

The Flying Machine by Ray Bradbury

The Flying Machine is a short story written by Ray Bradbury in 1953. He also adapted the tale into a short play.

Analyses

In “The Flying Machine”, the ethics of technological improvement with no clear goal in sight is called into action. Written in 1953 in the midst of the Cold War and nuclear proliferation (a very quick increase in something), these were important questions when Bradbury was writing, and they continue to be important questions today. Should inventors consider the possible negative ramifications of an invention, or should they proceed by only focusing on the benefits of it?

It raises the important question of how, and if, technology should be monitored and regulated. While there are risks and drawbacks to developing the Flying Machine, the contraption also creates a lot of beauty and releases it into the world.

The story also examines the idea of beauty. The emperor finds great beauty in the flying machine but it also scares him because he cannot control it or account for all the unexpected consequences that the machine could produce.

What does the flying machine symbolize?

The Emperor fears the beautiful flying machine because it represents uncertainty.

Even the man who invented it is not sure what it is for. The Emperor dreads its power and his lack of ability to control it. As he tells the inventor before he has him executed, his machine could do harm in the hands of an evil man.

What is the theme of “The Flying Machine”?

The theme is fear, conflict, control and selfishness.

What happened to the inventor of the flying machine?

He was executed and his body burned to ashes.

What is the conflict in the flying machine?

The conflict between the flier (protagonist) and the emperor (antagonist) is that the emperor does not like the new invention that the flier made. The emperor thinks that it can get into the wrong hands and that the person would destroy The Great Wall of China.

“But there are times,” said the Emperor, more sadly still, “when one must lose a little beauty if one is to keep what little beauty one already has.”

This is the emperor’s explanation to the inventor for why he is going to execute him and destroy the flying machine. He agrees that the machine is beautiful, but he fears that the beauty of the invention will be eliminated when the machine is used for unjust means, such as throwing rocks at the Great Wall of China.

Questions

1. What is the setting of the story?
2. What does the Emperor say are miracles?
3. After seeing the flying man, what did the Emperor’s gaze travel to?
4. What does the Emperor order to be done to the flying man?
5. What figures are shown in the Emperor’s wind up machine?
6. Why does the Emperor fear the flying machine?
7. What becomes of the flying machine?