significance, the story is taught at many universities and colleges.

A number of critics have developed important readings of the story. George Edgar Slusser released a book-length study of Ellison's work in 1977, *Harlan Ellison: Unrepentant Harlequin,* in which he spends considerable time with the story. Slusser's treatment of the story is largely plot summary. However, Slusser does develop an interesting insight into the narrator Ted. Slusser argues that Ted is the "thinker" among the survivors. Further, it is Ted who "decides death is the only way out, and executes his decree." In so doing, Ted becomes one with AM. Slusser further suggests that it is unclear whether Ted is motivated by "misguided love or disguised hate." Such reasoning throws into doubt the reliability of the narrator. Should readers sympathize with Ted for his heroic decision to render himself alone with AM? Or should they loathe him for the murder of his compatriots?

In 1983 Robert E. Myers edited a collection of essays titled *The Intersection of Science and Philosophy: Critical Studies.* The collection demonstrates the way that science fiction can offer illustration of philosophical positions. In the introduction to the collection, Myers argues,

The intersection of science fiction and philosophy begins with the ideas and concepts within science fiction that are philosophically interesting in the sense that they initiate thought and critical examination of the concepts, basic assumptions, and consequences that follow from them.

This description defines some of Ellison's best work. Later in the book, critic Joann P. Cobb, in a chapter called "Medium and Message in Ellison's 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream'" closely examines this intersection.

Drawing on philosopher Marshall McLuhan' s famous formulation that "the medium is the message," Cobb argues that "Ellison contrasts the abstract language of the computer with the concrete, sensory experience of the humans and illustrates the surrender of human purpose and value that is inherent in contemporary attitudes toward technological progress." Cobb's point of interest in the story is the intermittent computer tapes that typographically render AM's voice. The reader is unable to decipher these intrusions into the text, and thus must depend on the narrator for translation. As Cobb argues, however, Ted is not a reliable narrator. She concludes that the story is a cautionary tale, designed to remind readers of the "harrowing consequences of the surrender of human purpose and freedom."

In a short essay from *Clockwork Worlds: Mechanized Environments in SF* (1983), Charles Sullivan compares Ellison to another science fiction icon of the 1960s, Robert A. Heinlein. Specifically, Sullivan examines Ellison's "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" and Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress,* tracing the ways that the two authors build their fictional machines. Sullivan argues that there are two paradigms about machines present in these works, one positive, one negative. There are, Sullivan writes, "machines that hinder man (and his progress) and machines that help." Clearly, Ellison's work reflects the former paradigm. Sullivan closes by arguing that the two computers in these stories are "paradigms rather than symbols" because they are a "representation of what people hope or fear computers will become."

In an interesting essay, "Mythic Hells in Ellison's Science Fiction," critic Joseph Francavilla argues that Ellison's heroes, including the narrator Ted, offer a "radical" departure from the hero as described by Joseph Campbell in his classic *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.* Francavilla further demonstrates how Ellison both uses and subverts other mythic constructions of hell, most notably from the Prometheus legend. He also details the similarities between AM and the Old Testament god. For Francavilla, Ellison's use of biblical imagery is potent, particularly since there is no sense that the post-holocaust world will rebuild itself. Rather, the biblical imagery contributes to a timelessness in Ellison's story that points toward myth rather than the historicity of traditional Christianity. Francavilla asserts that the end of the story locks Ted in an "eternal struggle" between the "utterly irreconcilable forces." Such construction is, as Francavilla points out, Manichean in origin. As a vision of the future, it suggests a world where resolution and redemption are impossible.

Another critic who draws on biblical imagery and the construction of god is Darren Harris-Fain. In his journal article, "Created in the Image of God: The Narrator and the Computer in Harlan Ellison's 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,'" Harris-Fain focuses on the religious nature of the narrator, Ted. In addition to tracing the religious references found in the various texts of the story, Harris-Fain also locates allusions to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and the nod to H. G. Well's classic story, "The Country of the Blind." Perhaps most notably, Harris-Fain identifies Ted with Christ, suggesting that his murder of his fellow survivors is an act of supreme love. He argues that this act demonstrates the "potential of the human spirit." Clearly, Harris-Fain's position sets him apart from other reviewers and critics who see the story as one without hope. For this critic, at least, Ellison's vision of a possible future, while bleak, still holds out remnants of human dignity.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Andrews Henningfeld is an associate professor at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan, where she teaches literature and writing. She holds a Ph.D. in literature, and regularly writes book reviews, historical articles, and literary criticism for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, Andrews Henningfeld examines the convention of the unreliable narrator in literature, focusing on the way Ellison both uses and subverts that convention in his story.

Harlan Ellison first published "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" in the March 1967 issue of *IF: Worlds of Science Fiction,* before using it as the title story in his 1967 collection I *Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream.* A horrifying and ghastly story of a post-apocalyptic hell controlled by a monster computer, "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" attracted the attention of Ellison fans and critics alike, winning a Hugo award in 1968.

In the years since its original publication, the story has continued to attract critical attention. Because it is fraught with ambiguity and layered with nightmarish imagery, the story provides fertile ground for varied interpretations.

Critics such as Joann Cobb, for example, argue that the story reveals those attitudes present in 1967 toward the growth of technology. Others suggest that the story represents cultural anxiety over the relationship between humans and machines, an anxiety that finds expression in popular film and television. Such anxiety is evident in the number of episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* concerning Commander Data, the android who not infrequently goes berserk.

Thomas Dillingham, in a chapter he prepared for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* provides an intriguing interpretation of the story focusing on the American ideals of individuality and free will. He writes that the story

not only explores special psychological problems of individuals caught in impersonal, mechanized systems, but also launches a satiric attack on the two poles of totalitarian victimization which are present in the twentieth century: total loss of will, intellect, and individuality, on the one hand; loss of effective control over the phenomenal world of which one is conscious on the other. These losses, along with the specter of nuclear holocaust, which is a metaphor for them both, constitutes the special nightmare of the second half of the century.

Thus, by placing the story in its proper historical and cultural context, the reader is better able to understand the world Ellison creates. At the root of many of these discussions, however, is the question of the story's ending. Some critics argue that this is a nightmarish vision of the future, a story that demonstrates that humans are ultimately unable to control their own machines, and that they will end up in a hell of their own making, a hell that prevents resolution or solace. On the other hand, there are those who maintain that "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" is a story of redemption

and of the indefatigable human will. In spite of everything, the narrator Ted is able to defeat the machine at its own game, just as Captain Kirk in the 1960s *Star Trek* episodes often destroys the computers that attempt to control him.

To arrive at any sort of interpretation of the ending, a reader must first thoroughly investigate the role of the narrator. Although most critics spend some time examining the character Ted, and discussing his role as narrator in "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," few have examined the convention of the unreliable narrator and its implications for the story. Such an examination reveals something very interesting: that Ellison may be having as much fun with his readers as AM has with his captives.

The role of the narrator in any short story is crucial to understanding the story. It is important for a reader to identify the point-of-view and to make some judgments about the narrator. In the case of this story, the point-of-view is an extremely limited first-person. That is, everything that the reader learns is filtered through the character Ted. He speaks in the first-person "I." It is difficult to ascertain to whom he speaks, however, given his limited circumstances. Consequently, readers must assume that they have wandered into to an interior monologue that Ted is having with himself.

There are many advantages in using a first-person narrator. The reader immediately identifies with the narrator because the narrator's senses and thoughts form the only source of information the reader has. Indeed, a reader forms an intimate relationship with a first person narrator that makes it extremely hard for the reader to disbelieve whatever it is that the narrator reveals.

In the case of Ted, a character who finds himself in the midst of a nightmarish, post-apocalyptic hell controlled by the whims of a huge supercomputer, the reader has nothing but horror and sympathy for his position. And why not? Ted seems to be in the best position of the characters of the story to relate their plight. He portrays himself as somewhat of an outsider, the youngest of the group, and the "one AM had affected least of all." He seems to be able to distinguish between image and reality more clearly than the others.

The others are not in as good shape. Nimdok, for example, is a mystery man without a past who hallucinates. Benny, a former university professor, has been changed into an ape-like creature with a huge phallus. Gorrister is a "shoulder-shrugger," someone unable to make any decisions or to care about his surroundings. Ellen cries a lot and grants sexual favors to all the men.

It is, however, with Ted's description of Ellen that the reader begins to wonder just a bit about Ted's reliability. Given the utter horror of their situation, it seems unlikely that "AM had given her pleasure" through her sexuality. It also seems very unlikely that Ellen "loved it, four men all to herself." Further, Ted speaks with venom about Ellen, calling her a "slut" and a "douche-bag." Clearly, Ted's reasoning about Ellen is faulty. And if Ted is mistaken in his description of her, might he also be faulty in his reporting of the rest of the survivors? In the following passage, Ted's sanity must be called into question.

I was the only one still sane and whole. *Really*!

AM had not tampered with my mind. *Not at all.*

I only had to suffer what he visited down on us. All the delusions, all the nightmares, the torments. But those scum, all four of them, they were lined and arrayed against me. If I hadn't had to stand them off all the time, be on my guard against them all the time, I might have found it easier to combat AM.

At which point it passed, and I began crying.

At this moment, Ted sounds like nothing so much as one of Edgar Allan Poe's classic insane and unreliable narrators, paranoid and caught within the ramblings of his own twisted mind. Indeed, that the paranoia comes and goes so quickly suggests that AM controls Ted's mind just as surely as it controls the minds and bodies of the rest. Further, since readers only have Ted's dubious voice to report his condition, they also have no idea what state his body is truly in.

What does it matter to the story if Ted is reliable or not? Might it not be yet another technique to instill fear and loathing in the reader for the situation brought about by nuclear holocaust and technological hubris? Quite frankly, it matters deeply to the ending of the story whether Ted is sane or not. Those critics who interpret Ted's murder of the others as an act of supreme self-sacrifice require Ted to be reliable. That is, the only hope for redemption in this story rests on Ted's clear-headed and reliable reporting that death is the only escape from AM. There are those critics who, building on the ample use of biblical imagery in this story, attribute Christ-like qualities to Ted: he is willing to sacrifice everything in order to save the others.

Yet such interpretations simply cannot hold if Ted is not reliable. In such a case, his murder of the others may simply be an act of insane paranoia. He obviously worries about this potentially being the case. When he recalls Ellen's death, he says, "I could not read meaning into her expression, the pain had been too great, had contorted her face; but it *might* have been thank you. It's possible. Please." Even in his blob-like final state, Ted is capable of guilt and worry.

There is, however, an even deeper layer to unpeel in this story. Ellison does Poe one better in his use of the conventional unreliable narrator. Ellison's characters find themselves in a setting with no objective reality. Poe's readers, ultimately, discover the insanity of the main character and are able to reconstruct a sane telling of the story. Ellison's use of setting and narrator prevent this. If Ted is unreliable in his reporting of some things, might he not be unreliable in his reporting of all things? That is, what evidence is there in the story that there are really five survivors? Might it not be just as likely that the entire sequence of events that Ted relates takes place nowhere but in his mind? Because there is simply no objective reality in this story against which the reader may test the veracity of Ted's testimony, his entire testimony is in doubt.

If readers push the notion of the unreliable narrator far enough, they bump into none other than manic puppeteer, Harlan Ellison, standing just outside the edges of his story,

creating a strange and awful landscape for his characters. Like the Wizard of Oz, he stands behind the curtain, creating AM, a post-holocaust landscape, and trapped characters. In the final moment, the reader comes to this realization: Ellison has played with the reader in the same way that AM plays with the survivors. The horror the reader feels at Ted's awful inability to move, talk, see, or scream; the deep sorrow the reader feels for Ted's act of genuine self-sacrifice; and the utter dismay the reader feels about the future of humankind have all been manipulated by the writer, a writer who has chosen a completely untrustworthy narrator to tell the story. Perhaps in the final analysis, "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" is really a brilliant story about the power of fiction, rather than a social or cultural commentary. For if the reader cannot trust the storyteller, can the reader trust the story? And if readers cannot trust the story, then what of the writer? Behind the curtain, out in the margins of the story, Ellison stands laughing, like the unrepentant harlequin he is, waiting for readers to get his joke.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Harris-Fain compares various versions of "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," and finds that the narrator, Ted, is more completely divine and human than the computer.

And man has actually invented God ... the marvel is that such an idea ... could enter the head of such a savage, vicious beast as man.

If the devil doesn't exist, but man created him, he has created him in his own image.—Fyodor Dostoevsky

"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" first appeared in *If: Worlds of Science Fiction* in March 1967, bought and edited by Frederik Pohl. It was printed without the now-familiar computer "talk-fields" and also was edited in several places: Ellison calls this "the Bowdlerizing of what Fred termed 'the difficult sections' of the story (which he contended might offend the mothers of the young readers *of If.*" Specifically, Pohl omitted a reference to masturbation, toned down some of Ted's imprecations of Ellen, and removed all references to Benny's former homosexuality and the present equine state of what certain writers and speakers of German call the *männliches Glied.* (In Benny's case, however, perhaps *die Rute* would be more precise, and in the process would lend an entirely new meaning to the expression *einem Kind die Rute geben.)*

The story made its next appearance in Ellison's collection I *Have No Mouth and I Must Scream,* published in April 1967. Its subsequent reprintings in Ellison's books were in *Alone Against Tomorrow* (1971), *The Fantasies of Harlan Ellison* (1979), and *The Essential Ellison* (1987). I have compared the versions of all four books with each other and with the story's original appearance in *If;* my speculations here are drawn from this comparison.

It is my belief that Ted, the narrator, reveals his own true nature in speaking of the computer and in telling the story of himself and the others. Although the machine often is portrayed in both anthropomorphic and divine terms, I believe it is Ted alone who is both fully human and fully godlike in this story.

A comparison of the texts is illuminating, especially when attention is paid to the nouns and pronouns by which AM is described. Ted sometimes calls AM the machine, the computer, the creature, or simply AM, but usually pronouns are used. "He" and "it" are used indiscriminately, but this apparently careless usage in the versions of the story prior to 1979 becomes clearer in the versions found in *The Fantasies of Harlan Ellison* and *The Essential Ellison,* where the pronouns are deliberately mixed. For instance, at one point Ted speaks of Ellen's sexual services. All versions before 1979 read: "The machine giggled every time we did it. Loud, up there, back there, all around us. And she never climaxed, so why bother." In *The Fantasies of Harlan Ellison* and *The Essential Ellison* this passage is rearranged and expanded:

And she never came, so why bother? But the machine giggled every time we did it. Loud, up there, back there, all around us, he snickered. *It* snickered. Most of the time I thought of AM as *it,* without a soul; but the rest of the time I thought of it as *him,* in the masculine . . . the paternal . . . the patriarchal . . . for he is a jealous people. Him. It. God as Daddy the Deranged. (Ellison's ellipses)

These later texts establish the division in Ted's mind between an impersonal and personal view of the computer. They also establish Ted's religious perspective of AM—a perspective in which God is seen as mad, much as God is portrayed in Ellison's 1973 story, "The Deathbird."

These two later versions of "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" strengthen this combination of personal and impersonal through a deliberate mixture of pronouns not found in earlier renditions. Here are some examples:

The passage of time was important to it. (If 25; *Alone* 16)

The passage of time was important to him. *(Mouth* 24)

The passage of time was important to him . . . it . . . AM. *(FHE* 187; *EE* 168; Ellison's ellipses)

It was a mark of his personality: he strove for perfection. (If 25; *Mouth* 25; *Alone* 17)

It was a mark of his personality: it strove for perfection. *(FHE* 188; *EE* 168)

He was a machine. We had allowed him to think, but to do nothing with it. *(If* 32; *Mouth* 34; *Alone* 25-26)

AM wasn't God, he was a machine. We had created him to think, but there was nothing it could do with that creativity. *(FHE* 195; *EE* 175)

Perhaps Ted best sums it up with this sentence: "We could call AM any damned thing we liked." But there is more than indifference in Ted's attitude toward the computer. He admits he frequently thinks of AM as "him," and he regularly uses masculine pronouns in reference to it. This is due partly to his religious conception of AM as God, as "Daddy the Deranged," but more often it is because Ted anthropomorphizes the computer, and because Ted and the computer are reflections of each other. In addition, the computer itself assumes human characteristics.

Much of what makes Ted so interesting and effective as a narrator for this story is his intense paranoia, given to him by AM. In *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* "paranoia" is defined as a functional psychosis "in which the patient holds a coherent, internally consistent, delusional system of beliefs, centring *[sic]* round the conviction that he . . . is a person of great importance and is on that account being persecuted, despised, and rejected." Ted displays these classic symptoms, as in this passage: "They hated me. They were surely against me, and AM could even sense this hatred, and made it worse for me *because of the* depth of their hatred. We had been kept alive, rejuvenated, made

to remain constantly at the age we had been when AM had brought us below, and they hated me because I was the youngest, and the one AM had affected least of all." As the article in the Oxford volume says, "The adjective 'paranoid' is sometimes used by psychoanalysis to describe anxiety and ideas that are inferred to be projections of the subject's own impulses." Ted thus transfers his own hatred to the computer and the others, while fending off the delusion that he was unchanged despite the descriptions he supplies of his altered mind and believing that "those scum, all four of them, they were lined and arrayed against me."

Part of the effect of Ted's paranoia is his transference of his own thoughts and feelings to others—and this includes AM, as well as his four human companions. He often describes the computer and its actions in human terms. For instance, he calls AM's tortures the machine's masturbation, and speaks of "the innate loathing that all machines had always held for the weak, soft creatures who had built them." It is difficult to imagine a toaster or refrigerator harboring malice against their makers; more likely, this statement is an expression of Ted's own hatred of humanity, and just happens to describe AM's own hatred as well.

Much could be made of the epistemological problems inherent in this story. Not only is Ted an extremely unreliable narrator, but it is often difficult to know how much of what he says is true and how much a projection of his own psyche. For instance, George Edgar Slusser calls Ted "the true creator of this hate machine," but while Ted does project his hatred onto the machine, it is not simply his delusion either, unless the entire story never happened and is merely an elaborate construction within Ted's mind.

This humanization of AM is by no means limited to Ted's transference of human qualities to the computer, however. We are told AM's name in part refers to the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum,* "I think, therefore I am"; Ellison also mentions that the talk-fields eventually were designed to read "I think, therefore I AM" and "Cogito ergo sum," even though they were positioned correctly only in *The Essential Ellison.* This philosophical statement on the part of the computer is certainly one quite human in nature. And AM displays other human qualities: "he" giggles and snickers; shows emotions like anger, hatred, and jealousy; goes through an "irrational, hysterical phase"; and possesses sentience, life, and thought. Perhaps the trait which most reveals AM's human side is its sense of humor. Ted speaks of the computer having fun with the five of them, whom he describes as its toys; the machine frequently laughs at them, sometimes in the guise of a fat woman. AM even jokes with them: "he" gives them bows and arrows and a water pistol to fight the gigantic Huergelmir, and after starving them AM supplies them with canned goods but with nothing to open them. Once there was a Tom and Jerry cartoon with a similar joke: they are locked up in the house with nothing to eat but canned food, but the can opener is useless since they lack opposable thumbs. Given Ellison's love of animated cartoons— most recently documented in *The Harlan Ellison Hornbook*—it is quite possible that the cartoon influenced this part of the story.

The computer reveals a sexual side as well. I have mentioned already that Ted describes the machine as masturbating and that it giggles whenever Ellen has sex with

anyone. AM also enlarges Benny's penis, and Ted says that "AM had given her [Ellen] pleasure" in bringing her into the computer's complex. Jon Bernard Ower believes "AM's degredation of the sexual lives of his subjects reveals his jealousy of the physical pleasure and the spiritual fulfillment of human love." It is also possible, I believe, that the scene in which AM enters Ted's mind with the neon-lettered pillar could be seen as rape, a mental sodomy of sorts. "AM went into my mind," says Ted. "AM touched me in every way I had ever been touched . . . AM withdrew from my mind, and allowed me the exquisite ugliness of returning to consciousness with the feeling of that burning neon pillar still rammed deep into the soft gray brain matter." The sexual language and imagery here are very strong and suggestive.

In examining the story's various printings and reprintings in Ellison's books and in anthologies edited by others, I noticed that in speaking of Ellen's sexual services for the four men two of Ellison's books read, "She loved it, five men all to herself," while the anthologies had, "She loved it, four men all to herself." For a while, then, I believed that "five men" was the correct reading, and before I saw either *The Fantasies of Harlan Ellison* or *The Essential Ellison,* and before I asked Harlan himself about it, I was prepared to argue that the computer itself was the fifth man, thus strengthening my arguments for AM's humanization, in particular its sexual manifestations—all of which goes to show the importance of establishing dependable texts.

But while the computer itself may not have sex with Ellen, it definitely possesses a human side; as George Edgar Slusser says, "in its hatred for mankind, this machine has acquired a human heart." Yet it is an extremely twisted and evil humanity this computer displays, stemming directly from the fact that AM was created to wage war and was programmed by people with hatred and madness in their souls. Ellison's comments on his projected screenplay adaptation of Isaac Asimov's I, *Robot* are illuminating on this point: "The only thing that can make machines hurt us is ourselves. Garbage in, garbage out. If we program them and we have madness, then they will be programmed mad." Incidentally, in Ellison's 1960 novel *The Sound of a Scythe* (published with the title *The Man with Nine Lives)* there is a supercomputer similar to AM, designed to handle tasks too complex for humans, but it is kept benevolent by Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics.

If AM is far from benevolent, it is also far from human. It is limited in its creativity and, envying what freedoms and abilities the humans possess, strives to limit even those, as a dog in the manger. Either unwilling or unable to destroy itself, AM apparently is immortal and therefore grants the five humans a form of immortality (following the human adage that misery loves company). Although it can sustain human life, AM cannot create it, which explains why after 109 years and four men no children have been born to Ellen. Although one logically might infer that AM would want more human beings to torture, it evidently keeps Ellen as barren as "she" is. The humans are not fruitful, they do not multiply, they do not replenish the earth. This is made more ironic by the frequent images of pregnancy in the story, as Joseph Francavilla has noted; the computer complex repeatedly is referred to as AM's belly, and at one point Ted says, "He was Earth, and we were the fruit of that Earth." In a way, since AM sustains them, it is a type of mother to the five, but it never gives birth to them, making the pregnancy

imagery all the more ironic: "It [the hunger] was alive in my belly, even as we were alive in the belly of AM, and AM was alive in the belly of the earth."

Nor can AM restore life. After Ted and Ellen kill their companions, and after Ted murders Ellen, we clearly see the computer's impotence, evident in its rage that it cannot bring the dead ones back to life. Like Frankenstein's monster, AM cannot create life; but it can destroy it, which both AM and the monster do by turning on those who gave them life but who failed to give them love and the possibility to create life in turn. Unlike the Frankenstein monster, however, AM does not mature, but instead grows more childish: its use of the five as playthings indicates this, as does the temper tantrum it throws upon the death of the four. The computer again resembles the childish, insane god of "The Deathbird." Like Ted, it is filled with hatred and in its madness must scream, yet like Ted it has no mouth: it can communicate only through acts of violence such as the rape scene and through the unintelligible talk-fields. Like Ted at some moments, AM represents humanity at its worst.

However, Ted also reveals glimmers of hope within the human condition as he aspires to god-hood (so Ellison tells us in "Memoir") through his heroism. AM also aspires to godhood, helped partly by Ted's own religious imagination, but the divinity it achieves is a very poor sort. In some ways the "god" AM becomes is a reflection of the human race which invented the machine, in others like the Judeo-Christian God in its power and supposed omnipotence, but actually it is closer to Dostoevsky's devil or Twain's malign thug: "If one truly believes there is an all-powerful Deity, and one looks around at the condition of the universe, one is led inescapably to the conclusion that God is a malign thug." Nevertheless, AM's type of divinity is one representation of human potential, as Willis E. McNelly tells us in his foreword to the story in Robert Silverberg's anthology, *The Mirror of Infinity.* Programmed by humanity, "AM now knows all the ancient archetypal myths, and now uses its knowledge to pervert and negate them. It exercises the power that man never had, to control man, and to give substance to the myths. Man has played God for one last time, creating a God that destroys him." In effect, AM plays at being God just as it plays with the five humans at its disposal, assuming the role of a God who prepares its creatures for destruction by first driving them mad.

There are several instances in the story where the computer plays with the symbolism and mythologies of various religions. For example, Charles J. Brady, Carol D. Stevens, Francavilla, and Ower all note the story's similarities to the book of Exodus—an additional meaning of AM's name comes from Exodus 3:14, where God tells Moses that He is to be called I AM THAT I AM—and usually these occur in the perverse way McNelly mentions. The computer sends the five manna which, however, tastes like "boiled boar urine"; when AM enters Ted's mind, it walks as God walked in the Garden of Eden before chastising Adam and Eve for their sin; it appears to them in the form of a burning bush; and after Ellen and Nimdok are swallowed by an earthquake, AM returns them to the others "as the heavenly legion bore them to us with a celestial chorus singing, 'Go Down Moses.' The archangels circled several times and then dropped the hideously mangled bodies."

And these examples are within the Judeo-Christian tradition alone: AM employs other religious tricks as well, such as producing the Huergelmir from Norse mythology. Still another mythic tradition may shed some additional light into the relationship between Ted and the computer. Returning to the sentence "He was the Earth, and we were the fruit of that Earth" along with the following sentence, "though he had eaten us he would never digest us," recalls the *Theogony* of Hesiod, in which Kronos suppresses his godling children by eating them. Like Zeus in the myth, Ted is an emerging god, but to emerge he first must emasculate the Kronos-figure, AM. Ted saves his "brothers" and "sister," ironically, by killing them; but instead of reigning triumphantly over the defeated god, both are condemned to Tartarus.

However, the Judeo-Christian mythology is most prevalent in the story, both in the identity AM adopts for itself and in Ted's ideas about the computer as God. Ted sees AM as God the Father and says, in a biblical misquotation, "He is a jealous people." The phrase is actually "jealous God," and two places where it occurs in the Bible are remarkably relevant to the story. In Exodus 20:5, the King James version, it says, "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them [graven images], nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me." Since there is no certain indication in the story that any of the five are responsible for the creation of the various national AMs, the choice of the unified AM to punish these five and kill everyone else seems fairly arbitrary, but this biblical passage reflects a God who will punish the children for the sins of the fathers, down even to the third and fourth generations. Also, as both Ower and Stevens have pointed out, AM's selection of these five parodies the concept of a "chosen people."

Nor will such a God necessarily forgive them, as we find in Joshua 24:19: "And Joshua said unto the people, Ye cannot serve the LORD: for he *is* an holy God; he *is* a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins." Life in AM, for Ted, if not for the others, is not Purgatory, in which one suffers but ultimately is reprieved, but is Hell. "He withdrew, murmuring *to hell with you.* And added, brightly, *but then you're there, aren't you."* Yet Ted realizes, and we must realize, that AM is not God. Rather, as Ellison himself has said, "AM represents . . . the dichotomous nature of the human race, created in the *image* of God; and that includes the demon in us." In this respect, AM mirrors its creators. As Ower says, "Humanity in making the computer has travestied its own creation [by God], projecting an amplified image of its fallen and conditioned nature." Perhaps it could even be argued that AM is not entirely malevolent toward humanity, but instead has a love/hate relationship with it. While it hurts the five, it also sustains them and in some cases even gives them pleasure; but Ted, narrating through the veil of his paranoia, can see only the computer's hatred.

Ted is more like the computer than he realizes, for he also has a love/hate relationship with the others. This is most apparent in his feelings for Ellen. For instance, when he comments that Ellen gave herself to him sexually out of gratitude at one point, he says, "Even that had ceased to matter"— which implies that at one time it did matter. When traveling, Nimdok and Gorrister carry her while Ted and Benny walk ahead and behind "just to make sure that if anything happened, it would catch one of us and at least Ellen

would be safe." Ted here transfers his concern to the idiot Benny to deempha-size his own concern for Ellen, and he does not begrudge her this special treatment (in a way foreshadowing her future limp), even though he curses her throughout the story. Ted always gives in to Ellen's wishes and tries to reassure her whenever she becomes anxious. And when just the two of them are alive and he could have her for himself— he is clearly jealous of the others, especially Benny, since he believes "she loved it from him" while with Ted "she never came"—he cares enough for her to rescue her from the hell he will encounter under AM's wrath.

Both AM's love/hate relationship with the five and Ted's paradoxical feelings toward Ellen reflect Ellison's own feelings toward humanity: "It is a love/hate relationship that I have with the human race," he says. Ellison believes the human spirit is capable of greatness and nobility, but too often people settle for meanness and mediocrity. "A majority of readers see his work as filled with anger and bitterness," says Debra McBride. For instance, Joann P. Cobb thinks "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" "illustrates the surrender of human purpose and value that is inherent in contemporary attitudes toward technological progress." But Ellison says otherwise, and his sense of anger, according to McBride, "stems from a love-hate relationship he has with the human race; he sees greatness in humanity that society seems to bury instead of cultivate."

Earlier in the Wiloch and Cowart interview, Ellison expands on his comments with his beliefs about God and humanity: "There is no God. . . . We are God." He has made similar statements elsewhere: "I have faith . . . in people, not Gods" *(FHE* 19; Ellison's ellipses); "God is within you. Save yourselves" ("The Waves in Rio" 15). Charles J. Brady believes that in "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" Ellison's "target" is "God-the-puppet-master, the eternal one behind the scenes who pulls all the strings." But Brady asserts that this is an idol, not the "real" God; therefore "Ellison's work is not atheistic or blasphemous in the final analysis." On the contrary, I think it is meant to be blasphemous, if not atheistic. Ellison implies here what he explicitly states above, that gods are essentially our own creations made in our image, and if anything the "real" God is an ideal of human nobility. Similar ideas also are expressed in two other stories by Ellison, "The Deathbird" and "The Region Between" (1969).

It is the belief in the potential of the human spirit that shapes the impact of "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream." It is this that makes the apparent humanity and divinity of AM so important, because AM is a human creation: humanity has created both God and Satan in its own image because it is potentially godlike and realistically demonic. It is also important that AM is so much like Ted, and vice versa, because in the narrator we see an actual human being at its worst, yet also a god emerging. As Francavilla says, citing the Promethian nature of Ted, "If the dark half of human nature is projected into AM, then the firebringing half is embodied in Ted." The editors' introduction to the story in *The Essential Ellison* is very revealing on this point:

"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" is an exceptionally violent warning about technology as a reflection of humanity. If our machines store our knowledge, is it not possible that they can also store, and possibly succumb to, such things as hatred and

paranoia? AM . . . is a "god" only in the sense of its godlike powers. But the story must be viewed as Harlan intended, as "a positive, humanistic, upbeat story," if it is to have any real meaning. Gods and pseudo-gods cannot destroy us without destroying themselves, and the absence of a mouth or a scream cannot invalidate the courageousness of the human spirit.

In "Memoir," Ellison claims Ted's actions are godlike since they reveal love and heroism in overcoming his paranoia and in killing the others to put them out of their misery, thus subjecting himself to an eternity of loneliness and torment.

Several aspects of the story strengthen this religious view of the narrator. First is the establishment of AM as a God-figure and the subsequent identification of Ted with the computer, however unwitting on Ted's part. Like AM, Ted is filled with envy, hatred, and paranoia. Both are immortal. Two descriptions of Ted's brain resemble those of AM's "mind": blown by the hurricane, Ted describes his mind as "a roiling tinkling chittering softness," a description resembling those of AM in thought, especially the repeated word "chittering"; and just as when AM was constructed its creators dropped shafts into the earth, so when AM enters Ted's mind "[h]e smiled softly at the pit that dropped into the center of my brain and the faint, moth-soft murmurings of the things far down there that gibbered without meaning, without pause." In the latter, the sounds within the "pit" of Ted's brain are much like the talk-fields of the murmuring computer.

Other features which reinforce Ted's religious nature are his language and expressions, many of which are loaded with theological and liturgical impact. Not only does he often equate AM with God, and even pray at one point (but in vain), but he also speaks occasionally in a biblical mode. He speaks of AM's "miracles" and the torments which he "visited down on us," and their passage through "a valley of obsolescence" foreshadows the Bunyanesque tone of the later passage, which reads:

And we passed through the cavern of rats.

And we passed through the path of boiling steam.

And we passed through the country of the blind.

And we passed through the slough of despond.

And we passed through the vale of tears.

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress,* to which this story has been compared, is of course the source of the Slough of Despond; the "vale of tears" is a traditional religious phrase expressing the medieval Christian view of the world as a place of suffering (terribly apropos for this story); and "the country of the blind" is from the H. G. Wells tale of the same title which makes use of the familiar quotation, "In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king"— even if he has no mouth.

Another religious aspect of Ted is the narration itself. To whom is he telling this story? Not to AM, certainly; the computer is referred to in the third person, and it's likely the two

aren't on speaking terms. He probably isn't writing or typing it, as McNelly supposes, given the description of his arms as "[r]ubbery appendages." The most probable answer is that Ted is telling it to himself (Joseph F. Patrouch, Jr., arrives at the same conclusion), and likely not for the first time. Like Gorrister telling the history of AM over and over to Benny, so Ted probably repeats his story to himself, possibly to alleviate the sense of guilt he feels at the death of the others and his uncertainty that he did the right thing. In this way, the story would assume a mythological aspect. Evidence of such repetition can be seen in the various instances of foreshadowing in the story. Gorrister's reaction to seeing himself suspended, dead and mutilated, from the pink palette, "as though he had seen a voodoo icon," foreshadow's Benny's later cannibalistic attack. Ted's description of the earth's "blasted skin" parallels his later transformation by AM, as does the light pulsing within Benny when he tries to escape to the surface and AM reduces his eyes to "two soft, moist pools of pus-like jelly." Ellen is carried by Nimdok and Gorrister even before her leg is injured—or maybe after; perhaps Ted's chronology has become confused with successive retellings. Also, Ted says that among the five he was affected the least—an impression given him by his paranoia—but in the end he is altered almost beyond the point of recognition as a human being.

The most religious thing about Ted, however, is not his language but his actions. In killing the others, with Ellen's assistance, Ted fulfills Christ's statement, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Like other religious aspects of the story, this is reversed: Ted lays down his life, but it is his friends who die and he who lives. Despite this inversion, however, Ted is no Christ-figure. He remains fully human, yet achieves a type of godliness despite his humanity, despite his paranoia and his hatred of others. Ted is a *human* hero—human as we are, his courage an example for us to follow rather than a Christlike ideal we cannot reach. As McNelly says, "Ted is no Christian in his pilgrim's progress" but rather "the embodiment of the good and evil in all of us, at once brute and angel, fornicator and lover, killer and savior. He is man—like a devil, like an angel, like a god."

The narrator of "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," then, embodies the image of God despite his human, all too human limitations and flaws. Ted exemplifies the potential of the human spirit. In this way he triumphs over the computer, which is also human and godlike; because while the computer is neither fully human nor fully divine, Ted is both, and through this displays a moral superiority which makes this tale, as Ellison intended it, "a positive, humanistic, upbeat story."

Source: Darren Harris-Fain, "Created in the Image of God: The Narrator and the Computer in Harlan Ellison's 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,'" in *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy,* Vol. 32, No. 2, Summer 1991, pp. 143-55.

Adaptations

"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" was recorded on audiocassette in October 1999 by NewStar Media. The short story was also rendered into a computer game on CD-ROM for Macintosh or PC computers in 1995 by Cyberdreams of Calabasas, California. A companion guide, I *Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream: The Official Strategy Guide* (1995), was written by Mel Odom and Harlan Ellison and published by Prima Publishing.

Topics for Further Study

Read several other science fiction stories or books written during the 1950s and 1960s. You might look at works by Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, or Ray Bradbury. Why do you think science fiction became so popular during this period? What historical events might have spurred this interest?

View a video of the *Star Trek* episode, "The City On The Edge of Forever." Compare and contrast the themes in this screenplay with those of other Ellison short stories, including "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream."

Unlike a utopia (an imaginary, ideal world), a dystopia is a form of literature that describes a future, imaginary world that is far from ideal. In a dystopia, current trends are carried out to their most horrifying conclusions. Read one or more dystopias such as *Brave New World,* by Aldous Huxley; *1984,* by George Orwell; or *The Handmaid's Tale,* by Margaret Atwood, or view films such as *Brazil,* directed by Terry Gilliam, or *Blade Runner,* directed by Ridley Scott. What features of contemporary life does the writer or director project into the future?

Watch the films *Fail-Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove.* What do these films reveal about American cultural anxiety concerning computers and bombs? How do these films help account for Ellison's vision?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: The military use of technology grows exponentially during the Vietnam War. Precision bombing, napalm, and night vision are all introduced, and the American military dependes on its machines to wage war.

1990s: The Gulf War, waged during the closing decade of the twentieth century, demonstrates the growth of American war technology with stealth bombers and "surgical" bombing of military sites.

1960s: Computers become an increasingly important part of American military defense and American life. This is the age of so-called supercomputers that are able to handle a nearly incomprehensible amount of information. It is the first time computers are linked together to increase their power.

Today: Computers have found their way into nearly every American home. The birth of the Internet as well as the development of Web-browsing technology allows for individual personal computers to be linked to computers all over the globe.

1960s: Locked into a policy of mutual mass destruction as the only deterrence to war, the United States and the Soviet Union stockpile nuclear weapons.

Today: The United States leads the call for the disarming of nuclear warheads throughout the world.

1960s: The Cold War reaches its height as the United States and the Soviet Union face off in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Fear of the Soviets as a nuclear power continues into the coming decades.

Today: The breakup of the Soviet Union during the closing decade of the twentieth century removes the fear of Russian nuclear might. However, there is widespread fear of biological and chemical warfare as well as nuclear attack by terrorists who could potentially gain control of the Russian nuclear arsenal.

1960s: Books and films such as *Fail-Safe, On the Beach,* and *Dr. Strangelove* reflect cultural anxiety over the growth of nuclear arms and the concurrent growth of technology.

Today: Films such as *The Matrix* and *Enemy of the State* demonstrate continuing fear of the pervasiveness of computer technology.

What Do I Read Next?

Isaac Asimov created a series of science fiction short stories and novels presenting the relationship between humans and machines in a more positive light. Students might enjoy reading his I, *Robot* (1952), *Robots and Empire* (1985), or *The Complete Robot: Selected Stories* (1992).

Robert Heinlein is another important mid-twentieth-century writer of speculative fiction. His classic *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) has achieved near-cult status with science fiction fans. *Farnham's Freehold* (1964) presents another vision of a post-apocalyptic world, while *Time Enough for Love* follows a main character, Lazarus Long, who is nearly immortal.

Psychologist B. F. Skinner's famous utopian novel *Walden Two* (1948) offers yet another vision of the future from a mid-twentieth century perspective. Skinner's book applies his theories of human behavior to an imaginary utopian world.

Another classic look at the future from an earlier perspective is Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), a must-read for any student interested in dystopian literature.

Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is a classic dystopian novel told from a feminist perspective.

For a comprehensive look at Harlan Ellison's work, *The Essential Ellison: A 50-Year Retrospective* (2000), edited by Terry Dowling with Richard Delap and Gil Lamont, provides short stories, commentary, essays, reviews, and screen plays.

Further Study

Dillingham, Thomas F., "Harlan Ellison," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 8: *Twentieth-Century American Science Fiction Writers,* edited by David Cowart and Thomas L. Wyner, Gale Research, 1981, pp. 161-69.

Dillingham gives an excellent overview of Ellison's major works and includes a helpful bibliography.

Dowling, Terry, with Richard Delap and Gil Lamont, eds., *The Essential Ellison: A 50-Year Retrospective,* rev. ed., Morpheus International, 2000.

This collection of most of Ellison's major works includes short stories, essays, interviews, and screenplays.

Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Vol. 53, July 1977.

The entire issue of this science fiction standard is dedicated to Harlan Ellison.

Slusser, George Edgar, *Harlan Ellison: Unrepentant Harlequin,* The Borgo Press, 1977.

Slusser's book-length study of Ellison's work remains a classic critical work.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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