“The Machine Stops” by E. M. Forster Discussion Questions

Dystopia definition: A futuristic, imagined universe in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral, or totalitarian control. Dystopias, through an exaggerated worst-case scenario, make a criticism about a current trend, societal norm, or political system.

Characteristics of a Dystopian Society

- Propaganda is used to control the citizens of society.
- Information, independent thought, and freedom are restricted.
- A figurehead or concept is worshipped by the citizens of the society.
- Citizens are perceived to be under constant surveillance.
- Citizens have a fear of the outside world.
- Citizens live in a dehumanized state.
- The natural world is banished and distrusted.
- Citizens conform to uniform expectations. Individuality and dissent are bad.
- The society is an illusion of a perfect utopian world.

Part I

1. What does Vashti look like? Write one quotation that supports your answer.

2. Describe Vashti’s connections with others. (What has enabled Vashti to be accessible to other people?)

3. Describe the relationship between Vashti and Kuno. Give at least two quotations to support your answer.

4. What does the Book of the Machine say about “parenting responsibilities”? Does Vashti feel responsible for Kuno? Find a quotation to support your answer. (This is further ahead in the reading on page 6).
5. What is Vashti’s reaction to Kuno’s desire to walk on the surface of the earth?

6. Why does Vashti decide to visit Kuno? Describe the ordeal that this presents for her.

7. After talking to Kuno, “For a moment, Vashti felt lonely.” What comforts her?

8. What does the word “ideas” mean in the story? How do Kuno and Vashti differ on this?


10. What are three things that Vashti dislikes about the air ship? What does this reveal about her and her society?

11. At the end of section one, what is the irony in Vashti’s statement, “No ideas here,” when she views Greece from the air ship?

Parts II and III
1. Describe and define “homelessness” in the Vashti and Kuno’s society.
2. What is Vashti’s comment about “worshipping” the machine? Using her reaction, what can you infer about how Vashti’s society feels about religion?

3. How does this society view physical strength? Why?

4. List Kuno’s discoveries he made while on the platforms.

5. Trace the symptoms of the Machine’s destruction from the beginning of Part III until the end of the story.

6. What does Kuno believe the future holds at the end of the story?
After Reading

1. Using the characteristics of dystopian literature (listed on the first page of these questions), find examples from the story that PROVE this is indeed a dystopian tale.

2. What elements of the society in "The Machine Stops" resemble elements in ours? Consider attitudes, technology, beliefs, etc. Keep in mind that when this story was written in 1909, many of the innovations were not invented or in common usage at the time.

3. What is Forster's concern about society? Is this a valid concern? Is it too much of an exaggeration to be plausible? Explain.
Journal Topics

History
Consider the story’s place in history. How does this story respond to the technophilia and scientific enthusiasm of its time? How is history represented in the story itself?

Science and Technology
Compare the role of science and technology in this society to its role in Frankenstein? What things is science capable of explaining? Are there things science cannot explain? If so, what are some examples?

Living With/In the Machine
How do characters in the story relate to the technology around them? How does living with or within the machine change them? What does it mean to call Vashti’s room a “cell” in a beehive? How is the body treated in this world? What does it mean to be in constant contact with the rest of the world? But to never touch anyone? Why don’t they hear the humming of the machine? What have the people living with/in the machine given up? What is atavism?

Distance
How is distance made irrelevant in this world? What kinds of distance are portrayed? Consider geographical distance, personal distance, distance from thought. Why don’t people touch one another? Is it significant that everyplace in the world is the same? If so, why? Why is distance from original thought important?

Understanding and Religion
How is it that the Machine is said to have done away with all religion and superstition? Why do people begin to worship the Machine? What is the relationship between understanding and worship?

Ideas
What are “ideas”? Why are first-hand ideas bad? Why doesn’t Greece give Vashti any ideas? Does our own society idealize the concept of the “idea”? What might it mean that Kuno gets ideas from the stars?

“Man is the Measure” (100)
Why does Kuno say that his first lesson in rediscovering a sense of space was “man is the measure”? How and why might man be the measure of things? How are the senses important here? How do others in this society measure their worlds?

“The Imponderable Bloom” (89)
What is the “imponderable bloom” of humanity? What is essential about our humanity? What makes us human or special? How is the body important? The senses? For what reason do Vashti and Kuno weep near the end?

The Machine Stops
How does the society react when the Machine begins to break down? How dependent are they on the Machine? To what extent does it serve them? To what extent do they serve it? Why does silence kill? Will someone start the machine again in the future? Are humans capable of turning away from technologies that negatively impact their humanity?

Utopia and Dystopia
What elements of this story seem utopian? What would make it a dystopia? How does one tell the difference between a utopia and dystopia? What is the ultimate goal of a society? What can or should be sacrificed for this goal?