The Sound Machine

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROALD DAHL

Roald Dahl was born in Wales to Norwegian immigrant parents. Dahl's dislike for schooling and early penchant for mischief foreshadowed his frequent motif of rambunctious children in a power struggle with restrictive adults in his literary works. Eager to get away from home and see the world, he served in a Royal Air Force regiment during World War II as a fighter pilot after finishing college. He began his writing career with stories catered towards adults but shifted to writing fiction for children after having kids of his own and being inspired by the way they reacted to the stories he told them. Thus began an illustrious career filled with several immensely popular novels, including *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda*, *James and the Giant Peach*, and *The BFG*. He continued to write short fiction for adults as well, often featuring an extension of the dark and macabre elements of his work for children. He passed away in 1990 at the age of 74.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Fears that science had gone too far ran rampant in the period following World War II. The creation of the atomic bomb and its utter decimation of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 led many to seriously question the utility of a study that was just as capable of ending life as it was prolonging it, a sentiment given chilling weight by head scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer's famous recitation from the Bhagavad Gita: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." Similarly, the horrific human experimentation conducted on prisoners in concentration camps at the hands of men like Josef Mengele gave a terrible new gravity to the previously cartoonish depiction of the mad scientist. These anxieties would no doubt have been close to home for Dahl, whose service in the war gave him a deeply personal understanding of science's capacity for ruin in the wrong hands. It is likely not a coincidence that the character of Klausner has such a German-sounding name, for instance.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Science fiction was still a relatively new field of literature at the time "The Sound Machine" first received publication, owing its rise in popularity to the continued progress of science as a discipline itself. While the positive impact that scientific advancements had on things like technology and medicine is hard to deny, many authors of the time approached science with a degree of trepidation, imagining vivid scenarios where scientific ambition could reveal secrets better left uncovered. To this end, the character of the mad scientist became a fixture of the genre, with many citing Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein as its prototype. American sci-fi/horror author H.P. Lovecraft was quite fond of this concept, with many of his tales centering on brilliant minds driven to the brink of madness and cruelty in their pursuit of knowledge. His 1934 short story "From Beyond" bears some marked similarity to Dahl's story, featuring a scientist who creates a machine that allows one to view planes of reality above normal human cognition. Much like Klausner, he learns all too late that there is a reason why this knowledge was previously outside humanity's reach.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Sound Machine"
- **When Written:** 1949
- **Where Written:** Wales
- **When Published:** 1949
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Science Fiction; Short Story
- **Setting:** An unnamed English town during the summer
- **Climax:** Klausner tests the machine by cutting into a tree with an axe and hears a prolonged cry, confirming his hypothesis that plants feel pain.
- **Antagonist:** The horror of Klausner's discovery and perhaps Klausner himself
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Creative Differences Despite its massive popularity, Dahl disowned the 1971 *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* movie after his adapted screenplay was rewritten without his approval. He thus refused to allow anyone to allow anyone to remake it during his lifetime. The 2005 Tim Burton version was designed to represent a more faithful adaptation.

Espionage. Dahl worked as an intelligence officer for Britain's MI6 during the war, providing information to Prime Minister Winston Churchill. He likely channeled some of his exploits in this field when he penned the screenplay for the 1967 James Bond film, *You Only Live Twice*, having served alongside Bond creator Ian Fleming.

PLOT SUMMARY

On a summer evening, Klausner hurries back to his workshop to continue tinkering with a small black box full of complex

wires. He works excitedly on **the machine** with intense focus for some time before being interrupted by a visit from the town physician, Scott. After Klausner distractedly dismisses the man's concern for his sore throat, the Doctor soon takes notice of the object of Klausner's attention and questions him about its purpose, whereupon Klausner launches into an emphatic discussion of his research into translating pitches too low or high for the human ear into audible levels. The Doctor is amused but thinks the idea is implausible. As he leaves the man to his work, the Doctor silently questions Klausner's mental state.

After spending some more time tinkering with the machine and muttering to himself, Klausner brings his machine to working order and decides to test it in his garden. He has the feeling that he shouldn't be trying this experiment—that he is veering into "forbidden territory, a dangerous ultrasonic region where ears had never been before and had no right to be." Despite this feeling, Klausner presses on. When he slides on his headphones, he hears a terrifying shriek, but sees no possible source except for his neighbor, Mrs. Saunders, who is peacefully tending to her roses. He soon realizes the noises correspond with the cutting of the roses, and in horror deduces that plants emit small screams of pain inaudible to human ears. He frantically alerts Mrs. Saunders to this discovery, greatly worrying her in the process—she has always found him a bit odd, but now she is certain that he is outright mad. Klausner leans over the fence and whispers frantically to her about his discovery, Mrs. Saunders decides to dart back into the house for her own safety.

The next morning, unconvinced of the true nature behind the sound the roses made (whether it was truly a cry of pain or some other sensation or feeling humans don't have a word for), Klausner sets out to test his hypothesis further by taking an axe to a tree, which results in him hearing a prolonged growl of agony. Now fully convinced, the terrified Klausner breaks down, apologizing to the tree for hurting it and attempting to heal its wound.

On the heels of this discovery, Klausner calls the Doctor and begs him to come quickly, even though it's only 6:30 a.m. The Doctor senses something frantic and even mad in Klausner's voice and agrees to head over promptly. While waiting for the Doctor, Klausner dwells on the implications of this new knowledge, considering what humans would feel if someone took an axe to *them* and wondering which fruits and vegetables are free to eat without guilt.

The Doctor arrives and Klausner brings him to the tree, giving him the machine's earphones so he may hear the tree's cry as well. When Klausner goes to strike the tree this time, however, he feels a shifting of the ground beneath him and a branch falls from above after the axe hits, destroying his machine and nearly hitting both him and the Doctor. When questioned, the Doctor denies having heard anything in the earphones—after all, he ripped them off of his ears and began to ran away the second he saw the tree tipping over—and Klausner interprets the man's skittish demeanor as a sign that he may be holding back the truth. He firmly directs the Doctor to dress the tree's wound. The Doctor, now in fear of a possible violent outburst from the man, complies, assuring him he will come back to tend to the tree again the next day if need be before gently leading him back home.

CHARACTERS

Klausner – The protagonist—and perhaps antagonist—of the story and inventor of the titular **machine**. Despite being described as a small and frail "moth of a man," he is intensely dedicated to his research into the "world of sound" unavailable to human ears, displaying a painstaking attention to detail and an impassioned disposition. He becomes incredibly animated and passionate when he is asked about it, a quality that is off-putting to those around him, with both the local Doctor and his neighbor Mrs. Saunders questioning his mental state. Klausner's background is largely unknown; an occupation is eluded to but never expounded upon (the Doctor makes a comment about Klausner working with sound for his job), perhaps putting his credibility into question. As the story develops and Klausner becomes convinced that plants can feel pain, his scientific interest slowly begins to morph into abject revulsion and his obsession with the machine is coupled with a newfound sense of empathy for the tree he cut with an axe to test his theories. Despite this remorse, though, he continues to gouge the tree with the axe in the hopes that the Doctor will also hear the tree's pained cry. That Klausner continues to afflict pain on plants even while appearing genuinely regretful of his actions highlights the corrupting influence that some scientific discoveries can have on humankind. Klausner destroys nature and his own innocence just for the sake of learning, and Dahl implies that Klausner's discover is simply not worth it. By the end of the story, when Klausner forcefully commands the Doctor to tend to the mangled tree as if it were a human patient, the Doctor begins to fear Klausner becoming violent and views him as a madman. To this end, Klausner can also be said to represent the mad scientist archetype common in science fiction stories of the period.

The Doctor / Scott – An average country doctor who comes to check on Klausner's sore throat. He quickly takes note of the man's preoccupation with the strange contraption he is making and asks about **the machine**'s purpose, coming to believe there is an "immense, immeasurable distance" between Klausner's mind and body as he listens to the man's frenzied explanation of his research. The Doctor dismisses Klausner's hypotheses as "not very probable" and promptly leaves him to his work. He is only convinced to lend Klausner and his ideas more attention when he hears Klausner's "frantic, almost hysterical" tone of

voice on the phone, one he recognizes as "the same note he was used to hearing in the voices of people who called up and said 'There's been an accident. Come quickly.'" In the aftermath of Klausner's test and the machine's destruction by a falling tree branch, the Doctor claims not to have heard the tree make any sound, though the irritability and nervousness he displays upon being questioned casts some doubt upon the truth of this. It's unclear, then, if the Doctor did hear the tree's cry, or if his strange behavior stems from a place of fear, as the erratic Klausner is still holding an axe at this point. Feeling threatened by Klausner's increasingly unhinged manner, he complies with his demands to dress the tree's wound with iodine and "gently [takes] [Klausner] by the arm" and leads him away from the scene—much like he would a patient or a child, suggesting that perhaps Klausner has gone mad.

Mrs. Saunders – Klausner's neighbor. Her character is significant for her role in Klausner's discovery, as she is tending to her garden and trimming roses at the time of the first test of his new and improved **machine**. It is through this bit of happenstance that he is first able to hear that plants feel pain. His attempts to get her to aid him by cutting more roses, coupled with the breathless, frenzied explanation he gives regarding his findings, cause her to think her already "peculiar" neighbor has gone "completely crazy" and even consider alerting her husband about him. She instead politely humors him before abruptly excusing herself and rushing back to the safety of her home.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SCIENTIFIC ADVANCEMENTS AND FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

By posing a simple hypothesis, Roald Dahl's 1949 short story "The Sound Machine" effectively reminds the reader why the genre is called *speculative* fiction. The prospect of being able to hear higher and lower pitches may not immediately strike one as particularly important. But the horrific discovery that Klausner makes in the story—that plants and trees cry out in pain when cut or axed—has a dark and insidious undercurrent, raising the question of if he truly was meant to uncover those findings. As the story unfolds and Klausner grapples with the weight of his discovery, Dahl implies that some knowledge is better left unknown, simultaneously placing limitations on both the utility of science and humankind's ability and right to keep up with it.

Dahl's description of **the machine** that Klausner uses to access hidden sounds, as well as the way that people interact with the machine, keys the reader into its underlying sinister nature. This can be seen from the first physical description of the machine, as it is compared to "a child's coffin," suggesting that the machine will have a corrupting influence on whoever uses it. Furthermore, the way that Klausner interacts with the machine demonstrates how the contraption incites dangerously fervent fascination. Klausner is absorbed in it entirely, paying meticulous attention to every detail with "an air of urgency about the way he worked, of breathlessness, of strong suppressed excitement." The machine has a similarly captivating effect on the Doctor, who comes to check on Klausner's sore throat. Notably "intrigued by the remarkable complexity of its inside," the Doctor asks his patient about the device, admitting, "You've made me inquisitive." Despite this excitement, both men also seem anxious and wary about the machine. The Doctor plainly states that it is a "rather frightening-looking thing," suggesting that the machine is perhaps not such a harmless contraption. However it is Klausner's own fear that "the machine might not work"—and "also of what might happen if it did"—that truly illuminates the idea that there may be consequences to unlocking the secrets the machine is designed to reveal.

The question of whether humans are worthy of some knowledge becomes central to the story as Klausner first uses the machine and makes the discovery that plants can feel pain. With this, Dahl seems to be recognizing that obtaining new knowledge doesn't always make life easier, sometimes presenting ramifications that humans may not be equipped to contend with. In doing so, he levies a criticism of science and the danger some of its advancements may represent, hinting at this idea rather directly as Klausner turns the machine on and feels as if his "ears are going up and up toward a secret and forbidden territory, a dangerous ultrasonic region where ears had never been before and had no right to be." The idea that this revelation is too much for humanity to come to grips with continues to take root in the way other characters in the story perceive Klausner as a raving lunatic, with the Doctor noting that Klausner exhibits "a quality of [...] immense, immeasurable distance, as though the mind were far away from where the body was" and neighbor Mrs. Saunders believing that Klausner has catapulted from merely "peculiar" to "completely crazy." This notion of insanity is also recurrent in Dahl's diction, as Klausner frequently describes the machine's potential secrets as capable of "driv[ing] us mad if only our ears were tuned to hear the sound." With these characterizations, Dahl suggests that Klausner is, in fact, mad for trying to unlock secrets that humans have no right to know.

Despite being written off as insane by those around him, Klausner remains dedicated in his pursuit of ever more information, which Dahl suggests is a dangerous game. Though

initially terrified of the machine and his newfound discovery, Klausner quickly readopts the energetic, inquisitive nature he had in the story's beginning and decides to test the theories himself by taking an axe to a tree despite dreading "the thought of the noise" that it would make. This rapid shift from fear right back to cold clinical analysis reveals Dahl's implicit criticism of science's callous form of desensitization. However, Klausner does deviate from the mad scientist stereotype in the way he appears to grow through the rest of the story, becoming greatly shaken by the thought that all plant life, even fruits and vegetables, may be just as sentient and capable of feeling pain as humans are. Even still, Klausner pushes through these feelings and continues to harm a beech tree in the park to prove to the Doctor that plants indeed make sound and feel pain, suggesting that science lacks moral boundaries.

The ramifications of Klausner's discovery raise some serious questions regarding the nature of mankind's relationship to science and knowledge. The allure of the unknown may be attractive, but it is all too possible that our natural inclination towards curiosity may open up knowledge we were far better off without. Noting the story's 1949 publication date, it is likely that World War II was still quite fresh on Dahl's mind, which provides an interesting way of interpreting his exploration of the intersection of humanity's ambition and arrogance. This is perhaps best seen in Klausner's reductive statement that his machine is "just an idea." The very same could be said of gas chambers, tanks, fighter jets, and atomic bombs. By painting a small-scale situation in which science asks "could it?" instead of "should it?" all too late, Dahl may be touching upon very timely fears.

DENIAL AND RATIONALIZATION

The presence of a healthy amount of skepticism is often considered integral to a scientist's success in their field, but what happens when that guarded empirical nature is put up against a discovery that shakes them to their core? Dahl explores this question through the ways in which both Klausner and the Doctor react to **the machine**'s capabilities, examining their similar attempts to rationalize and dismiss the sounds they hear. In doing so, he characterizes the characters' denial as a mistake humankind is all too prone to making, and notes that their refusal to believe or acknowledge any information that makes uncomfortable is ultimately fruitless.

As the machine's inventor, Klausner goes through a range of emotions attempting to process the discovery it allowed him to make, shifting from excitement to fear to cold rationalization. Though he is characterized as a wispy "moth of a man," Klausner is said have an intense investment in his work on the machine, so much so that he causes the Doctor and Mrs. Saunders to actively worry about not only his mental state, but their own safety around him as well. This kind of devotion to his work momentarily tempers Klausner's initial fear of the machine after it allows him to hear Mrs. Saunders' roses cry out for the first time, as his inquisitive scientific mind quickly converts the sound they make from a "frightful, throatless [...] cry of pain" to "just a cry, a neutral, stony cry" born from some fantastical feeling humans can't understand called "toin or spurl or plinuckment, or anything you like." With this, Klausner attempts to sidestep the idea that plants feel pain and thus avoid the fear and guilt bound up in such a discovery.

This attempt to rationalize the "curiously inanimate" sounds through the lens of science ultimately proves to be fruitless in the wake of the horrible images Klausner now imagines, however. His frenetic yet calculated curiosity meets its limits as he ponders what humans would feel in the tree's place, or at the combined sound of "Five hundred wheat plants screaming together." The image of him regretting the deep cuts he made in the tree and "touching the edges of the gash, trying to press them together to close the wound" is certainly far removed from his previous detached, scientific interest. When he asks the Doctor to apply the iodine to the tree's cuts nightly at the story's end, he now seems to be entirely absorbed by guilt and empathy, viewing it just as he would an injured person.

Though he is noted to possess a degree of interest in Klausner and his strange machine, The Doctor's curiosity regarding this invention of his "strange patient" does not seem to be nearly as zealous, with him quickly writing off his ideas as "not very probable" and the man himself as little more than crazy. It is only upon hearing the "hysterical note" in Klausner's voice on the phone that the Doctor is motivated to give Klausner's findings any kind of further attention. However, when the Doctor straps on the headphones and listens as Klausner strikes a tree with an axe, part of the tree topples over, and the Doctor rips off the headphones and flees to safety. When Klausner asks if he heard the tree cry out, the Doctor turns nervous and shifty. While it's possible that the Doctor's nervousness stems from his newfound fear of Klausner—who is still holding an axe at this point and has grown increasingly unstable and excitable—the Doctor's awkward dismissal that he heard anything may signify his denial that Klausner's machine actually works.

By writing off Klausner as crazy and denying having heard anything, the Doctor may be trying to keep himself free of guilt, or at least avoid directly facing the horrors that the discovery entails. But the lingering seed of the "idea" that Klausner planted in him may never be able to be repressed. His outright denial that he heard anything may very well stem from his inability to cope with the horror of that knowledge, something Dahl represents as both pointless and reductive, seeming to suggest that the Doctor will still have to continue living with this knowledge despite his attempts to ignore it or rationalize it as the ravings of a madman.

By portraying two men of science in their respective battle and

failure to process such a significant discovery, Dahl makes an implicit argument regarding the nature of humankind's ability and willingness to comprehend the mysteries the world has to offer, potentially suggesting that some discoveries have an impact that cannot stand up to rationalization or dismissal.

PASSION VS. MADNESS

While the image of an individual hard at work on something they care very deeply about is not necessarily meant to invoke feelings of unease, the way Klausner's intense preoccupation with his **machine** and its abilities changes throughout the story carries with it a much more insidious nature. By following his character as he embarks on this fraught journey of discovery, Dahl showcases how extreme passion and unbridled curiosity, when left unchecked, can all too easily bleed into obsession and madness.

Right from the story's beginning, Klausner exhibits a fervency for his work on the machine that portrays him as a dedicated and passionate man. His meticulous attention to both the machine's complicated innerworkings and his own diagrams and frequent mutterings to himself contribute to his characterization as a man driven by a passion for knowledge, as does the "air of urgency [...] of breathlessness, of strong suppressed excitement" that defines the way he conducts his work. These qualities at first appear to be trampled upon by the arrival of the Doctor, who has come to check on Klausner's sore throat, an illness he now dismisses as "quite cured." This interruption makes the absorbed Klausner rather uptight, so much so that even the Doctor notes the "feeling of tension in the room." He recognizes Klausner's intense concentration on the machine, noting that Klausner has even forgotten to take his hat off. It is only when the Doctor questions Klausner about his project that his spark of passion fully returns, with the "moth of a man" suddenly launching into a discussion of his hypothesis so animated and detailed that the Doctor promptly excuses himself, noting the dreamy "quality of distance" displayed in the man's eyes.

As the story goes on and Klausner tests his machine, however, this impassioned professional curiosity begins to give way to a far more sinister form of unhealthy fixation. For one thing, it becomes clearer and clearer that Klausner is prioritizing his work over his own well-being, as the frail man is at one point described as resembling "an ancient, consumptive, bespectacled child." And while his earlier dismissal towards his sore throat may not represent a cause for alarm by itself, but this characterization continues to portray his health as something he may be neglecting in favor of his commitment to his research.

Furthermore, the way Klausner interacts with the people around him calls into question his grip on reality. He watches his neighbor, Mrs. Saunders, in her garden "without thinking about her at all" due to his fixation with the machine. It is only when he realizes that her roses are the source of the "inhuman shriek" he heard through his earphones that he engages her presence, his intense, excited demeanor making her thoroughly uncomfortable and questioning his sanity much like the Doctor had previously. His call to the Doctor after testing the machine on a tree is also quite revealing of his deteriorating mental state. His plea for the Doctor to come quickly is imbued with the same urgency as someone who is battling a life-threatening illness or had a fatal accident, suggesting that Klausner's obsession has perhaps bled into a kind of sickness.

By the end of the story, Klausner's curiosity has finally evolved into an all-consuming obsession that renders him on the brink of abject madness. His previously impassioned hypotheses about the wealth of sounds out of human reach takes a turn as he now considers the ramifications of his discovery with horror instead of excitement. This newfound horror grows into a new obsession with taking care of the tree he has hurt. Even though his hypothesis was wrong, the intensity he approached it with has effectively been carried over to the tree. Klausner's concern for the tree and its wounds as if it were another person signifies the depths of his mania. It's interesting to note that he displays more care for it than he does his own health at the beginning of the story, to the point where he even asks the Doctor to come back to tend to it again the next day. This is certainly a far cry from the brusque dismissal he gave the Doctor when questioned about his sore throat. In addition, the "curious, almost [...] threatening tone" Klausner takes on when directing the Doctor to dress the tree's axe wound compounds with the way he holds the axe to make the Doctor feel in danger of a violent outburst. Short of running away, he sees no other option but to comply with his demands and placate him in much the same way he would an unstable patient. The "distance" he once saw in the man's eyes has now thoroughly consumed him.

To this end, Klausner's journey from diligent scientific mind to a broken and obsessed shell of a man highlights the pitfalls of unchecked ambition and drive. By portraying him in such a way, Dahl spins a cautionary tale with Klausner at the center, showcasing just how easily one can be swept away in the currents of passion and jeopardize their own health and safety, potentially even losing their very sanity in the process.

SYMBOLS

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

THE MACHINE

Klausner's titular sound machine, which he uses to hear notes that human ears can't normally discern, symbolizes the dark underbelly of scientific progress, suggesting that some scientific advancements may effectively

rob humanity of its innocence. This can be seen in Dahl's frequent, often morbid, use of children in his imagery. The machine is first introduced to the reader as being similar in shape to "a child's coffin." In gesturing to a death of a child, Dahl is suggesting that Klausner's machine will be the death of Klausner's innocence and that, more broadly, some scientific discoveries are better left unearthed. Later, when testing out his machine, Klausner resembles a "consumptive, bespectacled child." The word *consumptive* means "affected with a wasting disease" and thus suggests that the machine has a corroding, corrupting influence on Klausner's childlike innocence.

Klausner speculates as much when he explains to the Doctor that he believes there are notes out there that "would drive us mad if only our ears were tuned to hear the sound of [them]." Later, when Klausner finally finishes tinkering with his machine and straps on his headphones to test it out, he has the most peculiar feeling that he is venturing into "dangerous" and "forbidden territory"—a place "where ears had never been before and had no right to be." Rather than be hemmed in by timidity, though, Klausner ignores these dark warnings and continues with his experiment. When Klausner becomes convinced that his machine works and that plants emit screams of pain when they're hurt, he grows even more frantic and unhinged than before. He agonizes over the pain he's inflicted on plants for the sake of his experiment—especially a large beech tree in the park, which he's gouged with an axe. Despite this seemingly genuine remorse, Klausner still presses on with his project and severs the tree irreparably in the hopes of proving to the Doctor that plants do emit these sounds and feel pain. With the tree's destruction, it seems like the machine's influence has made Klausner violent and sadistic (even if regretful) as he continues to destroy plants with increasing severity just to keep hearing their cries. Fittingly, the severed branch crushes Klausner's machine, which seems like Dahl's definitive assessment that some discoveries—like this one—are better left unmade, but that the damage has already been done to Klausner, to the machine, to the tree, and perhaps also to the Doctor.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Best of Roald Dahl* published in 1990.

The Sound Machine Quotes

It was a warm summer evening and Klausner walked quickly through the front gate and around the side of the house and into the garden at the back. He went on down the garden until he came to a wooden shed and he unlocked the door, went inside and closed the door behind him. The interior of the shed was an unpainted room. Against one wall, on the left, there was a long wooden workbench, and on it, among a littering of wires and batteries and small sharp tools, there stood a black box about three feet long, the shape of a child's coffin.

Related Characters: Klausner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which opens the story, introduces the character of Klausner and his mysterious machine. The secluded location of the shed that Klausner uses as a workspace speaks to the degree of secrecy that he prefers to work under, the shed being far enough away from his house as to be relatively out of the way of prying eyes. (This may be why, a little later in the story, Klausner is so startled when the Doctor shows up at the shed—he's unaccustomed to having visitors there, nor does he want them.) In addition, the fact that the shed is plain and unadorned—save for the wild tangles of wires and other parts on the workbench—speaks to how the machine is his singular focus.

The first physical description of his machine as being similar in shape to "a child's coffin" makes it seem dangerous and sinister right from the beginning, keying the reader into the role it will eventually come to play in the story as a symbolic representation of science's potentially negative impact on humanity's innocence. Dahl later describes Klausner as looking like an eccentric child, suggesting that the machine will be *his* coffin, or his "death," having a destructive impact on his wellbeing and corrupting his childlike innocence and wonder.

All the while he kept speaking softly to himself, nodding his head, smiling sometimes, his hands always moving, the fingers moving swiftly, deftly, inside the box, his mouth twisting into curious shapes when a thing was delicate or difficult to do, saying, "Yes…Yes…And now this one…Yes…Yes…But is this right? Is it—where's my diagram?…Ah, yes…Of course…Yes, yes…That's right…And now…Good…Good…Yes…Yes, yes, yes." His concentration was intense; his movements were quick; there was an air of urgency about the way he worked, of breathlessness, of strong suppressed excitement.

Related Characters: Klausner (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

This passage provides an early description of Klausner as he is conducting his work on the machine. Here, Klausner is careful and meticulous as well as intense and passionate—two sides of him that are often at war in the story. It is worth nothing that, when compared to the level of fervent obsession he displays at numerous times elsewhere in the story, none of the qualities he exhibits here—muttering positive affirmations to himself, trailing off due to his excitement, consulting detailed diagrams—come across as particularly alarming. Instead, his focused, if somewhat eccentric, behavior in this passage paints him as a conventionally dedicated and ambitious man that is both good at what he does and enjoys doing it. However, as the story unfolds and Klausner's passion gradually bleeds into obsession, he begins to look far more like the mad scientist archetype rather than a harmless inventor.

"It's just an idea."

Related Characters: Klausner (speaker), The Doctor / Scott

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Klausner tries to shrug off the Doctor's questions about what his contraption does. Klausner's response is vague and flippant and doesn't seem to reflect how he actually conceives of his project. After all, before the Doctor's intrusion, Klausner was working steadily on the machine, muttering to himself with intense focus, suggesting that the machine means a great deal to him, and that he's put in a lot of effort to make it more than "just an idea." This passage also foreshadows the destruction of the machine at the story's end. When a 60-foot branch smashes the machine, Klausner's discovery suddenly becomes little more than a lingering idea left to fester in his mind.

When taken in conjunction with the story's critical view of science and its frequent attempts to uncover the unknown, it's clear that Dahl finds this statement ("It's just an idea") incredibly reductive. *All* advancements and inventions, big and small, good and bad, originally begin as a mere idea. In this vein, Dahl penned this story only a few years after the end of World War II, a war that was well known for its astounding (and often lethal) scientific advancements, like the atomic bomb, computers, radar technology, and more. The "idea" for the invention of the atomic bomb, for instance, may have eventually helped the Allied Powers win the war, but the recognition that science could create such a devastating weapon sowed seeds of unprecedented anxiety amongst the entire world. With WWII in his not-so-distant past, then, Dahl may be reminding the reader that a simple idea can be a very dangerous thing in careless hands, and that Klausner is perhaps not prepared to shoulder the burden that his discovery is about to create.

"Well, speaking very roughly, any note so high that it has more than fifteen thousand vibrations a second—we can't hear it. Dogs have better ears than us. You know you can buy a whistle whose note is so high-pitched that you can't hear it at all. But a dog can hear it."

"Yes, I've seen one," the Doctor said.

"Of course you have. And up the scale, higher than the note of that whistle, there is another note—a vibration if you like, but I prefer to think of it as a note. You can't hear that one either. And above that there is another and another rising right up the scale forever and ever and ever, an endless succession of notes…an infinity of notes…there is a note—if only our ears could hear it—so high that it vibrates a million times a second…and another a million times as high as that…and on and on, higher and higher, as far as numbers go, which is…infinity…eternity…beyond the stars."

Related Characters: The Doctor / Scott, Klausner (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Klausner explains the nature of his research to the Doctor while the two men are in Klausner's shed. This exchange represents a significant turning point in the story, allowing the reader to finally understand not only what is driving Klausner's intense, singular focus and passion, but also implicitly showcasing the faults that even the most intelligent scientific mind can be prone to in its hubris. This is evidenced by Klausner's shortsighted ignorance of the fact that the sound of a dog whistle, when used incorrectly, can cause dogs considerable discomfort. In other words, sounds can be dangerous. In his idealistic and romantic consideration of the "infinity of notes" he hopes to discover, Klausner appears to leave no room for the possibility that unlocking these notes could, in fact, be a bad idea. Instead of approaching his hypothesis from a place of measured professional curiosity, Klausner instead comes across as fanatical and detached from reality, suggesting that his passion for sound and science is beginning to veer into madness.

> Klausner was becoming more animated every moment. He was a small frail man, nervous and twitchy, with always moving hands. His large head inclined toward his left shoulder as though his neck sere not quite strong enough to support it rigidly. His face was smooth and pale, almost white, and the pale grey eyes that blinked and peered from behind a pair of steel spectacles were bewildered, unfocussed, remote. He was a frail, nervous, twitchy little man, a moth of a man, dreamy and distracted; suddenly fluttering and animated; and now the Doctor, looking at that strange pale face and those pale grey eyes, felt that somehow there was about this little person a quality of distance, of immense, immeasurable distance, as though the mind were far away from where the body was.

Related Characters: The Doctor / Scott, Klausner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

As Klausner continues to explain his hypotheses about sound, growing more excitable by the second, the Doctor considers just how strange and eccentric the man looks. This extended physical description of Klausner displays the level of intensity the man is capable of despite his small stature and meek appearance. Dahl's repetitive diction—Klausner is described as "frail," "nervous," and "twitchy" twice within the same paragraph—paints the man as meek and unassuming, but his big ideas and passionate delivery shows that he's not to be underestimated.

Furthermore, the fact that the Doctor, a fellow man of science by trade, reacts to Klausner's display the way that he does shows just how far off Klausner is from being a respectable and intelligent scientist. He has been so driven by his passion that his hypothesis, as technically sound as it may be, comes across as lofty and irrational as a result. It is worth noting that, despite his estimation of the man as somewhat unstable, the Doctor does not yet appear to view Klausner's antics as anything particularly threatening, something that will come to change over the course of the story as Klausner's discovery begins to warp his idealistic and innocent outlook.

> "I believe," he said, speaking more slowly now, "that there is a whole world of sound about us all the time that we cannot hear. It is possible that up there in those high-pitched inaudible regions there is a new exciting music being made, with subtle harmonies and fierce grinding discords, a music so powerful that it would drive us mad if only our ears were tuned to hear the sound of it. There may be anything…for all we know there may—"

"Yes," the Doctor said. "But it's not very probable."

"Why not? Why not?" Klausner pointed to a fly sitting on a small roll of copper wire on the workbench. "You see that fly? What sort of a noise is that fly making now? None that one can hear. But for all we know the creature may be whistling like mad on a very high note, or barking or croaking or singing a song. It's got a mouth, hasn't it? It's got a throat!"

Related Characters: The Doctor / Scott, Klausner (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42-43

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Klausner continues to describe his beliefs about sound to the thoroughly unconvinced Doctor. Klausner's exuberant discussion of his research into this

"world of sound" that humans are unable to hear showcases how dedicated he is to plumbing the depths of the unknown. While Klausner frames this pursuit of "exciting new music" with the capacity to "drive us mad if only our ears were tuned to hear the sound of it" as adventurous and ambitious, his eventual discovery raises the question of whether venturing into these uncharted territories was really a good idea—after all, Klausner does unlock some previously unheard sounds which *do* "drive [him] mad."

Furthermore, Klausner's attempt to use the fly to prove his point presents another example of a blind spot that his obsession has created. Klausner seems to ignore the established fact that a variety of insects (crickets and cicadas most notably) already do exactly what he imagines the fly may be doing, but at audible levels and without the use of their throats at all. The fact that those creatures' "songs" are also generally considered to be a nuisance leads one to wonder why Klausner wants to unlock the sounds that he does. Much like his previous example of the dog whistle, this moment serves as further proof that his erratic idealism may be clouding his thoughts.

❝ He plugged the wire connections from the earphones into the machine and put the earphones over his ears. The movement of his hands were quick and precise. He was excited, and breathed loudly and quickly through his mouth. He kept on talking to himself with little words of comfort and encouragement, as though he were afraid—afraid that the machine might not work and afraid also of what might happen if it did. He stood there in the garden beside the wooden table, so pale, small, and thin that he looked like an ancient, consumptive, bespectacled child. […] As he listened, he became conscious of a curious sensation, a feeling that his ears were stretching out away from his head, that each ear was connected to his head by a thin stiff wire, like a tentacle, and that the wires were lengthening, that the ears were going up and up toward a secret and forbidden territory, a dangerous ultrasonic region where ears had never been before and had no right to be.

Related Characters: Klausner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Klausner finally prepares to conduct the first test of his new machine out in his garden. While Klausner appears as eccentric as ever, his trademark mutterings and deft care appear to finally be tempered by the recognition that his research may end up revealing something scary or unsavory. Even though he is afraid of the boundaries of science and nature to at least some degree, he lacks the necessary maturity or wisdom to respect them yet and thus pushes through his fear and carries on with his experiment. This coincides with another example of Dahl's subtle infantilization of Klausner, comparing him to a sick child. By doing this, Dahl may be characterizing the lesson Klausner must learn regarding the pursuit of forbidden knowledge in much the same way as he might describe a child that's about to touch a hot stove. Furthermore, that Klausner is described as a child here also points back to the earlier description of the machine as a "child's coffin." It seems, then, that Klausner's machine—and his aspirations about unlocking this world of sound—will be Klausner's death, in a way, stripping him of his childlike innocence. Indeed, Dahl's evocative description of what Klausner's ears observe upon the machine's first test make it clear that the man's efforts are breaking the natural order of things in his prideful pursuit of knowledge.

❝ From the moment that he started pulling to the moment when the stem broke, he heard—he distinctly heard in the earphones—a faint high-pitched cry, curiously inanimate. He took another daisy and did it again. Once more he heard the cry, but he wasn't so sure now that it expressed pain. No, it wasn't pain; it was surprise. Or was it? It didn't really express any of the feelings or emotions known to a human being. It was just a cry, a neutral, stony cry—a single emotionless note, expressing nothing. It had been the same with the roses. He had been wrong in calling it a cry of pain. A flower probably didn't feel pain. It felt something else which we didn't know about—something called toin or spud or plinuckment, or anything you like.

Related Characters: Klausner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

After scaring off Mrs. Saunders with his intensity, Klausner carries on his experiment on his own. This section

showcases Klausner's pressing need to rationalize the horrible discovery that his machine allowed him to make: that plants feel pain and cry out when hurt or cut. Here, he walks himself back from believing the plants' cries to be ones of pain to an unnamed feeling whose meaning is unknown, thus making himself feel better about "hurting" the plants and conducting more experiments.

The tension between Klausner's scientific ambition and childishness appears in the way the man makes up nonsense names for the expression he assumes the plants are making, allowing him to conduct more tests without feeling guilty about hurting the plants. The fantastical gibberish such as "toin or spurl or plinuckment, or anything you like" seems just as likely to be the names a scientist may brainstorm for their new discovery as they are a made-up magical language among kids on the playground. With this, Dahl seems to be saying that the imaginative nature of an energetic child is not all that far removed from that of a scientist's unbridled curiosity.

❝ He tried to remember what the shriek of the tree had sounded like, but he couldn't. He could remember only that it had been enormous and frightful and that it had made him feel sick with horror. He tried to imagine what sort of noise a human would make if he had to stand anchored to the ground while someone deliberately swung a small sharp thing at his leg so that the blade cut in deep and wedged itself in the cut. Same sort of noise perhaps? No. Quite different. The noise of the tree was worse than any known human noise because of that frightening, toneless, throatless quality. He began to wonder about other living things, and he thought immediately of a field of wheat, a field of wheat standing up straight and yellow and alive, with the mower going through it, cutting the stems, five hundred stems a second, every second. Oh, my God, what would that sound be like? […] no, he thought. I do not want to go to a wheat field with my machine. I would never eat bread after that.

Related Characters: Klausner (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

As he waits for the Doctor to arrive to hear the sound of the tree, Klausner thinks about the sounds that other plants might make when hurt. This section chronicling Klausner's revulsion after hearing the sound the tree makes upon being struck with the axe stands in particularly stark contrast to the manic optimism he approached his research with in the story's beginning. Instead of viewing the unknown with his previously unrestrained sense of wonder, he now cannot help but consider its terrifying implications with abject horror, a detail made clear by his conclusion that the sound is "worse" than any human noise distinctly because of its alien nature.

This passage also effectively brings his battle with denying and rationalizing his discovery full circle. No longer does he ponder the nature of the sounds like a clinical, callous scientist; he now recognizes them as the screams of pain that they are and even outright refusing to conduct tests on other plant life due to the fear of the impact the sounds would have on his psyche. From this it is obvious that Klausner regrets his decision to meddle into the unknown, but as his later behavior will illustrate, the damage may already be done.

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.

THE SOUND MACHINE

On a summer night, Klausner is hurriedly making his way back to the "unpainted room" of the shed he uses as a workshop. He immediately goes to the "small black box" in the shape of "a child's coffin" on the table and begins to tinker with the tangled mess of wires that make up its insides. He remains invested in this process for some time, methodically consulting his diagrams, muttering to himself under his breath, and generally working with "an air of urgency […] of breathlessness, of strong suppressed excitement."

Dahl effectively sets up the story's tone with his initial foreboding physical descriptions of the machine, hinting at its propensity for ruin by conflating it with a dead child. He also provides noteworthy implicit and explicit character detail for Klausner by noting his relatively unadorned workspace, the simplicity of which is distinctly removed from the restless passion he displays towards the work he conducts there, showcasing the man's intense singular focus and drive. Whereas a similar inventor may work in a laboratory full of their past experiments, Klausner's small shop seems dedicated to this sole purpose.

Klausner's thoughts are suddenly interrupted by the sound of footsteps outside the shed, causing him to nervously stop working and turn to the door. He seems relieved to find that "It was Scott. It was only Scott," the local Doctor. The Doctor greets Klausner, saying, "So this is where you hide yourself in the evenings." He says that he couldn't find Klausner in the house, so he ventured back to the shed. The Doctor asks how Klausner's throat is doing and asks to take a look at it, but Klausner tersely dismisses his sore throat as "quite cured" and tells the Doctor not to go through the trouble.

The nervousness Klausner exhibits upon having his work interrupted reads differently than a typical break of concentration, making the man seem suspiciously paranoid and somewhat eccentric. It is obvious from Dahl's use of "only" that Klausner does not deem the Doctor a real threat, though Klausner's relief that "It was Scott. It was only Scott," also raises the question of who else he might have been expecting. Nonetheless, Klausner still seems to bristle at the affable doctor's presence, even to the point of brushing off his concern for Klausner's health. It seems that Klausner would much prefer to be left alone with the machine he's working on.

The Doctor takes note of both the tense atmosphere in the room and Klausner's preoccupied nature, notifying him that he is still wearing a hat even though he's indoors. Surprised, Klausner reaches up and pulls the hat off of his head. The Doctor asks if Klausner is making a radio, but the man says that he's "Just fooling around." The Doctor notes that it's a "frightening-looking thing" and has "rather complicated innards," but Klausner claims **the machine** is "just an idea" that "has to do with sound." The Doctor seems incredulous at this, suggesting that Klausner has "enough of that sort of thing" in his work. Klausner simply replies, "I like sound."

Klausner's odd behavior, though outwardly rather harmless, lends itself to a palpable degree of tension, hinting at the mania the machine has inspired within him. Klausner's simplistic explanation of the machine also denotes his reluctance to talk about it, and the sole, vague reference to his occupation adds another layer of mystery of his background.

The Doctor makes an effort to leave but just lingers by the door, curious about his "strange patient" and the "remarkable complexity" of **the machine** he is so concentrated on. He asks Klausner what the machine's true purpose is, adding, "You've made me inquisitive."

Klausner's cageyness appears to have the opposite of its intended effect—instead of getting the Doctor to leave, Klausner's vague answers pique the Doctor's curiosity. That the Doctor tries to leave but can't get himself to actually do so mirrors to the strange pull the machine also has on Klausner.

Klausner is quiet for several moments, "gently scratch[ing] the lobe of his right ear" before agreeing to tell the expectant Doctor about his research, noticeably "having trouble about how to begin." He finally does by noting the existence of sounds "so low-pitched or so high-pitched" that the human ear is incapable of hearing them. He uses the principle of a dog whistle as an example, noting that dogs' heightened sense of hearing allows them to hear what to humans registers as mere silence. And beyond that, there are even higher notes—or "a vibration if you like," he adds, "but I prefer to think of it as a note." He hypothesizes that there may be "an infinity of notes" unavailable to human ears—"higher and higher, as far as numbers go, which is…infinity…eternity…beyond the stars."

Klausner's initial standoffishness fades away as he is overtaken by the urge to discuss his research, showing how passionate he is about sound. This is also clear from the romantic way he conceives of sound—to him, a sound is more like a poetic "note" than a mere "vibration." That he invokes the concept of a dog whistle in order to explain his ideas is significant because he fails to point out that such instruments can be painful for dogs if used incorrectly. This moment subtly foreshadows the unpleasant nature of the sounds Klausner's machine will soon reveal. This ties into the story's theme of forbidden knowledge, as it appears that he is almost willfully ignoring the possible consequences of his fascination.

Klausner, a "frail, nervous, twitchy […] moth of a man," becomes increasingly animated, leading the Doctor to detect "a quality of […] immense, immeasurable distance" in the small man's "bewildered" eyes. Klausner explains his belief that hidden in "inaudible regions," there is "a music so powerful […] it would drive us mad." The Doctor writes off these ideas as "not very probable," an assertion Klausner adamantly denies, pointing to a silent nearby fly and noting, "It's got a throat!" Klausner then refers to a previous iteration of **the machine** which "proved to [him] the existence of many odd inaudible sounds" by recording their presence with a needle, with the new one designed to relay them at audible pitches. The Doctor is still unconvinced that "the long black coffin-box" will do such a thing. Suddenly realizing how much time has passed, the Doctor departs.

It is here where Klausner's passion truly begins to reveal itself as more of an ardent obsession, with the juxtaposition between his waifish body and wild demeanor lending to the Doctor's belief that the man is perhaps a little unstable. Perhaps if his explanation was less lofty and dramatic, the Doctor would be more inclined to believe him. Klausner's dedication to the goal of unlocking these uncharted realms of sound is also given new depth by the revelation that this is not the first machine he has built, leading one to wonder exactly how long he has been pursuing this project and how many previous iterations there may have been before that most recent attempt.

After some more tampering, Klausner is finally ready to test his **machine**, awkwardly maneuvering it outside to the garden and brimming with excitement as he does so. He mutters "little words of comfort and encouragement to himself," afraid the machine will not work but "afraid also of what might happen if it did." As he stands in the garden, looking like "an ancient, consumptive, bespectacled child," Klausner takes in the stillness of the area around him. He watches his neighbor work in her garden "without thinking about her at all." He flicks on the machine and quickly notices a "curious sensation" accompanying the machine's usual hum—he has the strangest sense that his ears are entering "secret and forbidden territory, a dangerous ultrasonic region where ears had never been before and had no right to be."

Here, Klausner is described as an eccentric-looking child, harking back to Dahl's earlier description of the machine as being the shape of a "child's coffin." This parallel suggests that machine will somehow be the "death" of Klausner. That Klausner is described as a child may suggest that he is naïve and innocent, and that his machine will specifically be the death of that innocence. This is further evidenced by Klausner's sudden consideration that the results of his experiment may be something he is not quite prepared to contend with. His dedication nevertheless remains intact, as displayed by the lack of attention he pays to his neighbor even as he watches her, his primary focus being the machine itself.

Klausner is startled by "a frightful, piercing shriek" and searches for its source, believing it at first to be human. However, there is no one around except for his neighbor, who is cutting roses in her garden. Suddenly, the sound rings out again, and Klausner notes this time that it has "a throatless, inhuman [...] minor, metallic quality." As the woman next door snips another rose, the sound reoccurs, corresponding with "the exact moment when the [...] stem was cut."

The process Klausner undergoes as he comes to understand where the noise is coming from is particularly important to the story's themes of denial and rationalization, as it begins to follow him through the motions from believing the noise to be humanlike to distinctly inhuman and "throatless," an interesting callback to his previously impassioned reference to the fly having a throat (and the Doctor's mention of Klausner's sore throat).

Excited, Klausner calls to Mrs. Saunders "in a voice so high and loud that she became alarmed" and asks her to cut another rose. She is greatly disturbed by the appearance of her "peculiar" neighbor, who she now worries has gone "completely crazy," and considers getting her husband for backup. Nevertheless, she decides to "humor" Klausner, deeming him "harmless." As she cuts another rose, Klausner hears the sound again and, now sure of its source, pleads with her not to cut another: "That's enough. No more. Please, no more."

Klausner appears to be incredibly disturbed by the noise, but still requests that another be cut so he can hear it again, displaying the desensitizing influence of his scientific attitude. The introduction of Mrs. Saunders is also significant as it allows the reader another glimpse at how unstable Klausner appears to those around him, especially now that his efforts have yielded results.

Klausner frantically explains his new discovery that plants feel pain, getting closer and closer to Mrs. Saunders to the point where he is leaning over the fence, staring at her intently. Privately, Mrs. Saunders decides that in five seconds, she'll flee. In an excitable whisper, he asks, "*how do you know* that a rosebush doesn't feel as much pain when someone cuts its stem in two as you would feel if someone cut your wrist off with garden shears?" Now genuinely worried, Mrs. Saunders runs into her house.

Mrs. Saunders clearly finds Klausner to be unstable and downright threatening, as she runs into her house for safety. Klausner doesn't exactly help his case, as he infringes on her personal space, whispers like a madman, and even makes a gruesome analogy about someone cutting off Mrs. Saunders's wrist with garden shears.

Klausner returns to **the machine** and tests his hypothesis by picking another flower. Upon hearing its cry through his headphones, he begins to question whether the "curiously inanimate" sound it makes is truly indicative of pain, eventually concluding that it must be an emotion outside the realm of human understanding. He decides that it must be "something else which we didn't know about—something called toin or spurl or plinuckment, or anything you like." Noticing that it's getting dark outside, he collects the machine and returns inside.

Klausner seems to be in denial of his findings, as he immediately begins to conduct more tests despite his earlier certainty of where the sounds were coming from and his discomfort at hearing the plants shriek so terribly when cut. In this passage, Klausner talks himself down from the feelings of horror the screams initially awoke in him, and he seems to take on the cold, analytical mind of a scientist. His hypothesis that the sound doesn't reflect pain as humans know it but some other, unnamed feeling is a prime example of his attempt to rationalize the knowledge he has gained into something more ethically palatable. If he doesn't think that he's actively causing plants pain, he can keep doing his experiments without feeling badly about it.

The next day, Klausner wakes up at dawn and brings his **machine** to a nearby park, doubling back to retrieve an axe as well. He looks around "nervously," but the park is empty since it's only 6 a.m. He places the machine in front of a large beech tree, dons his earphones, and strikes the tree with his axe. As he does so, he hears "a most extraordinary noise," a "harsh, noteless [...] growling, low-pitched, screaming sound" that outdoes those of the roses in terms of both volume and duration. Greatly shaken by this, he caresses the wound the axe made and whispers apologies to the tree for hurting it, assuring the tree that "it will heal fine."

Klausner's haste to test the machine again—this time on an even bigger plant—furthers the idea that he has not truly learned his lesson about meddling with the unknown. The visceral sound the tree makes, however, seems to bring him closer to this revelation than ever before, its "harsh, noteless" quality representing a far cry from the lovely "infinity of notes" he wistfully pondered at before. Like when he ordered Mrs. Saunders to stop cutting the roses, Klausner appears to be overcome with genuine empathy and emotion for what he's done.

After staying with the tree for a time, Klausner rushes back home and calls up the Doctor, begging him to come over quickly and hear the sound has just heard, claiming it is "driving [him] mad." While he is unhappy at being awoken so early, the Doctor recognizes the man's "frantic, almost hysterical" tone of voice as one signifying a true emergency. He agrees to come over right away.

Now at a point of desperation, it appears that Klausner's previous wish to discover sounds capable of "driv[ing] us mad" has been granted, though certainly not in the way he had hoped. Indeed, Klausner's decision to notify the Doctor is decidedly different from the tense reluctance he displayed at their meeting at the beginning of the story, signifying the depths of his need for someone else to help shoulder the weight of what he has uncovered. The Doctor's reaction to this call further demonstrates the profound impact this discovery has had on Klausner; while the Doctor previously saw Klausner as an eccentric but harmless man, he now senses that Klausner may be in serious trouble.

As he waits anxiously for the Doctor to arrive, Klausner reflects on the noise the tree made and notes that it made him feel "sick with horror." He contemplates what noises a human being would make in the same situation, and concludes that the tree's noise is worse due to the "frightening, toneless, throatless" quality it possesses. He considers the sounds other forms of plant life would make, picturing the sound of a field of wheat screaming as it's being mowed and resolving never to take his **machine** to one because he "would never eat bread after that." He runs down a list of fruits and vegetables, determining whether or not they would shriek when picked.

This passage marks a definitive turning point for Klausner, as he now begins to hypothesize with horror instead of the pure, childlike wonder he demonstrated at the beginning of the story. However, even though he seems revolted by the sound the tree made, he continues to think dreadful, detailed thoughts about the sounds different plants would make, which suggests that he can't shake his obsession. Throughout the story, Klausner's machine represents the dark side of scientific advancement; Klausner's innocence is now thoroughly shattered by the terrible implications that his quest for knowledge has dredged up, suggesting that some discoveries are better left unmade.

The arrival of the Doctor rips Klausner from his thoughts and he hurriedly takes him to the tree, where the **machine** and axe still lay. The Doctor privately observes that Klausner doesn't appear insane, but "merely disturbed and excited." Upon their arrival in the park, Klausner directs the Doctor to put on the earphones while he prepares to strike the tree with the axe, though dreading "the thought of the noise that the tree would make." As he makes contact with the tree, he notices "a slight shifting of the earth beneath his feet" and hears a crack from above. The Doctor, who has torn off his earphones and is now running away, yells for the "spellbound" Klausner to move just as a 60-foot branch falls and destroys the machine.

Klausner's discomfort with cutting the tree does indicate a slight evolution of his character. Given his profuse apologies to the tree after whacking it with an axe the first time, it seems that Klausner does conceive of the sound as one of pain and thus feels empathy for the tree. He no longer relishes the act of testing his hypothesis; it is simply a necessity to allow the Doctor to hear the sound as well. Klausner's momentary paralysis, though, suggests that he's still totally consumed by this project and detached from everything and everyone around him.

The Doctor rushes to check on Klausner and is relieved to find him unharmed. Klausner, looking "tense and horrified" merely removes the axe from the tree and softly asks the Doctor what he heard in the earphones. The Doctor thinks about this for a moment, "rub[bing] his neck" and "bit[ing] his lip" before he eventually answers, "as a matter of fact… […] No, I'm not sure. I couldn't be sure." He reminds Klausner that he had to pull off the earphones only a second after the axe struck the tree. Klausner persists in his questioning, becoming increasingly insistent and combative as the Doctor "irritably" writes off whatever he heard as merely "the noise of the branch breaking." Klausner does not relent, getting in the Doctor's face and observing that he "certainly seem[s] nervous."

The Doctor's body language and generally skittish behavior may suggest that he is lying to both Klausner and himself regarding the noise he heard. Klausner, meanwhile, grows increasingly fervent and aggressive, pressuring the Doctor into admitting that he heard the tree's cry. After all, without the benefit of a concrete second opinion and a functional machine, he has no way of verifying his discovery. It's possible, then, that the Doctor's awkwardness in this passage simply stems from his discomfort at being around the increasingly unhinged Klausner, though it's also possible that he did, in fact, hear the tree's cry but is in denial about it.

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, the Doctor attempts to leave, but Klausner refuses to let him go without tending to the tree's wound first, his tone becoming "almost […] threatening." The Doctor tries to reason with the man but ultimately relents out of fear of him and complies with his wishes, delicately painting the tree's cuts with iodine according to Klausner's directions and keeping a keen eye on the man as he is still holding the axe, now with an even tighter grip than before. After deciding that the iodine "will do nicely," Klausner asks the Doctor if he will return to check on the tree again the next day to put more iodine on it. The Doctor agrees, and Klausner flashes him "a wild, excited smile." The Doctor gently takes Klausner by the arm and leads him away, telling him that it's time to go.

Klausner's previous propensity for making those around him uncomfortable with his passion reaches its zenith here, as he becomes actively aggressive in his desire to help the tree. In this sense, one can view his concern for the tree as an evolution of his single-minded dedication to the machine, as evidenced by his somewhat obsessive desire to continue checking up on the tree and visible excitement at the Doctor's agreement. The way the Doctor carefully tailors this final interaction so as not to upset Klausner, however, suggests his belief that Klausner has truly gone mad. This final depiction of Klausner, crazed and wild with an axe in hand, leaves readers to question if his machine even worked in the first place, or if it was merely a delusion.

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