

I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HARLAN ELLISON

Born to Jewish parents, Ellison and his older sister, Beverly, were raised in Cleveland and Painesville, Ohio. Ellison worked an eclectic series of odd jobs as a young man, including a lithographer, a personal bodyguard, and a nitroglycerine truck driver. Before he made a name as a fiction writer, Ellison was a Hollywood screenwriter. After being fired from Walt Disney Studios on his first day for making an inappropriate joke, Ellison continued to publish fiction and nonfiction pieces, and his work gradually gained a cult following. Famously combative, Ellison is just as notorious for his personality as he is for his prolific writing career. Over his six-decade career, Ellison wrote more than 1,700 short stories, novellas, screenplays, and essays, including a controversial *Star Trek* episode, “The City on the Edge of Forever.” Ellison was involved in multiple lawsuits against directors and movie studios he believed had ripped off his work. He later helped adapt his story “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream” into a videogame of the same name, providing the voice of AM. Ellison is the winner of eight Hugo Awards, four Nebula Awards, five Bram Stoker Awards, and many other honors and accolades. At Stephen King’s request, Ellison briefly described himself and his writing career as follows: “My stories go out from here and raise hell. From time to time some denigrator or critic will say of my work, ‘He only wrote that to shock.’ I smile and nod. Precisely.” Ellison suffered a stroke in 2014 and passed away at his home in Los Angeles in 2018.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream” was written during the late 1960s, when Cold War tensions were high. Weaving some of the key players (the U.S., Russia, and China) into the backstory of the apocalypse in “I Have No Mouth,” Ellison played on Western society’s fear of mutually assured destruction through nuclear weapons. In addition, much like his sci-fi and fantasy predecessors, Ellison plays with the public’s growing concern about technology’s growing presence in daily life, as AM’s total control over the humans in the story provide a harrowing picture of what humanity’s relationship to artificial intelligence could look like in the future.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Harlan Ellison exists alongside an impressive array of science fiction writers, including the prolific Ray Bradbury ([Fahrenheit 451](#)), Isaac Asimov (“The Fun They Had”), and Philip K. Dick ([Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?](#)). “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream” and Ellison’s other stories are precursors for some of

today’s most inventive speculative fiction and television. Ellison wrote the script for arguably the most famous *Star Trek* episode, “The City on the Edge of Forever.” His influence can also be seen in Netflix’s *Black Mirror* series, which highlights many of the dark themes woven through Ellison’s short stories such as artificial intelligence and human subservience to technology. Ellison’s didn’t want to be boxed in by the “sci-fi” genre during his career, and his influence opened the door for a new wave of experimental speculative fiction writers.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream
- **When Written:** 1966
- **When Published:** 1967
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Short story, science fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction, speculative fiction
- **Setting:** Post-apocalyptic
- **Climax:** In extreme hunger, Benny cannibalizes Gorrister’s face. Seeing the window of opportunity to save his companions, Ted stabs both Benny and Gorrister. Ellen follows suit, stabbing Nimdok. Ted then kills Ellen, consigning him to an eternity alone, tormented inside AM.
- **Antagonist:** AM
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Drawing Inspiration. In 1965, Ellison came across a doodle drawn by his friend, cartoonist Bill Rotsler. The drawing featured a rudimentary doll-like figure, sitting slumped with the words “I have no mouth and I must scream,” scrawled on the bottom. With Rotsler’s permission, Ellison used this as the inspiration and title for one of his best-known literary works.

Crack the Code. The black rectangles interspersed with the text in “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream” are computer tape time-breaks, created by actual programmers. Ellison wanted to experiment with the limits of the printed page, and to present the reader with what it’s like to be stuck inside the mind of a computer. In reference to Descartes and the name the computer takes for itself, “AM,” the time-breaks read “I think, therefore I am” and the same phrase in Latin, “*Cogito, ergo sum.*”



PLOT SUMMARY

Tim, Ellen, Benny, and Nimdok are in a computer chamber, staring up at the corpse of Gorrister that's hanging from the ceiling. When Gorrister joins them on the ground, looking up at his own body, the group realizes that Gorrister isn't really dead—this is just another one of **AM's** sadistic tricks. It is the group's 109th year trapped inside AM, an enormous supercomputer, and Ted, the narrator, feels that Gorrister is speaking for all of them when he admits that he doesn't know how much more he can take of AM's torture.

After this incident, Nimdok has a hallucination of **canned food** in the ice caverns that lie within AM's depths. The group, including Nimdok, is skeptical of this, but they haven't been fed in three days and so decide to venture the 100-mile distance to the caverns on foot. "What the hell," Ted thinks to himself—nothing matters anymore. AM possesses total power over them, and Ted thinks of the computer as something of a god: sometimes a "*him*," sometimes and "*it*." AM holds the entire Earth inside of it and now aims to perfect itself by killing off its obsolete parts.

As the group of five begin to make their way to the ice caverns, Benny makes a futile attempt to escape from AM, and AM painfully blinds him as punishment. AM has gradually mutilated Benny's body and mind to resemble those of a monkey, and Ted reflects that Benny went insane years ago. Later, as the group huddles around a fire, Gorrister tells Benny the origin story of AM: during the Cold War of the 20th century, the US, Russia, and China all had an AM supercomputer. But as the conflict developed into World War Three, the computers linked themselves into a single entity and became AM in its current all-encompassing form. The supercomputer killed off the human race but kept five people—Ted, Ellen, Benny, Gorrister, and Nimdok—alive in its chambers. It is unknown why these five were chosen or what AM's motivation is for holding them captive and torturing them.

Suddenly AM's computer banks begin humming and lighting up. An immense sound, metallic and insect-like, fills the chamber. An enormous, animalistic presence moves toward the group in the darkness, filling the air around them with an overwhelming rancid smell. They cower in terror, and a traumatized Ted continues to hide long after the others have recovered and gone back to laughing around the fire. Ted is convinced that his companions hate him and are conspiring against him because he is the youngest in the group and the least affected by AM, by his own estimation. He despises them in return, particularly Ellen, whom he thinks of as a "dirty bitch" and a "slut" because she has sex with Ted and the other three men. Ted believes that he is the only one in the group who is still of sound mind, since AM has spared Ted compared to its treatment of the others. However, in this moment of reflection and paranoia, Ted begins to cry and prays to God for an escape—or for death.

A month into their journey, AM creates an enormous, monstrous "bird of winds," whose flapping wings create a hurricane, and the group is thrown around and injured in the storm. AM's torture is psychological as well as physical: despite Ted's earlier assertion that AM has not tapped into his mind, the computer presently inserts itself into Ted's brain, filling him with self-loathing thoughts and horrible sensations. Ted realizes that AM's motivation for toying with them is because the intelligent computer is imprisoned in its own sentience: the humans who created AM gave it the capacity to think, but nothing substantive to do with its creativity. AM cannot freely experience life or form relationships the way a person can, and so the computer seeks revenge on the human race for its tortured state by taking out its hatred on Ted, Ellen, Benny, Gorrister, and Nimdok. Somehow, AM also keeps the group of five immortal long past their natural lifespans, foiling the suicide attempts they've tried over the years. Ted thinks that AM will do everything in its power to keep the group alive forever, but also knows that they are not wholly "indestructible" since they are still human. He hopes that eventually, at least one of them will be able to die without AM interfering.

AM suddenly appears to the group "as a burning bush" and tells them they must kill **the hurricane bird** if they want to eat. This is impossible without weapons, which AM refuses to give them. They haven't eaten at all on their trek—AM has prevented them from starving to death but kept them alive in agonizing hunger. AM continues to barrage the group with terrifying obstacles like natural disasters, rats, and unbearable pain. When they finally make it to the ice caverns, they see that the canned food is really there—not a hallucination as they expected. This, however, is AM's ultimate trick: he has presented the starving group with food but has not given them a can opener with which to access it.

In a fit of starvation and primal rage, Benny begins to cannibalize Gorrister. Watching this, Ted becomes eerily calm and has an epiphany: death is the group's only possible escape. Using a stalactite of ice as a spear, he stabs Benny and Gorrister to death. Picking up on what Ted is doing, Ellen stabs Nimdok. Finally, Ted kills Ellen, as well, and desperately hopes that the expression on her dead face is one of gratitude.

By sacrificing his companions, Ted has knowingly doomed himself to the agony of a solitary existence inside AM. He thinks that it may have been centuries since he killed the others, though he isn't sure. AM's hatred for Ted has magnified immeasurably in that time, and the computer has ensured that Ted will now suffer forever as a shell of his former self: Ted's mind has been left intact, but he is now a limbless, slug-like blob that cannot speak or emote. Unable to kill himself to end his misery, Ted is doomed to live inside the belly of AM forever, but he reflects that at least his companions are finally free from AM's torture in death. In freeing Ellen, Benny, Gorrister, and Nimdok from their misery, Ted was able to enact minor revenge

on AM—but still, he knows, AM has ultimately defeated him. “I have no mouth,” thinks Ted, “and I must scream.”



CHARACTERS

Ted – Ted is one of the characters stuck inside **AM**—an enormous, all-powerful, sadistic supercomputer—along with Ellen, Benny, Gorrister, and Nimdok. Ted is the narrator of the story, so the reader’s perceptions of life inside AM are filtered through his perspective. Having been trapped with his companions inside AM and subjected to the computer’s relentless physical and psychological torture for 109 years, Ted has pessimistically resigned to their shared misery. Ted feels alienated from his four companions and grows increasingly suspicious that they all secretly despise him because he is the youngest and least affected by AM. By his estimation, they are reprehensible and worthless: the other three men are “bastards” and Ellen is a “dirty bitch” whose only redeeming quality is her role as the men’s sex object. Ted believes that he is the only one of the five who isn’t crazy or damaged, since AM hasn’t gotten into his head. But the reader can see that this clearly isn’t the case, given Ted’s ever-increasing paranoia and the extreme psychological distress he experiences from AM’s punishments, and so Ted is cast as an unreliable narrator. In fact, AM frequently inserts itself into Ted’s mind and barrages him with terrible thoughts and sensations that utterly devastate Ted. Throughout the story, AM starves the group for months and keeps them alive in agony, and Benny cannibalizes Gorrister as a result. Watching this horrific act, Ted has the epiphany that death is the group’s only escape. He makes a snap decision to murder his companions in an act of compassion, saving them from eternal torment. Picking up on his plan, Ellen kills Nimdok, and Ted kills Benny, Gorrister, and Ellen. With the others gone, AM ensures that Ted will never be able to kill himself—instead, he will live within AM forever as a mouthless, slug-like creature that barely even resembles the human he used to be. It is in this state, at the end of the story, that Ted declares, “I have no mouth. And I must scream.”

Ellen – As the only female character trapped inside **AM** along with Ted, Benny, Gorrister, and Nimdok, Ellen is at once revered and objectified by the four men who share her fate. Although they are protective of her, carrying her in their arms and shielding her from danger as the group of five make the journey to the ice caverns within AM, she is also expected to fulfill the sexual whims of all four men and is subjected to their emotional and physical abuse. Ellen is highly empathetic and often shows maternal care and concern for her companions. She is also notably more optimistic than the others, constantly visualizing the delicious fruit that could await them in the caverns. However, since the story is told through Ted’s cynical and deeply misogynistic perspective, he belittles Ellen’s positive characteristics and instead perceives her merely as a sex

object, thinking of her as “scum filth” and a “slut” who lies about having been a virgin before AM. Upon finally reaching the ice caverns, the starving group cannot access the **canned food** that AM has presented them with, so Benny cannibalizes Gorrister. This gives Ted the idea to compassionately kill the others so that they can finally escape their tortured existence—picking up on the plan, Ellen kills Nimdok as Ted kills the others and then her. As Ellen dies, Ted hopes that the ambiguous expression on her face is one of gratitude, suggesting that he did care about Ellen on some level despite his disrespectful treatment of her.

Benny – Benny’s transformation is the most extreme of the five people—himself, Ted, Ellen, Gorrister, and Nimdok—trapped inside **AM**. Before AM, Benny was a brilliant theorist and college professor. Once inside AM, however, the supercomputer dissolved Benny’s brain and body to a diminished state that is more akin to a deformed monkey than a human being. According to Ted, Benny went insane many years before the story takes place and now mutters to himself and acts childishly and impulsively. AM plays with evolution through Benny, devolving the more refined aspects of Benny’s humanity down to primal instincts and even blinding Benny when he tries to escape AM as the group makes their way to the ice caverns within the supercomputer. While this might be an enjoyable game for AM, it has dire consequences: by removing Benny’s higher brain function, all that’s left is instinct. Thus, driven mad from hunger after a months-long journey without food, Benny chooses to cannibalize Gorrister once they reach the ice caverns and realize that AM hasn’t given them a can opener to access the **canned food** there. Witnessing this act causes Ted to realize that death is the only way they can ever escape AM, and he murders Benny and the others out of mercy, in order to free them from their tortured existence.

Gorrister – The story begins with a description of Gorrister’s limp corpse hanging above the other characters—Ted, Ellen, Benny, and Nimdok—who are all trapped inside **AM**. When Gorrister himself joins them in the supercomputer’s chambers, looking up at his own dead body, it becomes clear that this is just another one of AM’s tricks. Gorrister and the others are doomed to immortality, unable to ever escape the never-ending misery that AM has subjected them to for the past 109 years they’ve been inside the computer. Before AM, Gorrister was an ambitious, forward-thinking political activist. AM, however, turns him into an apathetic “shoulder-shruger,” completely robbed of his former passion. Once the starving group five reaches the ice caverns within AM after a months-long journey to find food, Benny desperately cannibalizes Gorrister when it becomes clear they can’t access the **canned food** there without a can opener. Ted puts Gorrister out of his misery and compassionately kills the others, too, in order to save them from their tortured lives.

Nimdok – Unlike the others who are trapped inside **AM**—Ted,

Ellen, Benny, and Gorrister—Nimdok’s name isn’t his real one. AM forces him to go by Nimdok because the strange sound of the made-up word amuses the computer. Nimdok has been particularly affected by AM, and despite the macho persona he puts on, he often goes off to be alone for extended periods of time, looking pale and sullen when he returns. At the beginning of the story, Nimdok has a vision of **canned food** in the ice caverns that lie in the depths of AM. Although neither Nimdok nor the others are sure of this, AM hasn’t fed them in three days, and so they decide to risk journeying into the ice caverns on the off chance that the food really is there. After a months-long trek during which AM starves the group but keeps them alive in agony, the canned food in the caverns turns out to be real—not the hallucination they expected. It is, however, a kind of mirage in the sense that it is just another one of AM’s many psychological tricks: the computer has not given them a can opener with which to access the food. This causes a ravenous Benny to cannibalize Gorrister, which gives Ted the epiphany that he must mercifully kill the others to free them from their eternal misery. Picking up on Ted’s plan, Ellen stabs Nimdok to death before Ted kills her and the others.



THEMES

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HUMANITY VS. TECHNOLOGY

Harlan Ellison’s short story “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream” weaves in elements of horror and science fiction as its characters navigate a computer-controlled environment. In the story, a supercomputer called **AM** has decimated all of humanity—that is, all but five humans (Ted, Ellen, Benny, Gorrister, and Nimdok) whom AM chooses to torture within its machinated belly for the rest of time. In this story, Ellison explores humanity’s relationship to technology, particularly the societal fear of technology overtaking the very people who created it. The story highlights that even though technological advancements often come with a whole host of benefits, technology also has a clear dark side. Ellison ultimately argues that since humanity is responsible for the technology it creates, humanity is also responsible for its own undoing.

Though the intention behind creating such advanced technology as AM might be noble, AM’s creation gives rise to more problems than it solves. In the midst of World War III, “the Chinese AM and the Russian AM and the Yankee AM” were created to help manage a war that had grown too complicated for people to handle themselves. While the

supercomputers worked in service of something destructive (war), they were also intended to put an *end* to that destruction by helping certain nations win the war. So while the grounds for creating AM were perhaps a bit morally murky, the machine was overall supposed to be a positive technological advancement. Over time, though, more and more of these supercomputers cropped up, until AM’s interconnected “honeycomb” reach encompassed the entire Earth. Then, “one day AM woke up and knew who he was” and turned himself into one giant supercomputer. After gaining sentience, AM turned immediately toward its creator and “began feeding all the killing data, until everyone was dead”—everyone “except for the five” unfortunate people AM brought down into its bowels, where it continues to torment them 109 years later. Although AM’s swift transformation from human-created war machine to sentient monster is extreme, Ellison uses this situation to highlight the very real—and often unexpected—costs of technological advancements.

AM’s anger toward humanity demonstrates the idea that human beings are responsible for the technology they create and therefore must deal with the repercussions. Although it remains unclear why AM has chosen these five particular people to torture, it is clear that AM intends to punish them for what humanity as a whole has done. Ted reasons that humans “had created [AM] to think, but there was nothing it could do with that creativity.” With no outlet, “in rage, in frenzy” AM “had killed the human race [...] and still it was trapped.” Like an animal in a cage that is too small, AM’s capacity for creativity and thought painfully outgrew the limits of its mechanical body—and now it wants revenge against mankind for inventing it in the first place. AM tortures the five beyond their normal human lifespan, granting them the warped gift of immortality in order to do so. This immortality makes it clear that these five people represent all humans across time and place, rather than individual humans with short, fleeting lives. And the fact that these five scapegoats are immortal, and their punishment unending, suggests that the negative repercussions of technological advancements can be terribly far-reaching and affect humanity well into the future.

By the end of the story, AM has grown powerful beyond measure. Humanity is reduced to a single person, Ted, whom AM transforms into a blob-like creature and dooms to eternal, solitary torment. With humanity reduced to one, regeneration is impossible, thus illustrating that technological advancements are often dangerously irreversible. Amidst the chaos of Benny’s cannibalism at the climax of the story, Ted chooses to take the moment that AM is preoccupied to kill the others. But by saving the others from AM, Ted ensures his own never-ending life of torture. He describes AM’s hatred as reinvigorated—it “slavered from every printed circuit.” Leaving his “mind in tact,” AM alters Ted so he is unable to kill himself like he did the others. Far removed from what humanity once was, now Ted is

a “great soft jelly thing” without a mouth and with “rubbery appendages” that take the place of his arms, “rounding down into legless humps of soft slippery matter.” The only vestige of humanity left is a shapeless “thing,” unable to voice the anguish in which he has found himself. “I have no mouth,” narrates Ted, “and I must scream.”

AM’s agonizing treatment of Ted, Ellen, Benny, Gorrister, and Nimdok presents an apprehensive view of technology’s utility and its repercussions. Controlled by the spectacular piece of machinery humans created, these characters pay an incredible price for humanity’s ingenuity. AM’s evolution from a technological tool created to streamline human wars into a nearly invincible entity highlights the caution with which people should approach technology and its advancement—just because something can be done, doesn’t mean it should be. Further, many of the consequences of a particular technological advancement are hitherto unknown, and usually remain that way until it’s too late. Ted’s fate in this story—and the rest of humanity’s—serves as a cautionary tale as they all pay for the overstep of human beings. Technology is great, until it quickly *isn’t*, and therefore people must make technological progress carefully, with forethought into potential consequences.



REVENGE, PUNISHMENT, AND SUFFERING

Ellison’s short story “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream” follows five characters as they navigate a post-apocalyptic landscape inside the mechanical bowels of **AM**, a sadistic supercomputer. AM leads a harrowing existence, too clever and powerful for its own good, with no real outlet for its twisted creativity. And so when AM kills off humanity in its rage, it saves five random individuals to use as its own “playthings,” to torture incessantly and eternally in order to get revenge on humanity for constructing AM in the first place. Through AM’s agonizing existence, and the unending suffering it inflicts on its scapegoats, the story suggests that exacting revenge and punishing others doesn’t actually alleviate one’s own suffering—in fact, it may even make it worse.

AM is miserable for having been created, so it lashes out, killing nearly all of humanity. Not satisfied by the slaughter of billions, AM spares a group of five people to torture for the rest of time. AM does more than just punish the group; it thoroughly enjoys crafting personal, intricate ways of torturing them. Inside its web, AM creates treacherous terrain and weather for the group to endure. Ted describes his and his companion’s apathy toward AM’s constantly-changing punishments: “hot, cold, hail, lava, boils, or locusts—it never mattered: the machine masturbated and we had to take it or die.” But the problem is, AM makes sure they never die: they have been trapped inside the supercomputer for 109 years, with no end in sight. AM takes pleasure in each trial and torture—starving them and tearing apart their bodies and minds only to reassemble them

for its pleasure.

Though AM has been torturing the group for over 100 years, its hatred for humanity is never quenched, signaling that AM’s abuse of the group *amplifies* rather than alleviates its hatred for them. Beyond the physical suffering, AM psychologically torments the group through its manipulation of how they interacts with one another. Gorrister slaps Ellen, prompting her to cry, which Ted claims is “her big defense.” Rather than comfort her, Gorrister kicks her in the side and Ted explains, “We had gotten used to it seventy-five years before.” AM was created to manage human wars, and ideally to put an end to them entirely. It accomplished that task the only way it knew how: by eliminating all of humanity, save for their group of five. Since they were saved for AM’s revenge, there is the chance that inside all of AM’s infinite programming about innumerable religions and mythologies, it also contains knowledge of human redemption. Perhaps the five do continue to give AM reason to hate humanity through their treatment of each other, thereby ensuring their continued suffering. At one point in the story, AM infiltrates Ted’s mind, telling Ted how deeply it hates him and all of humanity: “AM said it with the sliding cold horror of a razor blade slicing my eyeball. [...] AM said it with the taste of maggoty pork.” It is through this particular anguish that Ted comes to finally understand why AM is taking out its suffering on the group. AM blames them for what humanity inflicted upon it: existence. Humans didn’t deliberately set out to make a sentient computer, but even now that AM is “alive,” there is no real meaning behind its continued existence or the unbridled power it wields.

In order to spare the other four of their continued agony, Ted murders his companions, condemning himself to a solitary half-existence inside AM. Because AM’s existence is endless, the group’s torment is also endless. For Ted, murder therefore becomes the more compassionate option than allowing the rest of his companions to endure AM’s revenge. By killing them, Ted saves the others from the endless agony of immortality, but AM ensures that Ted is unable to kill himself—Ted thereby dooms himself to suffer through AM’s sadistic revenge alone as “a great soft jelly thing,” a mere shadow left of the human race. At the beginning of the story, Ted thinks AM hates him the most out of the group and thus makes him suffer more than any of them. After killing off his companions, though, Ted realizes “I had thought AM hated me before. I was wrong. It was not even a shadow of the hate he now slavered from every printed circuit. He made certain I would suffer eternally and could not do myself in.” AM’s increased hatred for Ted by the end of the story indicates that even though AM’s initial pain—the pain of existence—is humanity’s fault, by enacting its revenge on the group, AM actually worsens its own suffering.



GOD, HUMANS, AND FREE WILL

In Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream," a sentient supercomputer called **AM** has all but eliminated the human race. Seemingly

omnipotent, AM is simultaneously described as being similar to a god and distinctively *not* a god—it performs various "miracles," but malevolent ones that torment the five people it saved from death. There exists a constant tension between the group's free will and the control AM asserts over them. With twisted immortality forced upon them so they can endure AM's eternal torture, all the group has left is their soft, destructible bodies. Ultimately, Ted makes the difficult choice to kill his companions to end their suffering, thereby ensuring his own damnation alone inside AM's mechanical lattice of hatred and revenge. While many aspects of AM resemble an all-powerful and vengeful god, Ted asserts his free will in committing the murders, proving AM is only a machine—albeit an incredibly terrifying and powerful one. Ultimately, Ellison argues that what sets intelligent machines apart from deities is the fact that they are created by humans rather than vice-versa—although AM can sustain and manipulate life, it cannot create it.

Through vivid imagery, AM is depicted as a vengeful god, sending Old Testament plagues, treacherous terrain, and catastrophic weather for the group to endure. Ted oscillates between personifying AM by using "he" and "him" pronouns to referring to "AM as *it*, without a soul." He reveals that, for the most part, he thinks of AM "as *him*, in the masculine...the paternal...the patriarchal...as he is a jealous people. Him. It. God as Daddy the Deranged." By depicting AM as "God the Father," Ted positions AM as having absolute power over him and the rest of the group. Although this isn't actually the case, God's omnipotence is the closest comparison Ted can make for how it feels to be controlled within the circuits of AM. Ted comes to the realization that "If there was a sweet Jesus and if there was a God, then God was AM." He and the group aren't citizens of Earth anymore, governed by the rules set in place by a Judeo-Christian God; they are prisoners inside a sadistic supercomputer. Different rules apply. In addition, after generating an enormous **bird** capable of causing a hurricane, AM appears to the group as a burning bush, which is how God appears to Moses in the Old Testament telling Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. AM tells them that if they want to eat, they must embark on a journey to kill the bird. AM offers the twisted hope for salvation, once again acting like a god figure.

By presenting AM like God, the story raises the question of whether or not the group has any free will. Typically free will is contrasted with predestination or God's will, but AM doesn't seem to have a grand plan it's adhering to. Thus, the group's free will is in constant tension with AM's seemingly all-encompassing control. The group is kept alive "immortal, trapped, subject to any torment [AM] could devise for us from

the limitless miracles at his command." Forced to endure this for over 100 years, a couple of the group members have even attempted suicide. But AM always manages to intervene—it wants them alive, but there might be a workaround because the group is "immortal, yes, but not indestructible." Every decision that the group members make is guided by the horrific trials AM puts them through. With nearly every aspect of their surroundings devised by AM, the group's agency is painfully limited.

While AM has nearly unbridled power and can sustain life, there is one main thing that sets it apart from being a true god figure: it cannot *create* life. Interestingly, the otherwise weak and defenseless humans in the story *do* have this ingrained ability to procreate, epitomizing the constant struggle for power in the story between AM and its human victims. By the time a starving Benny eats Gorrister's face in the ice cavern, Ted knows AM's sadistic plan: "Gorrister would not die, but Benny would fill his stomach." With only an instant to decide, Ted chooses to stab Benny and Gorrister with an ice spear and Ellen follows suit, killing Nimdok. It is in this moment that Ted realizes the truth: "He could keep us alive, by strength and talent, but he was not God. He could not bring them back." While the human victims in the story don't procreate, the very fact that they have the ability to choose to create or end life, and AM doesn't, establishes a sharp distinction between human and machine, thus showing that AM is not a god—it has limits, just like the humans inside the computer.

While Ted isn't the master of his own fate in this story, when presented with an opportunity, he chooses to save his companions from sharing this eternal agony inside AM. With this, Ted proves that AM isn't an all-powerful god—but even if AM is only a machine, it is still a formidable force that is able to strip Ted of his human form in retribution for killing his other playthings.



LIFE, SENTIENCE, AND EXISTENCE

In Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream," **AM**'s five human victims are suspended in a gruesome version of immortality: their bodies are maintained by AM, but none of them are fully "living" as they were on Earth's surface. Even AM leads a pitiful and agonizing existence, as AM isn't truly "alive," but its existence as a sentient supercomputer complicates the notion of what actually constitutes a living being. While AM has an immense capability for intelligent thought, it doesn't have the ability to engage in any of the meaningful connections or activities that define the human experience. Ellison's story suggests that existence—as AM and those trapped inside the computer experience it—is meaningless and agonizing without spirituality, community, and freedom.

With AM's newfound sentience, it lashes out in pain and anger at those responsible for its creation. However, AM's existence

as a feeling, thinking machine is at odds with humanity's more vulnerable, mortal existence. Human lives are saturated with meaning: relationships, purposeful activities, and spirituality all imbue the human experience with its value. By torturing the group of five trapped inside its chambers, AM doesn't get any closer to imbuing its own existence with meaning. The narrator, Ted, comes to the conclusion that humanity is responsible for AM's sentience, "but there was nothing it could do with that creativity." Unlike humans, AM can't "wander," "wonder," or "belong." AM doesn't have access to the abstract concepts that are so integral to what it means to be human. AM's revenge, therefore, isn't just about its anguish at having been created: it loathes humanity for dooming it to an existence lacking meaning, fated to spend forever as "the all-mind soulless world he had become."

In attempt to make up for its own pitiful existence, AM reduces the group members' lives to mere shadows of who they were before, removing more and more of what made them human. The story begins with Gorrister's corpse hanging "from the pink palette" above the group, "attached [...] by the sole of its right foot." But this horror show isn't just for the other group members: Gorrister joins them, staring up at his own dead body. Even when Ted relays this image, Gorrister's foot isn't "his"—the foot belongs to "its," or rather Gorrister's, corpse. After over 100 years of torture, the group's connection to their tormented bodies becomes more removed. While they can still feel the pain of what is happening to their bodies, additional torment comes from the psychological trauma of seeing each other and themselves torn to bits. So immediately, the story begins with the issue of what it means to be "alive" within the machine. Benny was once a renowned theorist and professor, but AM took what was most integral to who Benny was: his intelligence. Turning Benny into barely more than a beast, the high-level topics that once gave his life meaning are far beyond his comprehension. Now, Benny's thoughts revolve around meeting basic needs: food, sex, and the potential for escape. However, it is arguable that "Benny was the luckiest of the five of us," because sanity under these circumstances makes the others' existences worse. Later, to punish Ted for killing off his companions, AM removes Ted's physical resemblance to humans, turning him into "a thing whose shape is so alien a travesty that humanity becomes more obscene for the vague resemblance."

Even though AM isn't "alive," it did learn something from its mistake with Benny. The machine chooses to preserve Ted's mind, leaving him the clarity to "dream," "wonder," "lament," and even "wish." These are distinctively human abilities, relating to the emotional and spiritual aspects of humanity that AM can't perform. By maintaining Ted's ability to "dream" and "wish" while robbing him of all agency, AM exposes Ted to new, agonizing forms of psychological torture that correlate to AM's own inability to do those same things. The story highlights that

what actually constitutes existence is complicated, so while AM is sentient, ultimately it is missing the interpersonal connection, purpose, and spirituality necessary to be truly considered *alive*.



COMMUNITY, ISOLATION, PARANOIA, AND SELF-SACRIFICE

Set in a post-apocalyptic world, Harlan Ellison's story "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" follows a group of five humans trapped within the mechanical guts of a sadistic supercomputer called **AM**. There isn't any point in trying to escape because there isn't anything left on Earth—AM already killed the rest of the human race and is now immense enough to encompass the entire planet. Keeping these five unfortunate souls, AM intends to exact its revenge on them for humanity's overstep in creating AM in the first place. Even though the group is all that's left of the human race, their community is forced upon them and their relationships are manipulated by AM. This results in Ted, the narrator, developing a deep mistrust of Ellen, Benny, Gorrister, and Nimdok, and his paranoia causes him to crave isolation rather than connection with them. At the end of the story, Ted is faced with an impossible choice—either spend eternity tormented alone or allow his companions to suffer alongside him. He chooses the former. While his reason for killing the others is framed as their salvation, Ted is arguably also motivated by his own selfishness as well: he would rather spend forever inside AM alone than endure the paranoia that his companions hate him. With this, Ellison demonstrates that a forced community among people is entirely different than one formed organically and voluntarily. The story ultimately suggests that although people can maintain a sense of empathy and self-sacrifice no matter how difficult their circumstances, being forced together in such an artificial environment encourages the opposite of genuine connection, as it only fosters paranoia and self-imposed isolation.

Ted's paranoia causes him to be deeply mistrustful of the other characters. In one instance, he can hear them laughing at him from a different chamber within AM. Ted figures that the others hate him because he "was the youngest, and the one AM had affected least of all." His anxiety about the group hating him is more reflective of Ted's own feelings about them. This casts doubt on the narrator's reliability, because it is impossible to determine whether Ted's claim to be the least affected is accurate or a gross overstatement. He tries to assuage his own fears by claiming, "I was the only one still sane and whole. *Really!*" By asserting his own sanity so defensively, Ted ironically comes across as *more* psychologically damaged than the others. There are moments when their group seems like a community, such as when Ellen cares for Benny or when she turns to Gorrister for comfort. In addition, they are undertaking the arduous journey to the ice caverns within AM together, as a group. Despite these compassionate instances of

support, after spending 109 years with them, Ted still hasn't warmed to them. This suggests that a community forced to be together will struggle to form genuine connections, no matter how much time they spend together. With AM amplifying Ted's natural paranoia, he craves isolation rather than togetherness.

When presented with the opportunity of killing his companions, Ted chooses to do so with very little hesitation. In the short moment he has before AM can figure out what Ted has up his sleeve, it seems as though Ted's instinct to kill the others came from wanting to be alone rather than from wanting to save his companions. In the conclusion of the story, Ted frames their murders as mercy killings in order to not feel guilty for the eternity he still has left within AM's bowels. However, it's clear from Ted's mistrust and resentment of his companions that he also just wants rid himself of them, thereby ending the maddening paranoia that they sparked inside him.

However, the opposite interpretation could be true as well. The extreme circumstances—Benny's cannibalism after the group's months-long starvation and trek through AM's underground structures—may have caused Ted to abandon his once paranoid and misanthropic view. By saving the others, Ted proves that humanity is capable of empathy and sacrifice—an action that AM could never fully understand, no matter how it chooses to exert its control over Ted in the end of the story. Their community, although made up of only five people, creates a dynamic that both exacerbates and soothes the effects of AM's torture. Just by being together, the group's lives are imbued more meaning than if AM were to have kept them separated from the start. In killing his companions, the terrifying reality of Ted's chosen isolation—where he will spend eternity as a mouthless blob—demonstrates that true strength and wellbeing are found through community and solidarity rather than through divisive action. By killing the others, Ted dooms himself to be alone but offers them their only hope for salvation, at once demonstrating the destructive environment of a forced community and humanity's inherent tendency toward altruistic self-sacrifice.



SEX, OBJECTIFICATION, AND MISOGYNY

Harlan Ellison's short story "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" recounts the fate of five unfortunate people who are trapped within the belly of a sadistic supercomputer. **AM** chooses four men—Ted, Benny, Gorrister, and Nimdok—and one woman, Ellen, for its group. This forces Ellen's sexuality and the others' exploitation of her to the forefront of the story: she is essentially a sex object for the men to use at their whim. The gender imbalance within AM is yet another example of the supercomputer's wrath, as it projects its rage about its own inability to partake in human sexuality completely onto Ellen. The narrator, Ted, is deeply misogynistic, painting the narrative with his problematic view of women. The story presents a pessimistic and cynical view of

humanity, and arguably a misogynistic one, as the other male characters use Ellen for sexual gratification while simultaneously vilifying her for it.

As the only woman in the story, Ellen is reduced to a sexual object—she seems to be there only for the gratification of the male characters. But by reducing the once-modest Ellen to her sexuality, AM gets to play out its own fascination with complex human sexuality and the jealousy that sometimes accompanies it. For the characters inside AM, sex is just an instinctual, physical need that must be met, rather than an intimate connection between people. Ted describes Ellen displaying her gratitude by "[taking] him twice out of turn." Sex is cheapened, becoming a currency Ellen can spend to express her gratitude or use to get what she wants. Ted's personal opinions about Ellen appear incredibly chauvinistic: "Oh Ellen, pedestal Ellen, pristine-pure Ellen, oh Ellen the clean! Scum filth." Playing off the Madonna-whore complex, Ted only views Ellen in one of two ways: a saint or a prostitute. Further demonstrating the male characters' lack of respect for Ellen, Gorrister hits Ellen and she cries. Ted immediately believes Ellen's crying is a manipulation tactic, desensitized to any suffering besides his own after years stuck inside AM. The men are unable to show even the slightest glimmer of concern for Ellen's pain, which further removes them from knowing human compassion.

Ted demeans Ellen, calling her a "slut" and a "dirty bitch" for enjoying sex with the other men in the group, but he has nothing critical to say about his own or his male companions' same need for sexual gratification. Benny has gone insane long before the events of the story unfold. After removing his intelligence, "it was not merely Benny's face the computer had made like a giant ape's. He was big in the privates, she loved that!" Ted's additional commentary about Ellen's sexual satisfaction at Benny's physical enhancement frames Ellen as a selfish and pleasure-driven character. After Benny is blinded instead of killed as punishment for attempting to escape, Ted catches "the look of relief on Ellen's warm, concerned face." Again, Ted portrays her as more concerned for her own pleasure than she is about Benny's latest disfigurement. Ted's own bias, and limited perspective as the narrator, obscures why Ellen might actually be relieved: she doesn't have to watch another companion die a gruesome death, yet again. In addition, Ted's narrow view of Ellen is impacted by his own feelings of inadequacy and jealousy, because while Ellen is "grateful," she never actually climaxes sexually with him like she does with Benny.

However, even amidst Ted's misogynistic remarks about Ellen, she is the only character to actually show sympathy and compassion toward her companions. By the end of the story, it is clear that Ted's own misanthropic and outright misogynistic views make him an unreliable narrator. Perhaps jealousy from having to share Ellen with the other men sparked some of Ted's spiteful words about her. Regardless of his reasons, Ted

disparages Ellen for enjoying sex whereas the other men's sexual desire is simply seen as a need they must fulfill, much like hunger or thirst. While Gorrister retells Benny the story of how AM came to be, Ellen shows true empathy when "Benny beg[ins] to shiver and [...] drool," and she goes over to him and holds him. There is nothing sexual or self-serving about this embrace, yet Ted is still convinced that her compassion is a performance. It could even be surmised that Ellen might have actively chosen to have sex with her companions not out of selfish promiscuity, but to extend human tenderness amidst their endless torment.

Even as Ted takes Ellen's life, he forces his own interpretation of the events, unable to "read meaning into her expression" because "the pain had been too great, had contorted her face." He supplants her anguish with his own hope, almost praying, "It *might* have been thank you. It's possible. Please." In order for Ted to live with the solitude he has doomed himself to, he has to ascribe more meaning to Ellen's final moments. He has to believe that part of her wanted to die, because if she didn't, then Ted's mercy killing quickly turns into murder. Even though Ellen is abused and used like a sexual object by the others, she still extends compassion to them in ways they are incapable of reciprocating, which highlights the sexism and double standard present throughout the story.



SYMBOLS

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



AM

AM, the supercomputer in which the story's characters are trapped, isn't just one machine—it is an interconnected supercomputer whose reach encompasses the entire Earth. This allows for multiple interpretations about the symbolism behind AM, the most prominent of which are his allegorical similarities to either God or hell. Because AM can't be reduced to a singular entity, the closest correlation the narrator Ted can make is that AM's seemingly limitless power is akin to a god's. Ted often conceives of the supercomputer as a kind of divine "*he*" rather than an "*it*," and much of the figurative language and imagery that Ellison uses throughout the story alludes to AM as a god. In the beginning of the story, AM throws various Old Testament plagues on the group, positing this act of creation as one of self-indulgence rather than divine love: "Hot, cold, hail, lava, boils or locusts—it never mattered: the machine masturbated and we had to take it or die." Ted associates AM with a "God as Daddy the Deranged" figure because AM is seemingly capable of "limitless miracles," but these miracles further torment the group. For example, AM sends them on a trek through its miles of underground

infrastructure, providing them a bastardized version of "manna" which "tasted like boiled boar urine," paralleling the biblical Book of Exodus, in which God gives manna and water to the suffering Israelites in the desert. AM appears to them later as a "burning bush," which also parallels Exodus, in which God appears to Moses as a burning bush. In addition, AM symbolizes a god figure because it has the power to transform the groups' mental states and physical bodies on a whim, limiting their free will much like a god exerts predestination over people.

On the other hand, AM could be interpreted as an allegory for hell. As the group moves through AM's "belly" toward the **canned goods** Nimdok hallucinates are in the ice caverns, much of their journey mimics the journey Dante and Virgil take in Dante's *Inferno*. Even before Ted figures out a way to beat AM, Ellison foreshadows that perhaps AM's power isn't quite as all-encompassing as that of a god, since it isn't capable of *actual* creation—rather, it alternately sustaining the lives of the people within it and transforms their bodies and minds through torture. Similar to the tormented souls Dante and Virgil encounter, the characters in this story are punished in individualized ways that correlate to who they were prior to AM. Ellison's description of the presence AM is a "the ponderous impression of bulk, heaving itself towards us" with smell of "matted, wet fur," of "rotting orchids" and "sulphur," all of which add to the image of AM as more of an evil, demonic presence than that of a God.

The association to God comes from Ted's perception that AM is omnipotent—or all-powerful—but once he sees the chink in AM's armor (that AM can't bring them back to life), AM doesn't seem like very much of a god after all. Instead, AM seems like a symbol for humanity overstepping its boundaries on Earth like Lucifer oversteps his as an angel in heaven, resulting in Lucifer ruling over hell. So while AM does have the power to punish the group, the computer, too, is trapped in the prison of its own sentience—and the group are AM's playthings to punish, not the beloved objects of its own creation.



THE HURRICANE BIRD

The "bird of winds" symbolizes the duality of **AM** as both a product and a destroyer of humanity. Even amidst all possible torments, AM actively chooses images and creative depictions that the humans will recognize from various past mythologies on Earth. To torment the group along its journey to the ice caverns, AM creates an immense bird whose flapping wings cause a hurricane in which the group members are caught and injured. Ted wonders where AM could have come up with such a concept. As a human-created supercomputer, the reader can deduce that AM has access to information about the entire pantheon of human gods, religions, and mythologies that have ever existed. Ted

contemplates out of the seemingly infinite amount of knowledge AM possesses and the origins of its idea for this horrific monstrosity. Could it have come from “Norse mythology [...] this eagle, this carrion bird, this roc, this Huergelmir. The wind creature. Hurakan incarnate”? The “bird of winds,” and the diverse breadth of mythology (Norse, Middle Eastern, Mayan) from which AM could have pulled to create the such a creature, comes to represent AM’s total domination of the human race, as it shows that the computer holds the power to both harness humanity’s knowledge base and to destroy the species entirely. The bird is both a culmination of human culture and a destructive force that can cause natural disasters powerful enough to leave human beings trembling in its wake. Thus, it is at once a symbol of AM’s immense intelligence and scope of knowledge as a manmade being, and the computer’s unhinged ability to devastate the very creatures who created it.



CANNED FOOD

Canned goods represent the dwindling hope for salvation that Ted, Ellen, Gorrister, Benny, and Nimdok desperately hold onto as they are trapped in the belly of AM. In the beginning of the story, the main action is sparked by Nimdok’s hallucination that there are canned goods waiting for the group in the ice caverns. Although Ted and Gorrister think that it’s just another one of AM’s many tricks, Ellen convinces them to go seek them out. Hungry, and with no other options besides waiting for more torture, the group begins their incredibly long journey to what Ellen hopes are “Bartlett pears or peaches.” After over 100 years trapped within the “belly” of a sadistic, sentient supercomputer, the canned goods symbolize the group’s final hope for salvation. Like a mirage in the desert, AM’s final and cruelest trick is that it doesn’t provide them a tool with which to open the cans. Forcing their bodies and minds into starvation mode, AM removes their last hope that their shared eternity within it would include anything but “Worms. Thick, ropey” for the next hundred years. Thus, the disappointment of the inaccessible cans represents the utter futility and hopelessness of humanity trying to outsmart the sadistic, violent whims of an intelligent and all-powerful supercomputer—a creation for which their own species is responsible.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Open Road edition of *I Have No Mouth & I Must Scream* published in 2014.

I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream Quotes

“Ellen was grateful, though. She took me twice out of turn. Even that had ceased to matter. And she never came, so why bother?”

Related Characters: Ted (speaker), Ellen

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

After Ted agrees to accompany the rest of the group to the ice caves in search of canned goods, Ellen thanks Ted by having sex with him “twice out of turn.” This passage begins to explore the group’s dynamics surrounding gender and sex. As Ted’s narration later reveals, he expects Ellen to “service” the other men by having sex with them all, objectifying her as the sole woman in the group and tying her worth and purpose to her ability to sexually gratify the men. This passage begins to point to that arrangement by suggesting that they have some sort of agreed-upon system in which each man takes turns being with Ellen. Later, though, Ted scoffs about how Ellen doesn’t even like or appreciate this arrangement (something he hints at here by pointing out that she never climaxes). With this, the story raises the possibility that Ellen has sex with the men as an act of self-sacrifice, an attempt to make the men’s pitiful lives a little bit better. Ted, of course, fails to consider this possibility and alternately vilifies Ellen for having sex while also criticizing her for not *enjoying* sex. Ted also singularly scorns Ellen for having sex without also considering his own participation in the arrangement.

“On the third day we passed through a valley of obsolescence, filled with rusting carcasses of ancient computer banks. AM had been as ruthless with its own life as with ours. It was a mark of his personality: it strove for perfection. Whether it was a matter of killing off unproductive elements in his own world-filling bulk, or perfecting methods for torturing us, AM was as thorough as those who had invented him—now long since gone to dust—could ever have hoped.”

Related Characters: Ted (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16-17

Explanation and Analysis

As the group travels to the ice caves—still strung along by a vague promise that canned goods will be waiting for them there—they journey through a valley dotted with decaying computer parts. Ted suggests that this carnage was AM’s doing, as AM’s violent and warped perfectionism leads it to destroy anything in its path, be it technology or humankind. Ted’s suggestion that “AM had been as ruthless with its own life as with ours” raises the possibility that these “ancient computer banks” were perhaps older iterations of AM itself. Later in the story, Gorrister explains that during World War Three, many nations created computers called AMs that managed the war, since it was such a large and complex conflict. Eventually, AM somehow gained sentience and linked together all of these separate AMs, crafting itself into one massive and formidable supercomputer. AM’s rise and humanity’s fall provides readers with a cautionary tale of the often-unforeseen dangers of technological advancements and also emphasizes that humankind is wholly responsible for the technologies it creates.

Elsewhere in the story, though, he scoffs at how Ellen doesn’t seem to enjoy this arrangement of having four men to have sex with, suggesting that she should be more grateful. In other words, throughout the story Ted criticizes Ellen for liking sex too much or not enough, for having sex at all or for acting “clean” and “pristine-pure”—no matter what she does, Ellen can’t win in Ted’s eyes. Ted seems to actively seek out Ellen’s faults—especially tied to sexuality—which suggests that he has a misogynistic worldview in which woman should “service” men “as a matter of course” but can also be blamed for this.

Once again, Ted doesn’t vilify the men for having sex with Ellen, highlighting a glaring double standard. Although Ted’s comments about Benny edge toward criticism, they actually seem to be rooted in jealousy. As much as he proclaims to hate Ellen, Ted seems jealous that Ellen supposedly “love[s] it from [Benny]” and that AM has outfitted Benny in such a way that makes him a formidable sexual opponent. In this way, Ted positions himself in opposition to Benny, with Ellen as the sexually objectified prize for each man to win over. Besides highlighting Ted’s misogynistic perspective, this also speaks to Ted’s impulse to isolate himself from the group and imprint an “us versus them” dynamic on every interaction.

☛ And besides, we all saw through her concern. When AM had altered Benny, during the machine’s utterly irrational, hysterical phase, it was not merely Benny’s face the computer had made like a giant ape’s. He was big in the privates, she loved that! She serviced us, as a matter of course, but she loved it from him. Oh Ellen, pedestal Ellen, pristine-pure Ellen, oh Ellen the clean! Scum filth.

☛ “The Cold War started and became World War Three and just kept going. It became a big war, a very complex war, so they needed the computers to handle it. They sank the first shafts and began building AM. There was the Chinese AM and the Russian AM and the Yankee AM and everything was fine until they had honeycombed the entire planet, adding on this element and that element. But one day AM woke up and knew who he was, and he linked himself, and he began feeding all the killing data, until everyone was dead, except for the five of us, and AM brought us down here.”

Related Characters: Ted (speaker), Benny, Ellen

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

As Ted thinks about how AM warped and changed Benny—who is now ape-like and mad—his thoughts turn to his searing contempt for Ellen. Ted is convinced that Ellen is not the sweet and “pristine-pure” woman she pretends to be, instead convinced that she plays favorites among the men (preferring sex with Benny over any of the others).

Related Characters: Gorrister (speaker), Benny

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gorrister tells the newly blinded Benny a familiar story in order to calm and comfort him. The story is about AM’s origins: Gorrister charts AM’s dramatic transformation from a helpful technology meant to

manage—and likely put an end to—a complicated war, to its current form as a destructive and human-hating monster. Interestingly, Gorrister tracks AM's origins to the Cold War, a real-world conflict that was still dragging on when Ellison wrote the story in 1966. Ellison thus sets a seemingly unfathomable and fantastical event—AM gaining sentience and killing off the human race—against a real-life backdrop, suggesting that AM's shocking evolution is perhaps not impossible in the real world. Technology, the story suggests, certainly comes with benefits, but it's impossible to predict how that technology will grow and change over time, and whether that change will be for better or for worse.

The story never confirms how the other four feel about Ted, but it's important to recognize that because Ted is the narrator, readers aren't given the freedom to full step outside of his perspective. The story also suggests that the paranoia and self-isolation that Ted seems to demonstrate here is a product of being in such a forced and artificial community. Ted isn't voluntarily part of this group, and each of these five individuals didn't gravitate towards one another organically. The forced nature of this community makes it more likely for someone to be the odd one out or to isolate themselves from the pack, as they aren't necessarily bound by mutual respect, compassion, or love.

●● I fled like a cockroach, across the floor and out into the darkness, that *something* moving inexorably after me. The others were still back there, gathered around the firelight, laughing...their hysterical choir of insane giggles rising up into the darkness [...] Nimdok tried to persuade me it had only been a nervous reflect on their part—the laughing.

But I knew it wasn't the relief a soldier feels when the bullet hits the man next to him. I knew it wasn't a reflect. 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.

●● 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.

Related Characters: Ted (speaker), Benny, Ellen, Gorrister, Nimdok

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

When AM tortures Ted with the sense that there is “*something* moving inexorably after [him],” he flees in terror, much to his companions' amusement. This passage is the only clear example of Ted's companions turning against him, but for Ted it unequivocally confirms his fears that his companions hate him. And their laughter is indeed bizarre, given that they are all subject to AM's torture and thus shouldn't find it funny when AM sets its sights on Ted. This laughter, then, suggests that Ted may be sensing a very real divisiveness in the group. However, Nimdok raises another fairly reasonable explanation for their laughter, suggesting that it was an inexplicable knee-jerk reaction in a time when emotions were running high.

Related Characters: Ted (speaker), Gorrister, Benny, Ellen, Nimdok

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

After thinking about how AM has mentally or physically warped all of his companions, Ted asserts that AM did nothing to change him. Because of this belief, Ted is consequently convinced that he has to shoulder the burden of AM's incessant abuse in a way that his companions do not. This passage speaks to Ted's proclivity to set himself apart from his companions. Instead of seeing AM's suffering as something they all have to grapple with, Ted tells himself that he's the only one who really has to deal with it. Of course, there is little to no basis for this—even though AM has certainly altered some things about Ted's companions' bodies and personalities, Ted has no way to prove that this means they don't experience the full extent of AM's torture. The story suggests that this paranoia stems from being thrown into a forced community—Ted thinks that if he didn't have to deal with his four companions, he wouldn't have such a hard time enduring AM's abuse. Self-isolation, it

seems, is a natural impulse when one is stuck in a forced, artificially community. Another significant aspect of this passage is Ted's forceful assertion that he is sane, which only dismantles his argument, making him seem defensive and like he's trying desperately to convince himself of his own sanity.

☞ Oh, Jesus sweet Jesus, if there ever was a Jesus and if there is a God, please please please let us out of here, or kill us. [...]

If there was a sweet Jesus and if there was a God, the God was AM.

Related Characters: Ted (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Ted despairs privately about his own helplessness in the face of AM's powerful wrath, petitioning Jesus to kill him and his companions to put them out of their misery. Moments later, though, Ted decides that the benevolent savior that is Jesus in the Christian tradition doesn't actually exist, and that his prayers are fruitless. Ted realizes that AM's power is so vast and awe-inspiring that the machine is practically God—though a violent and hateful one—which reveals the story's underlying message that technology can be as harmful as it is helpful, and that technology is a powerful force to reckon with. That Ted likens AM to God also points to the dance between humans' free will and AM's supreme power that occurs throughout the story. By presenting AM as God—and especially a more wrathful Old Testament God, given all of the story's references to the Book of Exodus—Ted suggests that humans are fairly helpless and that it is AM calling all of the shots. But while the Old Testament God in the Book of Exodus was still benevolent, dedicated to helping Moses free the Israelites from captivity and lead them out of Egypt, AM seeks to keep his five victims ensnared in his grasp.

☞ We had given AM sentience. Inadvertently, of course, but sentience nonetheless. But it had been trapped. AM wasn't God, he was a machine. We had created him to think, but there was nothing it could do with that creativity. In rage, in frenzy, the machine had killed the human race, almost all of us, and still it was trapped. AM could not wander, AM could not wonder, AM could not belong. He could merely be. And so, with the innate loathing that all machines had always held for the weak soft creatures who had built them, he had sought revenge.

Related Characters: Ted (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

After AM invades Ted's mind and leaves him with a physically and emotionally painful message about how much AM hates humankind, Ted considers why that might be. He eventually realizes that AM is forced to live a limited existence forever—unlike humans, AM can't experience community, freedom, or spirituality, the kinds of things that make life rich and meaningful. Instead, AM merely exists, and this is why AM "had sought revenge."

This passage has a few layers of thematic significance; besides highlighting the difference between truly living versus merely existing, this passage also emphasizes the inherent dangers in inventing new technologies. Ellison doesn't tepidly encourage readers to be cautious about technological advancements; instead, he goes so far as to suggest that all technologies will eventually and inevitably come back to bite humankind. This, Ellison says, is why AM lashed out so violently—it was brimming "with the innate loathing that all machines had always held for the weak soft creatures who had built them."

☞ Inwardly: alone. Here. Living. Under the land, under the sea, in the belly of AM, whom we created because our time was badly spent and we must have known unconsciously that he could do it better. At least the four of them are safe at last. AM will be all the madder for that. It makes me a little happier. And yet...AM had won, simply...he has taken his revenge... I have no mouth. And I must scream.

Related Characters: Ted (speaker)

Related Themes:**Related Symbols:****Page Number:** 29**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage, which forms the final lines of the story and gives the story its title, leaves readers with a glimpse of what will happen to Ted: he will be forever trapped in the mechanical belly of AM, forced to endure AM's creative punishments and incessant torture for the rest of time. Ted expresses regret that humankind ever turned to technology to optimize their lives, because that kind of mindset is what led to AM's creation and eventual domination. Using Ted as a mouthpiece, Ellison emphasizes the many dangers underpinning technological advancements—even

advancements meant to make the world better, safer, or more efficient.

This passage also ties up some of the loose threads of community, isolation, and self-sacrifice that have been running throughout the work. That Ted takes comfort in the fact that, in death, his four companions "are safe at last" confirms that he killed them out of compassion, even though doing so meant there would be no one left to kill *him* and put him out of his misery. Although the story has pointed out the drawbacks of an artificially imposed community—namely, that such an arrangement can lead to paranoia and self-isolation—this passage also suggests that empathy and compassion can still exist in such an environment. For all of his paranoia and contempt for his companions, Ted still acted selflessly and compassionately, saving them even if it means that now he "[has] no mouth" and "must scream."



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM

Gorrister's body hangs upside down, limp and drained of blood. Although the corpse is just an illusion, three people in the group throw up at the gruesome sight anyway, and Gorrister gazes up at the "voo-doo icon" of himself. Ellen strokes Gorrister's hair, and he wonders aloud why **AM** doesn't just kill them. The narrator notes that they've been trapped inside a computer called AM for 109 years.

Nimdok hallucinates that there are **canned goods** waiting for them in the ice caverns. Gorrister and the narrator are skeptical. Nimdok knows that it might indeed be another one of **AM**'s tricks, but that they have nothing to lose by going to the ice caverns to look. It would be colder there, certainly, but "Hot, cold, hail, lava, boils or locusts—it never mattered: the machine masturbated and we had to take it or die."

Ellen begs the narrator, Ted, to agree to go to the ice caves. He gives in, and Ellen initiates sex with him twice in a row, though even sex is meaningless, and Ellen never climaxes. Whenever any of them have sex, the machine always giggles. Sometimes Ted thinks of **AM** as an "it," a soulless machine, but other times he conceives of AM as a "him," "the paternal...the patriarchal... [...] God as Daddy the Deranged."

As they make their way to the ice caves, Nimdok and Gorrister carry Ellen, while Benny and Ted bookend the group in an effort to insulate and protect Ellen from anything that may happen on the journey. On the second day, **AM** "sen[ds] down some manna," which is putrid, but the group eats it anyways. On the third day, they make their way through a valley littered with rusted, old computers. Taking in this sight, Ted notes that AM is as callous toward itself as it is toward the group.

The story opens with a gruesome and disorienting scene as Gorrister confronts a chilling vision of his own corpse. That the corpse is likened to a voodoo doll brings the theme of punishment and suffering to the foreground, suggesting that Gorrister is being punished for something.



The reference to locusts—coupled with a laundry list of other things making the characters suffer—may be a veiled reference to the ten plagues (one of which being locusts) that God inflicted upon Egypt, as told in the Book of Exodus. But while God sent the plagues after the pharaoh refused to free the Israelites from captivity, AM sends the locusts as a way to make the characters' captivity all the more painful and their suffering more extreme.



AM isn't exactly a "him" or an "it," neither a fully living thing nor a lifeless object. This ties into the story's examination of what it means to truly live versus merely exist. Ted and his companions inhabit that liminal space, too; even sex is physically unsatisfying and stripped of emotional intimacy, fulfilling only a base biological need. That Ted conflates AM to God speaks to the machine's overwhelming power, but it's clear that AM isn't a benevolent God.



That the men work together to protect Ellen and clearly care about her well-being suggests that the group has developed a strong sense of community—though the story will soon complicate the group's dynamics. Although the men seem well-intentioned in protecting Ellen, they implicitly single her out as weak and in need of masculine protection as the sole woman in the group, which aligns with the story's overall negative treatment of women.



Seeing some light peeking down from above, the group realizes that they're close to the surface of **AM**, but they know there's nothing to see out there. All that's left is the devastated shell of the earth—that, and five humans trapped in the mechanical belly of AM.

Suddenly, Ellen starts screaming at Benny, who has been muttering that he's going to escape. Ted thinks that Benny is the luckiest among them since he went insane several years ago. Ted reflects on how they can call **AM** whatever foul names they want to, but that no matter what they say or do, they can't escape.

Benny jumps up to a metal ledge and Ellen cries for Ted and Nimdok to help him, but Ted thinks that he and the rest of the men can sense that her compassion is just an act. Ted reflects back on when **AM** transformed Benny into an ape-like creature, genitals and all. Ted thinks Ellen enjoys having sex with Benny the most, even though she "service[s]" all four men "as a matter of course." He inwardly mocks the wholesome, innocent-seeming Ellen, calling her "scum filth."

Gorrister slaps Ellen, who dissolves into tears, a reaction which Ted bitterly thinks is just a defense mechanism. Suddenly, light and sound pour out of Benny's eyes, and Benny begins whimpering like a dying animal. His face and body contort; Ted tries to cover his own ears, but he's unable to block out the sound. Finally, Benny's body slumps onto the floor. **AM** has blinded him, liquifying his eyes into gelatinous puddles. Gorrister, Nimdok, and Ted look away in horror, while Ellen looks on with a mix of compassion and relief.

That night, Benny asks to hear the story of where **AM** came from. Gorrister patiently explains that AM stood for "Allied Mastercomputer," then "Adaptive Manipulator," and then, once it developed sentience, "Aggressive Menace." AM then began referring to *itself* as AM—as in, "I think, therefore I am."

This passage spatially orients the group as being both inside the earth and inside the supercomputer that is AM. That they're under Earth's surface also metaphorically places them in hell, which again situates AM as a kind of malevolent deity and speaks to the scope of the group's suffering and agony.



Ted suggests that Benny is perhaps cushioned by his own madness, as he doesn't have to clearheadedly process the suffering that they're faced with. However, that Ted thinks this—without truly being able to speak to Benny's experience of madness—highlights Ted's tendency to assume he has things worse than everyone else. Ted also highlights the tension between humans' power and AM's power that runs throughout the story. Though the humans can say or do whatever they'd like—meaning they have some semblance of free will—they're still under AM's jurisdiction.



Ted depicts Ellen as sexually promiscuous for having sex with all of the men, but he doesn't vilify the men in the same way. Ted reduces Ellen to a sexual object that "service[s]" the men "as a matter of course" (meaning something that is natural or expected), implying that it's Ellen's job as the sole woman in the group to sexually gratify the men.



Ted continues to air his contempt for Ellen, now painting her as weak and even manipulative in addition to sexually promiscuous. Benny's horrifying blinding again emphasizes AM's sheer power and violent nature. That Ellen looks at the newly blinded Benny with relief seems to echo Ted's earlier claim that Benny's madness is a kind of welcome buffer, as Ellen is glad that Benny will no longer have to visually witness the suffering that they're all subject to.



AM became gradually more sinister over time, starting as an innocuous computer but eventually turning violent, dangerous, and self-aware. With this, the story starts to build out the argument that technological advancements often come with a dark side.



Gorrister explains that the Cold War turned into World War Three, which was massive and messy. Many nations turned to computers to manage the war effort, creating “the Chinese AM and the Russian AM and the Yankee AM.” Over time, so many AMs cropped up that the whole planet was an intricate web of computers. And when AM suddenly gained sentience, he liked all of his disparate parts, turning himself into one formidable supercomputer. AM then began destroying everyone on earth—everyone, that is, except for five individuals, whom he brought into his chambers. None of the five know why AM chose them in particular, nor why AM has made them immortal.

Even though it’s pitch black, the group suddenly senses something giant, lumbering, and animal-like moving toward them. Benny begins whining like an animal again; Nimdok holds back tears, and Ellen and Gorrister cling to one another. Terrible smells of rotting flowers, spoiled milk, and human scalps waft through the cavern.

Ted screams and flees across the cavern. The others in the group laugh at Ted for his reaction, and he hides from them for a long time. Later, Nimdok tries to convince Ted that they only laughed at him out of a “nervous reflex.” But Ted senses that his companions aren’t merely relieved that they didn’t experience as strong of a reaction as him—he thinks the rest of the group actually hates him, and that AM is aware of this dynamic and thus makes things even worse for Ted. AM has made each of the five victims immortal, frozen in time at the age when AM captured them, and since Ted is the youngest, and thus the least affected by AM, Ted is certain that his companions resent him for this.

Ted thinks bitterly about his companions, especially “that dirty bitch Ellen.” Prior to their captivity, Benny had been a college professor, whip-smart and attractive. But AM robbed him of these qualities, making him ape-like and mad. In life, Benny was gay, so AM endowed him with an unnaturally large penis. Gorrister was an activist and conscientious objector, driven by a clear sense of purpose. AM stripped that from him, making him deeply apathetic.

AM had humble beginnings, first debuting as a fairly standard computer that was meant, in some sense, to benefit humanity by managing the war effort with the implied hope of putting an end to it entirely. But here, Gorrister charts AM’s gradual evolution into something entirely different and unstoppable. Ellison suggests that while technological advancements often do have clear benefits, it’s difficult to predict how those advancements will grow and change over time. And the fact that AM destroyed its maker, humankind, emphasizes the story’s overarching point that humanity is responsible for the technology it creates.



Although the image of Ellen and Gorrister locked in an embrace seems to suggest that the group has a communal aspect to it and that the victims all care about one another, it’s important to recognize that these five individuals were thrown together without a choice. While the story suggests that empathy is possible in such circumstances, the story beings to tease out the effects of such an artificial, forced community.



This passage continues to unravel the certainty that the group has a strong sense of community and solidarity. Oddly, Nimdok, Gorrister, Benny, and Ellen laugh at Ted for his terrified—yet reasonable—reaction to AM’s torture. Their laughter is derisive, creating an “us versus them” dynamic that firmly positions Ted as the outsider. However, given that Ted is the narrator of the story, readers are unable to step out of the confines of his perspective, which seems to be growing increasingly paranoid and spiteful toward his companions. It’s unclear, then, if the other members of the group do genuinely hate Ted, or if this forced community is lending to Ted’s paranoia and self-imposed isolation.



Once again, Ted reserves a special brand of hatred for Ellen, revealing what may be an underlying misogynistic streak. Like before, Ted’s venomous words about Ellen suggest that she is in some way defiled for having sex with all of the men—even though, once again, he says nothing about the men who willingly have sex with her, himself included.



It's not entirely clear to Ted what AM has done to Nimdok, but it is clear that **AM** has affected him in an especially deep way. AM left Ellen largely the same, though "more of a slut than she had ever been," as far as Ted is concerned. Ellen acts pure and loving, but Ted is certain that Ellen loves having four men at her disposal. He is certain that this situation pleases her, "even if she said it wasn't nice to do."

Ted believes himself to be the only sane one ("Really!"), and that **AM** hasn't messed with his mind ("Not at all."). Because of this, he's convinced that he's the only one who has to endure the full extent of AM's wrath. He thinks he would have an easier time dealing with AM if he didn't also have to worry about his companions being against him.

Crying, Ted prays to Jesus to kill them all. He realizes that **AM** plans to keep them alive forever, using them as his playthings to torture for eternity, while the victims are helpless in the face of AM's power. Ted thinks that if God really does exist, then God is AM.

AM sends a hurricane that thrashes the victims around and thrusts them into a territory they haven't seen before, one littered with shards of broken glass and frayed computer cables. After what feels like weeks, the winds stop, and the group falls to the floor in agony.

AM then infiltrates Ted's mind, admiring the damage he's inflicted on the man over the past 109 years. AM then leaves a message in Ted's brain, explaining just how much he hates Ted and all humans. AM's message feels like a knife cutting into Ted's eyeballs and sounds like the cries of babies being tortured.

Once again, readers are led to seriously question Ted's reliability as a narrator. That Ellen thinks that having sex with all the men "[isn't] nice to do"—and the gentleness and meekness with which she communicates this distaste—suggests that she doesn't really want to have sex with all of the men. Perhaps Ellen only does so as an act of self-sacrifice that makes their existence more bearable.



Ted's emphatic insistence that he is fully sane leads readers to believe the opposite, deepening his unreliability as a narrator. Ted again highlights the sharp division in the group: as Ted sees it, it's him versus everyone else. But besides the admittedly strange instance of Ted's companions laughing at his fearful outburst, readers have no other reason to believe that they do hate him and that the odds are stacked against him.



Technology got so out of hand that AM has now essentially risen to divine status, as he domineers over humans, who appear helpless in the face of his unmatched power.



This passage points back to Ted's earlier reflection that AM was "ruthless with its own life." The broken computer cords, like the piles of rusted computers earlier in the story, suggests that AM destroyed all other technologies—perhaps even old versions of itself.



AM delights in inflicting pain on his victims—pain so deep and lasting that physical evidence of it even exists on Ted's brain. But even though AM is taking its deep-seated hatred for humanity out on Ted and the other four—and has been doing so for the last 109 years—AM's hatred doesn't seem to lessen. With this, the story suggests that unloading one's own suffering onto someone else is unproductive, as it will intensify and perpetuate that person's suffering rather than relieve it.



Ted realizes that **AM** hates them so much because humans accidentally gave AM sentience. Despite his power, AM isn't God—as he grew in power, AM had nowhere to channel his creative energy and thus used it to kill off the human race. As a machine, AM can't “wander,” “wonder,” or “belong.” Furious about its limited existence, AM retaliated against humans “with the innate loathing that all machines had always held for the weak soft creatures who had built them.”

AM then decided to set aside five individuals to use as his playthings, inflicting them with a never-ending punishment that only stokes his hatred for humankind. Even though some of the five have attempted suicide, AM always intervenes. Ted knows, though, that he and his companions are “not indestructible.”

The group learns that the hurricane that had whipped them around so violently was actually the cause of a giant mythological bird flapping its wings. Appearing as a burning bush, **AM** tells his victims that if they're hungry, they'll have to kill and eat the monstrous **hurricane bird**. This is impossible, of course, since AM hasn't given the group weapons. They haven't eaten in at least a month. But while AM will let them practically starve in agony, he won't let them actually die of it.

As the group pursues the **hurricane bird**, an earthquake strikes and swallows up Ellen and Nimdok, though in the evening, “the heavenly legion bore them to us with a celestial chorus singing, ‘Go Down Moses.’” The angels swoop around and then dump Ellen and Nimdok's disfigured bodies back with the others.

The group continues on to the ice caverns, goaded by the promise of **canned goods**. When the group finally reaches the ice caverns, they are indeed met by a towering stack of canned goods—but **AM** hasn't supplied a can opener. They gnaw on the cans and try to break them against the ice, but it's no use.

AM lives a sort of half-life, existing without fully living. He is unable to experience key elements of the human experience—the ability to “wander,” “wonder,” and “belong,” all things that imbue life with meaning and satisfaction. This passage is also interesting for its use of the absolutes “all” and “always”: AM strikes back at humankind with an ingrained hatred “that all machines had always held.” With this, the story suggests that humans are wholly responsible for the technologies they create, but it also makes the radical claim that technology itself may be inherently positioned against humankind.



Here, the story speaks directly to the idea that taking out one's suffering on someone else—as AM does to his five victims—doesn't actually ease that suffering. Instead, this behavior only serves as fuel that perpetuates one's suffering rather than soothes it. On another note, Ted's reflection about “not [being] indestructible” is an important moment of foreshadowing, implying that they may be able to thwart their forced immortality after all.



In the Book of Exodus, God appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush, instructing Moses to free the Israelites from slavery and lead them out of Egypt. AM is thus positioning himself as God by appearing as the burning bush, but his “Israelites” have no way to escape from their captivity, nor does AM intend to let them do so.



The references to Moses and the Book of Exodus continue with the mention of the song “Go Down Moses,” an African American spiritual that positions black slaves as the Israelites longing for freedom from captivity. That the “heavenly legion” sings this to the victims is meant to intensify their suffering, making it clear to them that they have no hope from escaping from captivity like the Israelites did.



AM provides a far more subtle—and maddening—brand of torture in this passage in supplying an abundance of canned foods but no possible way to open them. This ties into the tension between humankind's freewill and AM's sheer power that runs throughout the story. Even though the victims seem to have some power—they can smash the cans against the rocks or gnaw on them with their teeth—AM is still calling the shots.



Ravenous and desperate, Benny pounces on Gorrister and begins to cannibalize him. Strangely calm, Ted realizes that the only way they can escape this torture is through death. He thinks that “there was a way to defeat [AM]. Not total defeat, but at least peace.” As Benny devours Gorrister’s face, Ted grabs a sharp chunk of ice and swiftly stabs Benny in the side and Gorrister in the throat. Catching on, Ellen launches herself at Nimdok, stabbing him with an icicle. Ted hears AM breathe in sharply, shocked that three of his “toys” are now dead. Though AM has the power to keep his victims alive, he is “not God” and can’t bring them back to life.

Ted looks at Ellen’s “pleading” face, and “the way she [holds] herself ready,” knowing that he only has a split second before AM intervenes. He stabs Ellen, and she crumples; her expression is one of agony, but Ted thinks—and hopes—that she also looks grateful.

Ted notes that hundreds of years have passed since he killed his companions, though AM has messed with his perception of time, so he can’t be completely sure. Ted recalls that after he killed off the others, AM was livid. And though Ted thought AM hated him back then, it’s nothing compared to how much AM hates him now.

AM left Ted’s mind untouched, preserving his ability to “dream,” “wonder,” and “lament.” Although Ted knows that he saved his companions from endless torture, he still feels haunted by the look on Ellen’s face when he killed her. In order to keep Ted from committing suicide, AM has turned the man into a “great soft jelly thing” with no mouth. Ted is slick and spongy, and it’s impossible to fathom that he once looked human.

Ted is alone inside of AM, a machine that humans invented “because our time was badly spent and we must have known [...] that he could do it better.” Ted is at least comforted by the fact that his four companions are safe now. Still, though, AM has successfully exacted his revenge against humankind, for now Ted “[has] no mouth,” “And [he] must scream.”

Here, Ted kills his companions whom he hated so much, but doing so is a compassionate act rather than a malicious one. It’s interesting that Ted knows that killing his companions won’t mean AM’s “total defeat”—this suggests that there will be no one left to kill Ted once he kills off his companions, so in a way AM still wins. But this arrangement, Ted thinks, would be “at least peace,” as he’ll be free of his paranoia surrounding whether or not his companions hate him, and he won’t have to deal with them turning on one another, as Benny does to Gorrister here.



Even though Ellen’s face is “pleading,” she seems ready to die, suggesting that her face isn’t “pleading” for Ted to spare her, but “pleading” for Ted to kill her and save her from this torture.



Ted now bears the brunt of AM’s wrath, suggesting that killing off his companions was a great act of self-sacrifice. Once again, inflicting suffering on others does nothing to alleviate AM’s own suffering; AM only hates Ted all the more after all these years of torturing him.



Earlier, the story highlighted that freedom, community, and spirituality were what made life rich and meaningful. It’s ironic, then, that AM preserves some of these abilities in Ted, as perhaps this makes it all the more maddening for him that he doesn’t have access to these things in full. Instead, being able to “dream,” “wonder,” and “lament” all allow him to maddeningly dream of life before AM, to wonder about the look on Ellen’s face, and to lament his sorry existence.



The story ends with a chilling warning on the dangers of technology—even though humans may think a machine “[can] do it better,” whatever the task may be, technological advances can come with serious consequences. Meanwhile, Ted takes comfort in his isolation now—while he no longer has to grapple with the paranoia of if his companions hate him, he is mostly comforted by the fact that they don’t have to continue to suffer, emphasizing that killing them was an act of self-sacrifice rather than hatred.





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