

The Sound Machine

by Roald Dahl

1. (a) With reference to the story "Sound machine' explain what made the Doctor intrigued and inquisitive ? What explanation did the "strange patient" offer to satisfy the curious mind of the Doctor?

Answer: The Doctor is intrigued by a black box which was the size of a coffin and almost three feet long. The top of the box was open and displayed the numerous colourful wires and silver tubes inside it. The sheer complexity of the box intrigued the Doctor to know more about it. To add to the Doctor's curiosity was his strange patient, who was caught up so excitedly with the box that he behaved rather strangely. His deft handling of the innards of the box, his enthusiasm and rapt attention had made the Doctor inquisitive about what he was up to.

The patient's attempt was to create a sound machine that would allow humans to hear the high-pitched voices otherwise inaudible to the human ear. The "strange patient" offered to satisfy the curious mind of the Doctor by explaining the entire theory behind his innovation of the sound machine.

The human ear is incapable of hearing certain high-pitched and low-pitched sounds, in particular the notes with more than fifteen thousand vibrations a second. According to him there is a whole world of sound that humans cannot hear due to the high frequency of notes emitted. There is a whole gamut of exciting music, with subtle harmonies and grinding discords missed out on by humans due to their sheer incapacity of hearing these sounds. The strange patient is eager to tap on the unheard powerful music produced with its sound machine that would enable people to hear these unheard sounds which would ideally drive them mad if they were to hear it with their ears.

(b) What example does the "strange patient" offer to convince the Doctor about his theory?

Answer: The "strange patient" tries to convince the Doctor about his theory of a world full of powerful sounds untapped by humans. The Doctor is not convinced about the theory and believes it's highly unlikely for it to exist. To convince the Doctor about his theory, the "strange patient" offers the example of a fly. He says that there could possibly be a whistling, croaking or high note barking sound emitted by the fly through its mouth that we are unable to hear due to the high notes. The "strange patient" further tries to convince the Doctor by talking about his innovation of a simple instrument that allowed him to depict the presence of sound vibrations in the air though he could not hear anything. His current sound machine is a step further in that direction that would allow him to convert these

high-pitched frequencies into an audible sound by the human ear.

(c) Who is the 'strange patient'? How does the author describe the "strange patient" ?

Answer: The 'strange patient' is Klausner. He is described by the author as a "small frail, man, nervous and twitchy with always moving hands." He had a large head that was inclined towards its left shoulder as though his neck was not sturdy enough to support his head rigidly. Klausner had a pale, almost white, smooth face, pale grey eyes that were covered behind steel spectacles. His eyes mirrored his emotions truly and were often bewildered, unfocused and remote while working on his innovative sound machine. He was a twitchy little moth of a man, full of dreams. He was obsessed with a perspective of his own. He was distracted yet extremely passionate almost about his idea. He worked deftly and swiftly to ensure his innovation was a success. However, one could remarkably notice an immense sense of distance between his body and mind at work which showed his lack of confidence and insecurity.

2. (a) With reference to the story 'The Sound Machine' answer why did Klausner take the machine to the park next day ? What happened to the machine ?

Answer: The Sound Machine' by Roald Dahl explores the obsession of Klausner with sound. He invents a sound machine in order to allow humans to hear the high pitched voices otherwise inaudible to the human ear. According to him, there is a whole world of sound that humans cannot hear due to the high frequency of notes emitted. There is a whole gamut of exciting music, with subtle harmonies and grinding discords missed out by humans due to their sheer incapacity of hearing these sounds. Klausner is eager to tap on the unheard powerful music produced with its sound machine that would enable people to hear these unheard sounds that would ideally drive them mad if they were to hear it with their ears.

Klausner decides to take this machine to the park for experiment and prove it to others with concrete evidence that what he harped about was in fact true. Klausner takes the machine to the park at six in the morning with a view to hear the sound emanated by the tree that he was going to axe. The first blow that he aims at the beech tree, Klausner believes he heard a 'harsh, noteless, enormous noise, a growling, low-pitched, screaming sound...loudest at the moment when the axe struck, fading gradually fainter and fainter until it was gone.'

Klausner believes that he heard the voice and calls his friend, the doctor to validate his experiment. However, on his second attempt to axe the tree, Klausner hits the roots of the tree making the sixty feet long branch fall off which destroys the sound machine into pieces.

(b) Why did Klausner call the doctor hurriedly? Why did he come immediately? What does this reveal to the readers about their relationship?

Answer: Klausner during his experiment with the sound machine in the park at the wee hours is convinced that he had a breakthrough with his invention. He heard a loud shriek from the tree which sounded like "a harsh, noteless, enormous noise, a growling, low-pitched, screaming sound." Klausner though convinced himself about the success of his machine, he wanted to apprise his friend the doctor to validate the same that he had heard. Therefore, he calls him up hurriedly to be a part of this experiment and hear the same shrieking sound from the tree as he had heard when the tree was axed.

The doctor receives the phone immediately as he was attuned to people calling him at any hour for his help. He is amazed at Klausner's obsession for the sound machine and his belief in the experiment. However, his tone at that hour in the morning sounded like a desperate cry for help, almost as if it was an emergency case. The doctor came immediately because he saw a friend in Klausner. However, unbelievable did the experiment sound, the doctor was curious to know more on this matter.

The doctor and Klausner shared a friendship that went beyond his professional realm. He is a loyalist stand by his friend throughout despite being convinced of his invention or the theory. His concern for Klausner is palpable in his conversation with him. He cares for him and makes those extra efforts to enquire about his health even when there is no need. He also tries his level best to avoid the truth of the sound he heard to ensure Klausner is not disappointed but fails.

The doctor is a curious soul, inquisitive about the many things that Klausner does. He is keen to know about Klausner's invention and theory behind it, but he does not agree to the whims and fancies of Klausner's brain and instead relies on his own experience. He is a sceptic and does not believe the theory and story provided by Klausner, but he is a sympathetic friend who understands Klausner's situation and to heal him of his bad notions agrees to stitch the wounded tree. The Doctor is a nervous soul, but a true and loyal friend, a characteristic that wins him the hearts of Dahl's readers. Their relationship is more of friendship rather than a doctor and a patient and that is why the two remain etched in the mind of the readers for a long time.

(c) What happened to the machine? Is there a chance Klausner will try this experiment again?

Answer: Klausner during his experiment of the sound machine in the park about his theory on sound axes the beech tree to hear the sound emanated by it. In the first blow he aims at the beech tree, Klausner believes that he heard a harsh, noteless, enormous noise, a growling, low-pitched, screaming sound loudest at the moment when the axe struck, fading gradually fainter and fainter until it was gone.'

Klausner wants to prove his theory to his friend, the doctor and calls him to the park. However, on his second attempt to axe the tree, Klausner hits the roots of the tree making the sixty feet long branch fall off, which breaks the sound machine into pieces.

Klausner is obsessed with the idea of inaudible sound to that extent that his sense of sanity has overpowered his senses. He refuses to acknowledge any possibility of his theory being wrong. Thus, his friend succumbs under his hysteria and bandages the tree as he wishes. This clearly shows that there is a complete possibility that Klausner may build this sound machine again to experiment and prove his theory once again.

Long Questions and Answers

1. Explore the various themes interwoven in the story "The Sound Machine'. What does the story convey?

Answer: Roald Dahl's story makes us think a lot regarding man's relationship with nature, with other human beings and the values that shape our very being. It has multiple themes that can be explored at various levels.

The first theme is the individual versus conformity. Individual theories meet opposition when they are against the accepted beliefs or norms of society. This makes us timid as we fear ridicule. So is the case with Klausner who has to hide his machine from public view as he is not sure of himself. This approach comes in the way of free thoughts and experimentations. The world is losing many innovations due to this. The only way is to overcome obstacles with belief in oneself. One has to have the courage to stand by one's convictions. A compromise is required from both sides.

The second theme is madness vs. sanity- those who come up with different theories or interpretations are considered mad. Klausner can be labelled as mad because he behaves strangely. He seems odd to his neighbour. The doctor is also sceptical about his invention.

Yet another theme, put forward is that of appearance vs. reality- are the sounds real or imaginary? Klausner is convinced of sounds, but are they figment of imagination of a feverish brain, obsessed with sounds? The machine breaks into pieces, so there is no way for the 'sane' doctor to hear it and vouch for it.

Rejection or acceptance is another aspect dealt with, in the story. Which is the right way? People are different, their behaviour, attitude and convictions may be different but they should not be rejected. Even if their beliefs are unacceptable to you, do not demean them. It is possible to live in harmony. This way everyone can have convictions without fear and this will lead to innovations. The doctor and the inventor walking arm in arm at the end of the story, suggests this harmony.

One theme that stands out and compels our attention is human attitude to Nature. We should not forget that Nature is a living entity, and every cut we make on the plants or animals transmits pain. But at the same time this awareness will not permit us to live. We will not be able to eat or drink if we entertain this sensibility. Somewhere a line has to be drawn.

On the whole, we can say, the story sends a strong message that one has to respect people with different views. We should accept and admire all forms of life and the environment. We should not mistrust indiscriminately and give labels. The ones in search should not cease their pursuit even if they have to continue on their own.

2. Attempt a character sketch of Klausner and Dr. Scott.

Answer: The writer portrays characters through narration, characterisation, actions, own words and what other characters say or behave.

Klausner is shown checking some machine in a wooden shed. There is something secretive about him, in the way he surreptitiously guards his contraption.

He speaks softly to himself, nodding, smiling, and his mouth shifting in curious shapes. He becomes more animated every moment. His physical attributes tell us something about his character. He is a small frail man, nervous and twitchy. His large head is inclined toward his left shoulder as though his neck is not strong enough to support it. He is bespectacled, and his eyes are bewildered, unfocused and remote, dreamy and distracted. He gives a strange impression that his mind is far away from his body. This description in itself gives the idea that he is different from most of the people.

That he is meticulous in whatever he does is shown by the way he handles the machines. His insecurity and lack of confidence is shown by his twitchiness and the way of speaking.

Klausner's obsession with sound creates a greater sensitivity towards all the creatures around him. He hears the cry of the plants and trees. He wonders how he is going to eat his next meal when he imagines thousands of wheat and vegetable plants scream in pain when they are cut. The groan of the tree, when cut by his axe, haunts him. This is the reason why he insists that Dr. Scott applies medicine on its gashes.

In contrast to Klausner, Dr. Scott is sceptical and practical. He is not overly sensitive to things around him. Yes, as a doctor, he is concerned about his patients. That is the reason why he visits Klausner. When he sees the curious looking machine, like anyone else, he wants to know what it is all about. In spite of not believing in what Klausner says, he does not ridicule him but humours him. He is a foil to Klausner as he is calm and collected. He is

a tall man and very confident of himself. He is sensible enough not to protest but meticulously applies for medicine on the tree, just to bring down the heightened reactions of his patient.

Thus with simple, straightforward, descriptive details, actions and words, Roald Dahl sketches the characters of Klausner and his doctor.