

Report on the Threatened City



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DORIS LESSING

Doris Lessing was born in 1919 in what is now Iran. She was an only child, and her parents were British subjects. In 1925, the family moved the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe), to farm maize on 1,000 acres of bush. Lessing's formal education ended at the age of 13. She married Frank Wisdom at the age of 19; the couple had a son and a daughter. When they divorced, Lessing left the children with her husband. She subsequently married and had a son with German expatriate Gottfried Lessing, whom she met in the communist-leaning Left Book Club. After her second divorce, Lessing never remarried. Lessing's literary output was influenced by her leftist political leanings, her study of Sufism (a form of Islamic mystical practice), and her experience of the social expectations for marriage and motherhood. She campaigned against racism and colonialism and wrote science fiction speculating about the calamities humanity might invent for itself. She also authored books that questioned the capitalistic and patriarchal organization of society, although she left the Communist Party of Britain and rejected the term "feminist" as too narrow. She won numerous literary awards during her long career, including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007. She died in 2013 at the age of 94.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There are two historical contexts at the heart of "Report on the Threatened City": the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and the Cold War. The 1906 earthquake, or the "previous disaster" that the alien envoys are stunned to learn about, occurred on the morning of April 18. Its epicenter was near San Francisco, and 80 percent of the city was destroyed either by the 7.8 magnitude earthquake or the subsequent fires. It is likely that more than 3,000 people died, and countless others were injured and displaced. Local leaders, worried about the bustling city's economy, downplayed the earthquake and its destruction as they almost immediately began rebuilding the city. Two serious earthquakes struck just north of the San Francisco Bay area in 1969, likely providing inspiration for Lessing's story. The 1906 earthquake remains the deadliest earthquake in the United States and the deadliest natural disaster of any type to occur in California. The story also refers to the Cold War in considering humanity's warlike tendencies and paranoia. This period of geopolitical tension between the United States and the Soviet Union began in the aftermath of World War II and lasted until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In political and social terms, the Cold War was framed as a contest

between democracy—represented by the United States and its allies—and communism, represented by the Soviets. It was characterized by increased tensions, a nuclear weapons race, and damaging proxy wars.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Lessing was, for many years, a member of the Communist Party of Britain. Much of her writing, including "Report on the Threatened City" is influenced by Marxist ideas deriving from *Das Kapital*, which explores the political underpinnings of capitalism and critiques powerful and wealthy people's exploitation of the working class. "Report on the Threatened City" approaches this topic through the eyes of the alien envoys, placing it in the science fiction genre, which was being used in the late 1960s and early 1970s to explore contemporary political and social issues. Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, for example, examined gender roles by imagining a world in which gender distinctions don't exist. Similarly, Lessing uses science fiction to critique capitalism in "Report on the Threatened City." Lessing's science fiction series of novels, collectively titled the *Canopus in Argos*, explores the relationship of the individual to the collective, similar to the focus on how humans value individuals versus large groups in "Report on the Threatened City."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Report on the Threatened City
- **When Written:** 1970s
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1972
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Science Fiction
- **Setting:** San Francisco, California
- **Climax:** The alien envoys lose their televised debate with humans, and an angry mob runs them out of town.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Better Late than Never. When Lessing won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007 at 88 years old, she was, at the time, the oldest person to have been awarded this prize.

Cassandra Complex. A literary critic once described Lessing as "Cassandra in a world under siege." In the *Aeneid*, the god Apollo gives Cassandra the gift of prophecy, but she's subsequently cursed to never be believed. Indeed, in her

speculative and science fiction, Lessing characterizes humanity as unable to see or appropriately react to warnings of impending climate catastrophe, global epidemics, or political upheaval.



PLOT SUMMARY

A group of six alien envoys sends a priority broadcast back to their base: all programs and plans must be cleared pending the information in their report. In the report, the envoys explain that they've traveled to Earth to warn the residents of a city (implied to be San Francisco) that their city will be destroyed by an **earthquake** within the next five years. The envoys found out about the impending earthquake by observing Earth with "Astroviewers" and unmanned spacecraft. They prepared for this trip by pushing their technology to its limits and postponing other important priorities.

The envoys land in a sparsely populated area outside of San Francisco. Their species is made of **light**, so the envoys are usually invisible to the human naked eye. They spend their first four days on Earth attempting Phase I: telepathically communicating their warning directly into some local farmers' minds. They also try to communicate with a group of four youths from the city, but both of these attempts fail. The envoys notice that the elders are obsessed with war, and that young people can perceive and understand things more clearly. But the youths are also more apathetic and hopeless than the elders. The envoys report that humans can hold two contradictory ideas at once, and that this mental block is why the envoys can't communicate with either age group effectively.

So, the envoys proceed to Phase II, in which they enter several other youths' minds and attempt to directly warn the population. The youths, who are high on drugs, begin to sing songs about the impending disaster, which gets them thrown in jail. There, the envoys learn for the first time that a deadly earthquake struck the city decades ago. They realize that their warnings are going unheeded because everyone knows about the danger, even though no one is taking steps to avoid or soften it. The envoys report that humans aren't very open to new ideas, and that they'll only accept information from sources they already trust.

Next, the envoys incarnate as two human men and attempt to engage the geological technicians at the Institute for Prognosis and Prevention of Earth Disturbance. Here, they learn that economic considerations trump human safety in the planning and management of the city. (At this point, various local news broadcasts about tragedies, acts of selflessness, and city-planning and tourism efforts start intermittently interrupting the envoys' report.) The envoys note that humans tend to use conversation to avoid taking meaningful action, and that individuals only care about the people they're closest to, not

humanity as a whole.

After the envoys realize that the technicians aren't receptive to what they have to say, they decide to appeal directly to a large group of young people during a nighttime beach party. But this ends with some of the youth expressing their indifference and others acting on their despair by committing mass suicide.

Finally, the envoys, in their male human personas, appear on television to debate local professors about the importance of actions rather than words. At first, the audience laughs at the envoys rather than taking them seriously. But when the envoys shift their arguments to the specific need for action to avoid the impending earthquake, the viewers in the studio and at home react with violent anger. Realizing that their mission has failed, the extraterrestrials dematerialize, reconvene at their ship, and return to their planet. They conclude that anyone who conforms to human society's norms is doomed, because it's normal to deny reality and avoid preparing for disaster. Only society's outcasts have a chance at survival.

After the envoys have left, sightings of alien spacecraft continue. This confounds Military Command, which identifies the ships as Chinese, and the Air Force, which speculates that the ships are either Russian or extraterrestrial. Concerned about hundreds of people apparently disappearing on these UFOs, the Air Force suggests that the government seal off the landing site from the public.



CHARACTERS

The Envoys – The envoys are a group of six beings from another planet who have traveled to Earth in their spacecraft. They try to warn humans in the titular "threatened city" (implied to be San Francisco) that a disastrous **earthquake** that will strike the city within the next five years. Physically, the envoys seem to be roughly the same size as humans, but they are made of **light** rather than matter, so they are not normally visible to the naked human eye. The envoys refer to themselves as "we" throughout their report, which suggests that they might have a collective consciousness. There are no distinctions made between them based on age or gender, in contrast to how human society is divided. The envoys demonstrate their altruism by traveling so far to warn the city's residents about the disaster, planning to help mitigate the earthquake's damage, relocate people, and educate some human "specimens" so that they themselves can predict future calamities. These envoys are not just messengers to humanity; they observe the species with an anthropological interest, reporting back to their base what they discover about human characteristics, interactions, technologies, and rituals. Their ongoing struggle to understand human behavior draws attention to how human beings often act contrary to their true needs. The envoys, like the humans, are not free of bias and assumption, but their initial inability to

understand human resistance to their message, rather than frustrating them, sparks their curiosity and concern. In contrast to the humans, who seek to avoid information that challenges their opinions, the envoys seek to fill in their own knowledge gaps to better fulfill their mission. Their attempted warning ultimately fails because they can't overcome this human desire to avoid uncomfortable information. No matter how clearly they are able to understand human motivation, their own attitudes and opinions are ultimately so alien that they cannot find a way to meaningfully communicate.

The Four Youths – On their third day on Earth, the alien envoys encounter a group of four youths who have come to the remote area of the landing site because it is a hang-out spot for young people. They come in a “metal conveyance,” or a car, in which they will return to the city in the morning. While they're able to absorb the envoys' telepathic message about an impending **earthquake** more readily than the elders, they also react to the warning with resignation and hopelessness. Their behavior while driving the car indicates carelessness, too. The envoys ride along secretly, and they are horrified by the youths' reckless driving and laughter when they narrowly avoid accidents. This lack of fear leads the envoys to conclude that they are damaged specimens, so they abandon these four for another group of youths at a gas station.

The Technicians –The envoys visit the Institute for Prognosis and Prevention of Earth Disturbance, where they encounter a group of “highly skilled” geological technicians who study **earthquakes**. These technicians live and work close to the fault line in the city, the most dangerous place to be if there's an earthquake. Their equipment enables them to diagnose tremors and convulsions, and it is their duty to warn the public before earthquakes, which they do with great accuracy. Despite their advanced knowledge and awareness that the city will not survive a major earthquake, they seem content to live in this dangerous area, and they are more emotional about the city's economic concerns than about potential disasters.

even has an institute that studies and predicts earthquakes—the city's residents don't seem to care about it. Thus, the envoys come to understand that for humans, perceiving doesn't necessarily equal believing. For example, the society's leaders are invested in maintaining the status quo: people who rightly perceive UFOs find themselves “repulsed, ridiculed, or even threatened” by authorities who cast them as “mentally inadequate or deluded.” In this sense, the story suggests that opinions are more important to humans than perceivable facts, especially when the facts seem to contradict those opinions. Thus, the gap between perception and belief in San Francisco's inhabitants arises because the evidence of danger opposes “received” opinions—in the form of news broadcasts—that celebrate the city and emphasize the importance of its growth.

Interestingly, the alien envoys initially exhibit this same gap between perception and acceptance. They can see but are unwilling to accept the overwhelming evidence of human indifference to suffering and death, believing that any creature who knows of impending danger would, like them, “have learned from the event and taken steps accordingly.” Yet the envoys—unlike the humans—continually reevaluate their actions, plans, and assumptions. By the time they leave, although they have failed in their mission of warning the inhabitants of the “threatened city,” they have begun to understand the mental frameworks that rendered their mission futile—knowledge that can be used in future missions. Through the aliens' reports, the story suggests that it's perhaps natural for humans (and, in the context of the story, aliens) to let biases and assumptions cloud their perception, but that aligning one's beliefs with reality is ultimately necessary for survival.



INDIFFERENCE

In “Report on the Threatened City,” a group of alien envoys attempt to warn the citizens of San Francisco of an impending **earthquake**. Because the city's residents aren't evacuating, the extraterrestrials believe that they must not know about the looming danger. But as they spend a week in futile efforts to warn the population, they come to understand that almost everyone is aware of the danger, yet they refuse to act accordingly. As such, the story satirizes modern society's apathy and suggests that it's dangerous for people to avoid uncomfortable or unpleasant truths. Indeed, the envoys observe that humans think their species generally “must continuously lose numbers and strength and health” through catastrophe, yet they care very deeply about “individuals or small groups.” In essence, humans are good at caring for individuals but can't extend this concern to bigger groups of people. In addition, the envoys observe that almost all human communication is an echo chamber, meaning that people only care about information from sources they already trust and agree with. The young and old humans in the



THEMES

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PERCEPTION AND BELIEF

In “Report on the Threatened City,” envoys from an alien species land in San Francisco to warn the city's inhabitants about an impending **earthquake** that will destroy the city. But the aliens learn that despite already knowing about the potential danger—San Francisco

story have different strategies for maintaining their indifference, but both age groups equally avoid confronting difficult truths or taking decisive action. The young numb themselves through humor, “mating rituals,” drugs, and music. The elders, meanwhile, spread propaganda, diffuse responsibility through an “infinitely subdivided society,” and expend their energy on debating rather than solving problems. The envoys’ observations of humans—and their failure to convince people to care about or prepare for the earthquake—suggest that such indifference and passivity can have deadly consequences.



PARANOIA AND CONSPIRACY

When the alien envoys in “Report on the Threatened City” come to San Francisco to warn of an impending **earthquake**, they find a world in the grip of Cold War-era paranoia and conspiracies. Almost everyone who sees their spacecraft identifies it as a weapon or spy craft of some sort, and the range of origin theories suggests the power of the “war-making functions” that control Earth: some think the craft is Russian, others Chinese, and still others American. The envoys note that humans frequently observe “a great many of the devices and machines used by the war departments [...] under test,” yet their reports to officials are “repulsed” and “ridiculed.”

The story draws a fine line between the conspiracies that the government weaves to silence talk of extraterrestrial visitors—for example, cutting off access to a UFO landing site by claiming a radiation leak—and the conspiracy that the city’s population willingly engages in regarding the looming disaster. History clearly demonstrates that San Francisco is an unsafe place to live (the story references the city’s deadly 1906 earthquake), and the residents in the story are aware that another earthquake will happen eventually. Yet city planners, builders, geologists, and other citizens willingly—even cheerfully—live and congregate in the most dangerous zones. “Verbal games” (debates), ritual reenactments of “unpalatable ideas” (television shows), and education in “received opinion” all serve to communicate “the current standard of ideas” in society and, by extension, to disregard ideas outside these norms. The story thus suggests that people’s willingness to accept conspiracy theories and propaganda over facts is a potentially deadly impulse, and also that this tendency makes it easy for government and media to influence people.



ALTRUISM VS. CAPITALISM

“Report on the Threatened City” portrays capitalism as a system that encourages profit and self-interest over the common good. In the story, alien envoys visit Earth to warn San Francisco residents of an impending **earthquake**, and their mission requires them to push their planet’s technology to its limit and “postpone[]

certain cherished plans.” They seem to consider these sacrifices worthwhile when balanced against the mass death and devastation that they believe the earthquake will cause. The humans, by contrast, aren’t nearly as altruistic: the envoys observe that the larger the group, the less humans care about it.

The local news broadcasts that occasionally interrupt the envoys’ report do sometimes focus on individual acts of generosity: five “ordinary people” each donate a month’s pay to cover a toddler’s heart surgery, for instance, and a brave man sacrifices himself to rescue four others from a burning building. The envoys also note humans’ “infinite care and devotion to individuals or small groups.” Yet other reports suggests that San Franciscans are generally more concerned about economic expansion than the population’s well-being. Instead of evacuating people before the earthquake or addressing the city’s high poverty rate, the broadcasts largely focus on commercial interests and activities: an entertainment extravaganza, plans for new suburbs that will bring more residents to the city, or new infrastructure to draw in more tourists. Furthermore, individual acts of heroism contrast sharply with more tragic reports, such as when 60 people die in a stadium accident because the stadium owner prioritized profits over safety. The alien envoys thus conclude that under capitalism, people tend to make decisions not by considering people’s needs, but by negotiating between “many conflicting bodies and individuals” who participate out of “self-interest.”



SYMBOLS

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



THE EARTHQUAKE

The earthquake that threatens the city represents the doomed fate of a society that is unwilling to take action or to value human life more than commercial interests. The city in the story (implied to be San Francisco) was destroyed almost completely by an earlier earthquake in 1906. Afterward, local leaders quickly rebuilt infrastructure and housing to ensure the city’s position as a trade hub and the wealth and power of those who controlled its industry. Because earthquakes occur along fault lines, their risk—if not their actual occurrence—is easy to predict. Therefore, the imminent earthquake in the story’s present (the 1960s)—which is going to happen along the same fault line as the previous one—represents any sort of catastrophe that a society can foresee but chooses not to address.

In fact, the earthquake’s danger is less important to the city’s residents than economic interests. While alien envoys come to the city and try to convince people to evacuate, local

broadcasts emphasize the need to build infrastructure for tourism and increase housing as the population swells. The city's unique charm, beauty, and climate all make it an attractive place to be—as long as one ignores the fault line lying below. Indeed, the way people know about but don't act on the earthquake's danger represents the broader idea that humans avoid taking responsibility and meaningful action. Young people in the city numb themselves with drugs and embrace a nihilistic philosophy that sees death in natural disasters as inevitable and prioritizes current pleasures. Meanwhile, the geological technicians in the city warn people about the earthquake but don't suggest solutions and are able to live cheerfully in danger, believing that they have done their job and trusting in others to take care of the rest. These failures of responsibility are highlighted by the few outliers who make different choices, like sacrificing money to help a small child access medical treatment. Ultimately, all of those who fail to heed the danger that the earthquake represents will suffer destruction and even death. The earthquake thus represents humans' self-destructive tendency to stay passive and prioritize short-term comfort over long-term well-being.



LIGHT

Light and darkness symbolize humanity's awareness and understanding, or a lack thereof, literalizing the idea of enlightenment in "Report on the Threatened City." In the story, the alien envoys and their spacecraft are made of light and are thus difficult for the humans—with their limited understanding and still-developing technology—to perceive. The ship can be seen in dim moonlight, and the envoys' first encounter with humans happens at night, suggesting the dimness of human awareness. And indeed, the youths and elders with whom the envoys communicate are aware of the imminent danger of an **earthquake** (which the envoys have come to Earth to warn people about) but cannot imagine taking preventive steps against it. The aliens themselves seem to be made of light rather than matter, which suggests that they are generally more enlightened—that is, technologically advanced, knowledgeable, and empathetic—than humans. The younger humans are more "clear-minded" than the elders, though, and thus better able to discern the dangers posed by war or the intersection of human action and nature. When the envoys encounter some intoxicated youths, the drug they have taken increases their sensitivity and enables them to better sense the envoys, whom they associate with light shining above the roof of a gas station.

When the envoys infiltrate a youthful gathering on the beach at sunset, they learn that darkness has a "powerfully saddening effect" on the humans, and the envoys' messages inspire "disabling despair," sad songs, and a hopeless refrain of "what can we do?" that lasts until many of the youth commit suicide. In

this way, darkness represents people's despair at not being able to understand the world around them. It is also at sunset—a time that, to the alien envoys, symbolizes humanity's apathy and passivity—that the envoys abandon their failed mission of warning the city's residents about the earthquake. The shifting and unstable light of sunset both indicates the challenges of enlightening the humans and provides the opportunity for the "official explanation" that shifting light and vivid sunsets cause mirages—illusions. Yet the envoys are real, and so is the danger of the earthquake. Nevertheless, humans perceive the envoys as a trick of the light and the earthquake as a vague, unurgent danger, thus perpetuating their own shortsightedness.





QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves* published in 2018.

Report on the Threatened City Quotes

●● Observing their behavior [...] our Commissioners for External Affairs decided that these people could have no idea at all of what threatened, that their technology, while so advanced in some areas, had a vast gap in it, a gap that could be defined, in fact, precisely by that area of ignorance—not knowing what was to befall them. This gap seemed impossible.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis



The background information that the alien envoys provide about their mission states the necessity of warning the residents of the titular "threatened city" of the impending earthquake. Based on humans' evidently unconcerned behavior, which the aliens have directly observed, the envoys believe that the humans must not be able to predict the coming earthquake.


But the envoys themselves will later admit that their assumptions and biases prevented them from understanding the situation, and this passage offers an early hint that they are missing or misunderstanding an important factor. The gap *seems* impossible, yet it exists—the aliens can perceive the truth but not yet accept or believe it. Thus, they demonstrate a gap between

perception and belief, just like the gap they observe in humans. Yet as the report progresses, it becomes clear that while the aliens are willing to reassess their beliefs, humans aren't. It also becomes clear that humans have a particular indifference to suffering and death. That human behavior is so unconcerned as to look like ignorance to these outsiders provides a clue about the depth of human indifference.

☛ We took it absolutely for granted, an assumption so strong that it prevented our effective functioning as much as these creatures' assumptions prevent them from acting—we believed (since we are so built ourselves) that it would be impossible for a disaster to have occurred already, because if we had experienced such a thing, we would have learned from the event and taken steps to accordingly. Because of a series of assumptions, then, and an inability to move outside our own mental set, we missed a fact that might have been a clue to their most extraordinary characteristic—the fact that such a very short time ago they experienced a disaster of the sort that threatens again, and soon.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

Until the alien envoys arrived on Earth, they weren't aware of the 1906 earthquake that destroyed San Francisco less than a century before their mission. They provide this important piece of context in their report before they begin recounting their mission day by day.


The aliens come to Earth because they believe that there's a gap in human technology for predicting earthquakes, but this isn't the case. And, even if it was, San Francisco has experienced a massive earthquake within the past century, so historical example should have already warned people that the San Francisco Bay area isn't a safe place to live. Rebuilding the ruined city in the same place, thus subjecting generations of people to the risk of a similar catastrophe, is yet another demonstration of human indifference to life and suffering, although the envoys don't yet understand the mechanism behind this indifference.


While the previous earthquake shows without a doubt that there is no "gap" in human knowledge, it also points out the

enormous gap in the aliens' knowledge. Their mission was conceived and planned based on a fundamental assumption that the humans would behave like the envoys' own species. This assumption clouds their ability to accurately perceive the situation when the first humans they try to warn don't react to their message—the envoys waste several days believing their subjects are either defective or incapacitated by fear. However, by the time they finalize their report, they have recognized the gap in their own knowledge and worked to close it. Thus, while they are initially like humans in their inability to perceive and act on the truth, the envoys change their thought process to consider new information—something they suggest humans are unable or unwilling to do.

☛ Here we approach the nature of the block, or patterning of their minds—we state it now, through we did not begin to understand it until later. It is that they are able to hold in their minds at the same time several contradictory beliefs without noticing it.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis



In the middle of a section describing the "war-making patterns" that characterize humanity, the envoys make their first attempt at defining the nature of the block that prevents humans from taking steps to protect San Francisco residents from the impending earthquake. Throughout the report, there are allusions to the Cold War, which was going on when the story was published in 1972. This was a time when the communist Soviet Union and the capitalist United States expressed ideological and national hostilities through technological competition (the Space Race and the stockpiling of nuclear weapons), proxy wars, and cultural events like the Olympic Games, rather than through direct violence. Thus, the envoys note that even when an entire society is driven by hostility, if it is orchestrated to occur quietly, its citizens will prefer to accept the more comfortable belief that they themselves have peaceful intentions.

The ability to hold contradictory beliefs simultaneously demonstrates the gap between perception and belief that

characterizes human behavior throughout the story. Perceiving the danger of the earthquake while believing that the city is a wonderful place to live and work is similar to watching war preparations and believing they are designed to keep the peace. The human capacity for holding contradictory beliefs begins to establish the basis for the paranoia and conspiracy thinking that characterize humans throughout the report. Most citizens are willing to believe their government's messages, even when confronted firsthand with truths that contradict this messaging.

Large numbers, everywhere on the planet, see craft like ours, or like other planets' craft or war machines from their own or other geographical areas. But such is the atmosphere created by the war departments that dominate everything that these individuals are regarded as mentally inadequate or deluded. Until one of them has actually seen a machine or spacecraft, he tends to believe that anyone who claims he has is deranged.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

When the envoys land their craft in a remote area outside San Francisco, partygoers and local farmers observe them. They are surprised to learn that many observers understand that their craft is extraterrestrial but aren't excited or alarmed by this information. Digging into the question, they tie this indifference to human nature and to the propaganda that rules society.

Each country's military machinery is invested in quieting reports of UFOs, whether these are extraterrestrial or military craft from hostile nations. This official conspiracy serves to control the population and allow militaries to continue to compete with one another. However, the number of sightings contradicts the official story. As more evidence builds up suggesting that official narratives contradict citizens' firsthand experiences, it becomes easier to understand the human gap between perceiving a truth and believing it: if a person is told that their observations are the result of mental instability, this undermines their trust in their own senses.

For one thing, at that time we did not know how to differentiate between the effects of the drugs and the effects of their senses. We now do know and will attempt a short description. The drug causes the mechanisms dealing with functions such as walking, talking, eating, and so on, to become slowed or dislocated. Meanwhile, the receptors for sound, scent, sight, touch, are open and sensitized. But, for us, to enter their minds is in any case an assault because of the phenomenon they call beauty, which is a description of their sense intake in an ordinary condition.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis


The envoys have entered the minds of three youths who are intoxicated by an unnamed drug. They report on this drug's effects and define the difference between how humans perceive the world and how they themselves do—with or without the drug. Given the importance of perception and belief in the story, knowing that the envoys perceive in a way that's totally alien to humans emphasizes the idea that perception is limited by the observer's biases and frameworks.

This also indicates the extreme differences between the two species, calling into question the envoys' initial assumption that humans would or should behave according to their expectations. The envoys note that *normal* human perception is so rich in information that it feels like an assault on their sensibilities, and that the drug enhances this feeling. The overwhelming nature of human sensation suggests a possible explanation for their vulnerability to conspiracy: with such a flood of information, it may be easier to trust what one is told rather than to have to discern the truth.

The doctor was also saying that he had to treat large numbers of people, particularly the young ones, for 'paranoia'. This was what our three hosts were judged to be suffering from. Apparently, it is a condition when people show fear of forthcoming danger and try to warn others about it, and then show anger when stopped by authority.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 250



Explanation and Analysis

The envoys possessed a trio of young people to use as loudspeakers for their message, but they were apprehended by the police and taken to jail, where a doctor sedated them. What the young people have been yelling and singing about is common knowledge—that the city is likely to suffer an earthquake soon—but because they’ve voiced this truth, authority figures target and suppress them.

Paranoia is a mental condition characterized by delusions, but history and current science both indicate that the young people are not delusional—the danger they’re talking about is real. The doctor’s own comments about the 1906 San Francisco earthquake mean that he can’t really consider them delusional, so silencing their voices is an act that covers up an inconvenient truth and replaces it with a conspiracy. Labeling people as delusional is the same strategy that the government successfully employs when it suppresses information about UFO sightings. Because the envoys are an alien species, however, they don’t know the human definition of “paranoia,” so they make their best guess. In their view, it is the authorities who are delusional in their refusal to acknowledge the truth of the coming disaster. Yet because the youth have relatively little power, the conspiracy has more influence than the truth.

☞ While at that stage we were still very confused about what we were finding, we had at least grasped this: that this species, on being told something, has no means of judging whether or not it is true. We on our planet assume [...] that if a new fact is made evident by material progress, or by a new and hitherto unexpected juxtaposition of ideas, then it is accepted as a fact, a truth—at least until evolutionary development bypasses it.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

As the envoys realize they must abandon their attempts to communicate telepathically and plan to take on human form, they report their best understanding of the problem.

The humans’ mental block and their ability to hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time are both functions of their inability to judge the truth independently. The extraterrestrials themselves accept the truth as it is revealed by advancements in science or by novel ideas, regardless of how revolutionary these ideas may be. Conversely, humans accept new information only from trusted sources—authorities—and this limits their ability to assess the truth objectively. Because the envoys have already presented information in their report about how the authorities lie and suppress information, they can see how vulnerable this makes the humans to lies and conspiracies—even if the humans themselves cannot see this.

The tone of the report, in which the envoys take an anthropological approach to studying human behavior, creates distance between readers and the human subjects. By filtering normal human activities and tendencies through alien eyes, the story forces readers to think about humanity from an outsider’s perspective and to consider their own society’s indifference to life and truth.

☞ For it is as if the mechanism fear has been misplaced from where it would be useful—preventing or softening calamity—to an area of their minds that makes them suspicious of anything but the familiar.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker), The Technicians

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

As the envoys continue to analyze humans’ inability to assess the truth, they perceive that humans fear unfamiliar ideas more than they fear the real dangers that surround them. The willingness to accept an authority figure’s word allows for the conspiratorial thinking that the envoys believe characterizes human society. Furthermore, the report will later reveal that the endless subdivision of society renders the authority of trustworthy individuals nearly pointless. For example, the geological technicians at the Institute can warn about earthquakes and about how dangerous it is to live in San Francisco, and most people accept these warnings. But since they don’t offer solutions, their warnings aren’t enough to outweigh the other

authoritative voices telling everyone how lovely, well-situated, and important the city is.

In a time of social and political upheaval, the role of authority is called into question. The story thus argues that the Cold War mentality, the government suppression of UFO sightings, and a disregard for San Franciscans' safety are all mechanisms by which the authorities suppress unfamiliar, potentially revolutionary ideas. Such ideas include the notion that humans aren't alone in the universe, that military powers control even peaceful societies, and that human life is more important than economic progress. The young—who are frequently connected to the 1960s and 70s “flower child” movement through their shaggy hair, use of psychedelics, and “free love” mentality—can more clearly perceive the truth of these revolutionary ideas. But they don't feel empowered by their society to act on the truths. And indeed, various authority figures disregard and suppress their ideas throughout the story.

☛ Thus disguised, we walked about the city engaged in observation, on the whole astounded that so little notice was taken of us. For while we were fair copies, we were not perfect, and a close scrutiny would have shown us up. But one of their characteristics is that they, in fact, notice very little about one another; it is a remarkably unnoticing species.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 252


Explanation and Analysis

The envoys have “incarnated” as two adult males, and although they have taken care to assume clothing, grooming, and behavior that project authority, they are nevertheless surprised that they don't raise anyone's suspicions. The lack of attention to the details of their disguise is an extension of humans' general inability to assess the truth, which the aliens have been analyzing for quite some time. In a society where opinions and beliefs are more important than facts, this lack of awareness makes humans more susceptible to authority figures' propaganda and conspiracies. This general unnoticing nature contrasts sharply with the sheer amount of sensory information that seems to be available to humans—which the envoys detailed with they possessed drugged human hosts. The story thus suggests that the necessary information to behave in a way that values life and respects the truth is available to human

beings. So, if humans behave with indifference or paranoia, then they are responsible for their own blind spots.

☛ We believe we have established one of their mechanisms for maintaining themselves in impotence and indecision. It is precisely this: that they do continuously discuss and analyse.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker), The Four Youths

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 253


Explanation and Analysis

At the Institute for Prognosis and Prevention of Earth Disturbance, the envoys have time to engage with human beings closely. While this doesn't get them any further toward their goal of warning the people to leave the city, it does give them more insight into human thought processes that prevent meaningful action. Although they have frequently noted an indifference in the minds of the humans they encounter, the envoys are still uncovering the mechanisms that create the block. Closely related to the reliance on familiar ideas and authorities is a reliance on discussion instead of action. In both cases, the range of potential action is severely limited, whether by the command of an authority or by endless words. The envoys experienced this earlier with the four youths who spent the night having a circular discussion about the impending catastrophe rather than strategizing for their survival.

Importantly, the alien envoys themselves do a lot of analyzing in their report. However, they provide a counterpoint and critique of human talk because their analysis leads them to deeper understanding of human beings. In addition, as their understanding grows, they change and adjust their plans—shifting from telepathy to impersonating humans, for instance, or honoring human fears about new ideas by using roundabout language to discuss problems. In this way, the aliens in the story serve as more rational, open-minded, proactive counterpoints to human beings.

●● Their attitude towards life is that it is unimportant. They are indifferent to their own suffering, assume that their species must continuously lose numbers and strength and health by natural disasters, famine, constant war. That this attitude goes side by side with infinite care and devotion to individuals seems to us to indicate...

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 254


Explanation and Analysis

The envoys reach this conclusion while at the Institute as they struggle to understand humans' "barbaric" method of city-planning and cheerful willingness to live in the city regardless of the danger. The life-limiting factors in this passage—natural disaster, famine, and war—can all be eliminated or limited through forecasting and human ingenuity. However, like the hopeless youths, humanity in general seems to have a fatalistic attitude toward suffering—especially when the threat is generalized or applied to other groups of people. When individual lives are at stake, however, humans are capable of great concern and care.

The interrupting local transmission cuts off the envoys' hypothesis, either suggesting that the contradiction can't be resolved or leaving a space for the reader to supply their own hypothesis. The passage also raises a question about the uses of technology: at one point in history, natural disaster and famine weren't preventable or predictable because of technological limits. But humans seem to have become stuck in this mentality, and their beliefs about the lives they can save haven't caught up with the impressive technology that allows them to predict earthquakes and land on the moon. This indifference is chosen, or at least perpetuated, by the authorities in power, although the reasons for their actions aren't yet clear.

●● Essentially, a received idea is one that has become familiar, whether effective or not, and no longer arouses hostility or fear. The mark of an educated individual is this: that he has spent years absorbing received ideas and is able readily to repeat them. People who have absorbed opinions counter to the current standard of ideas are distrusted and may be called opinionated.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes:  

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Explanation and Analysis

Building on their earlier analysis of the fear that humans show in the face of new ideas, the envoys describe the process of human education as one that instills society's common ideas rather than encouraging critical or novel thought. They suggest that an idea's familiarity, rather than its truth, determines how easily it will be accepted, which shows how easily people are disposed to be manipulated by those in power. Conspiracy thinking is built on the acceptance of "received ideas," and conspiracy is how government officials and other authority figures maintain control. Moreover, the importance of receiving and repeating ideas for social acceptance gives more insight into why humans seem so quick to accept what they're told over evidence that they can observe firsthand. Holding ideas that don't line up with the current standard can be dangerous, as the envoys' encounter with the police and the jail doctor already demonstrated.

●● But, very shortly, a strong emotion was raised by phrases and words of which we list a few here: profit motive, conflicting commercial interests, vested interests, capitalism, socialism, democracy—there are many such emotive words. We were not able to determine, or not in a way that our economic experts would recongise as satisfactory, the significance of these phrases, since the emotions became too violent to allow the conference to continue.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker), The Technicians

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

The envoys engage the technicians in roundabout discussions in their attempts to understand why the humans evidently refuse to take steps like evacuating the city. The technicians are less emotionally invested in their personal well-being than they are in the city's economic growth. Once again, the envoys provide an outside perspective of human preoccupations, critiquing the ease with which economic words such as "profit motive" are able to rouse humans from their general indifference into a state of violent agitation. An indifference toward life is combined

with a vested interest in the city's economic value. As the envoys quickly discover, economic self-interest is the guiding force behind city planning—and, by extension, behind the choices city planners and leaders make, including their resistance to any proposals about evacuating or relocating the city. Even the Institute's technicians, who are experts on earthquakes, are more concerned about the city's economic well-being than their personal safety, which shows how people allow themselves to be guided (or misguided) by profit and short-term comfort.

☞ We have concluded that the young are in a state of disabling despair. While more clear-minded, in some ways, than their elders—that is, more able to voice and maintain criticisms of wrongs and faults—they are not able to believe in their own effectiveness. Again and again, on the beach, as the air darkened, versions of this exchange took place:

“But you say you believe it must happen, and within five years.”

“So they say.”



“But you don't think it will?”


“If it happens, it happens.”

“But it isn't *if*—it *will* happen.”

“They are all corrupt, what can we do? They want to kill us all.”

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 256-257

Explanation and Analysis

Having failed to convey their warning—or even lifesaving first-aid instructions—to a group of youths on a beach, the envoys conclude that despair renders young people completely impotent. Youthful indifference arises from powerlessness, which itself is a result of older people's prioritization of economic concerns over human life. The report has already detailed instances of the youth being harassed or harmed for reporting UFO sightings, being jailed and drugged for shouting about the earthquake risk, and generally being disregarded and marginalized by their elders. Thus, although young people are more receptive to the envoys' message, they are less able to act on it.

Society's managers, in perpetuating the status quo and using conspiracies and propaganda to cover up

inconvenient truths, have also shown the youth that their lives are meaningless. And, as a result, the young people value neither other people's lives nor their own. Their hopelessness, shown most tragically by their mass suicide event, demonstrates the truth of the envoys' initial assessment that humans lack the will to live. The youths' suicides both preview the tragic loss of life that will happen in the earthquake and serve to critique society for allowing—if not directly encouraging—this hopelessness.

☞ We have a tentative conclusion. It is this: that a society that is doomed to catastrophe, and that is unable to prepare for it, can expect that few people will survive except those already keyed to chaos and disaster. The civil, the ordered, the conforming, the well-tempered, can expect to fall victim at first exposure. But the vagabonds, criminals, mad, extremely poor, will have the means to survive. We conclude, therefore, that when, within the next five years, the eruption occurs, no one will be left but those types the present managers of society consider undesirable, for the present society is too inflexible to adapt—as we have already said, we have no idea why this should be so, what is wrong with them.

Related Characters: The Envoys (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

As the envoys prepare to leave Earth, they try to summarize their failed mission's findings. Humans' unwillingness to protect themselves in the face of natural disaster has doomed the city to destruction. The efforts spent in silencing the truth, quieting dissenters, and expanding San Francisco's commercial interests could just as well be spent on preserving human lives—yet society's elites lack the flexibility to adapt to uncomfortable truths. Thus, the current situation relies on groupthink and conspiracy to maintain belief in the city's value despite the clear danger of its location along a fault line.


The envoys suggest that the only hope lies with those who have been marginalized by society and who are perhaps better positioned to see the truth precisely because they resist conforming to socially acceptable views. However, these are the very lives that broader society has consistently devalued—for example, the lives lost in the

stadium collapse or the thousands of homeless people living in the city. Indifference to some lives translates into indifference for life more generally, and the wealthy living in the high-rent part of town are just as vulnerable to natural disaster as the poor.

Salvation, in “Report from the Threatened City,” is presented as an outside force, whether it’s the extraterrestrial envoys or the people living on the fringes of society who are more likely to survive the catastrophe. This suggests that the human denial and indifference on display throughout the report is not necessarily a function of human beings themselves, but has more to do with how they organize their societies. In a world characterized by war and in a country founded on capitalism, the story suggests, the outlook for humanity is not good. Thus, although the envoys failed to provoke the citizens of the city to action, their report challenges human readers to think critically about the world in which they live.

●● The two southern landings coincided with the disappearance of 11 people, five the first time, six the second. This makes 450 people gone without trace during the past two years. We suggest it is no longer possible to dismiss the fact that the landings of these craft always mean the disappearance of two to ten people with the word ‘coincidence.’ We must face the possibility that all or some are manned, but by individuals so dissimilar in structure to ourselves that we cannot see them. We would point out that Sonoscope 4 is only just able to bring these types of craft within vision and that, therefore, the levels of density that might indicate the presence of ‘people’ might escape the machine. We further suggest the facetiousness of the phrase ‘little green men’ might mask an attitude of mind that is inimical to sober evaluation or assessment of this possibility.

Related Characters: The Envoys

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 260

Explanation and Analysis

This Air Force report, written after the alien envoys have left Earth, indicates that some humans have indeed heeded their warning and are leaving San Francisco—and even the planet. This report’s writers are willing to explore the possible implications of their observations, allowing their perceptions to guide them to the truth, rather than falling back on standard, received ideas. They also push back on official efforts to obscure the truth when they reject the dismissive language used to imply that UFO sightings are delusions. Trusting their perceptions, the writers suggest that the craft might be manned and that their repeated visits to the area might be purposeful. However, the official reports included in the story emphasize conspiracy and cover-up, and they minimize the pattern of disappearances. This demonstrates how cynical the government’s conspiracies are: they know full well what is going on, but they won’t acknowledge publicly, knowing that almost everyone will accept their official account.



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.

REPORT ON THE THREATENED CITY

Priority Flash One. Unforeseen conditions mean that all plans and forecasts must be cancelled. *Priority.* Energy supplies are low, and it is likely that other local transmissions might interrupt the report.

This opening passage establishes the framework for the report, which will analyze the mission and explain why the plans must change. It also foreshadows—and explains—the news reports and advertisements that will later interrupt and give context to the report.



Summary of Background to Mission. Some envoys report that they observed a city on a different planet using “Astroviewers” and unmanned spacecrafts. In doing so, they realized that a major disaster loomed over the city. Given the city’s evident lack of preparation, the envoys and their fellows assumed a knowledge gap was to blame. This surprised them because of the general advancement of the creatures’ technology, but they couldn’t come up with any plausible explanations for the source of the knowledge gap.

The aliens’ observations—that this other species is technologically advanced yet fail to prepare for natural disaster—hints that they’re talking about humans on Earth. The envoys’ extraterrestrial point of view provides distance from the human subjects in the story. This allows the story to analyze humanity from an anthropological perspective, which makes familiar behavior seem strange and therefore noticeable. The aliens’ assumption that the citizens of the threatened city must not know about the impending disaster betrays their own biased beliefs—they are unable to understand the situation because the humans’ behavior is so different from their own. Their bias clouds their ability to fully understand the situation.



Summary of Objective this Mission. The extraterrestrials worked to build a ship capable of landing a team on the planet to warn the people, assist in evacuating and resettling them, and “cushion the shock” of the impending **earthquake**. The envoys were also tasked with taking some “specimens” back to their planet for scientific training that would help them predict future earthquakes. The extraterrestrials worked hard and postponed other plans to build the necessary spacecraft for this mission. The trip was successful: the envoys landed on “the western shore of the land mass” and have been on the other planet for one week.

The extraterrestrials demonstrate their altruism by committing time and resources to the project of warning the city, even through it requires sacrifice. Their altruism will be contrasted with the behavior of the humans they try to warn. Although the impending disaster’s location hasn’t yet been specified, “the western shore” where the envoys land is the first hint that the story is set on the west coast of the United States.



The Nature of the Problem. The envoys delayed making any transmissions until this point because they have been conserving fuel. In addition, it took quite some time for them to understand the problems that they encountered in warning the people of the threatened city. The creatures are, in fact, able to forecast the **earthquake**, but they don't seem concerned about it. The envoys believe that the creatures belong to a species that "lacks the will to live," and they have been trying to understand why this is the case. They will report the circumstances of their mission to try to explain this indifference.

An Impossible Fact. First, however, the envoys must relate a fact that seems unbelievable. The city experienced a very large **earthquake** "65 years ago, their time." The extraterrestrials weren't aware of this because they couldn't imagine that the city's citizens knew this history but didn't take preventive measures. In a similar situation, the envoys would have tried to avoid a repeat disaster. Therefore, the extraterrestrials did not look back into time when planning the mission, taking it "absolutely for granted" that the disaster was to be unprecedented. Having made this admission, the envoys begin to recount their mission.

The Landing. The envoys landed their craft by **moonlight** in an arid, sparsely populated area. Their predecessors had landed here, first at long intervals, but with increasing frequency recently. A group of young creatures were at the site, participating in a "mating ritual that involved fire, food and strong sound." Several of the youth saw the craft. As they dispersed, the envoys read their minds and discovered that while these viewers believed that the craft was alien in origin, they were indifferent to this knowledge. Next, a group of older specimens appeared, all of whom were farmers who lived nearby. These creatures were also aware of the envoys' spacecraft, though it became invisible to them once the sun rose. The elders felt pride because they believed the craft to be a weapon that originated from their own planet.

The envoys' report switches between detailing their actions step by step and offering commentary on what they have learned. This bit of analysis, which communicates the envoys' realization that there is no knowledge gap about the earthquake risk—although no steps are being taken to save lives—introduces the idea that humans are indifferent to other people's (and their own) suffering. According to the aliens' perspective, human indifference is almost suicidal—this is the story's way of critiquing humans' unwillingness to care for and preserve life. Despite this evident flaw in humanity, the envoys carry on their altruistic mission of saving the species from itself.



This passage reveals that the city the aliens are observing is most likely San Francisco; a major earthquake struck San Francisco in 1906, about 65 years before "Report on the Threatened City" was published in 1972. While turn-of-the-century technology didn't allow the initial earthquake to be predicted, the city was rebuilt on the same fault line despite the knowledge that future earthquakes would happen. This suggests a general indifference to human suffering and death. Because an earthquake is a relatively predictable natural disaster, it symbolizes any kind of impending threat that humanity chooses to ignore. The aliens demonstrate their own gap in perception and understanding when they admit that they didn't look back into the past while preparing for their mission. However, they frame their report with the aim of correcting this mistake and rationally assessing humanity.



The envoys don't try to land secretly, but their presence doesn't surprise anyone nearby. They note this indifference with some surprise, although they don't yet understand its source. Importantly, the landing happens at night, which both renders the craft more visible—making it even more strange that no one reacts—and introduces the symbol of light, which stands for enlightenment. The aliens and their craft are made of light, which represents the advancement of their technology and their ability assess the truth rationally. Once again, their non-human perspective makes a common activity—a party—sound strange, allowing a fresh perspective on human behavior. Finally, the "mating ritual" of food and song in the countryside is the first of many allusions to the flower child movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, which was a protest of mostly young people against capitalism and war.



War-Making Patterns. The envoys explain the older specimens' belief that the spacecraft was a weapon. War and violence are so characteristic of this species that it is in the process of destroying itself. Each geographical grouping of this species is under the control of its "war-making functions." This is true whether the inhabitants are actively preparing for war or believe themselves to be peaceful.

Rational Action Impossible. The species can hold in their minds two contradictory ideas at once. This fact is key to the "nature of the block" that prevented the envoys from completing their mission, and it makes rational action hard for the species. The envoys are aware that the planet's inhabitants are being deceived by their various groupings' war departments.

Subservient Populations. For instance, this species' recent, publicly broadcasted moon landings were not actually the first. Rather, earlier landings were made secretly to show military and technological prowess among the dominant groups. Likewise, inhabitants' widespread reports of UFOs are frequently stifled by the authorities, who conceal whether the objects in question are terrestrial or extraterrestrial in origin. This official misinformation is so widely accepted that most of the inhabitants believe that sightings are a sign of delusion or mental illness until they see one themselves.

This supports another one of the envoys' observations: the younger members of the species see more clearly and better understand the nature of the planet. Yet the younger members are also "more passive and hopeless" than the elders, who control society. The envoys hypothesize a correlation between the amount of purposeful energy members of the species have and the narrowness of their ideas. Both the youths and the elders that the envoys encountered upon landing had seen and reported alien spacecraft to the authorities in the past. But the youth had met with resistance and were no longer willing to interact with the authorities. The elders' response was to be on the alert for further sightings but to keep their observations quiet.

Because war is so prevalent in human society, the elders assume that the alien spacecraft is terrestrial surveillance or weapons technology. This is the first allusion to the Cold War, a decades-long conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. The Cold War avoided direct confrontation, but the development of weapons technology and proxy wars in the 1960s and 1970s meant that even the fragile "peace" between the two powers was underwritten by violence. Allowing themselves to be governed by war even when they believe they are at peace demonstrates humans' preference for their opinions and beliefs over facts and explains some of the indifference the aliens note. Surrounded and controlled by war, violence, and death, no one—especially not the young—feels empowered to change their situation.



The essential truth that humans can hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time is foundational to conspiracy thinking, which requires a person to believe in a hypothetical scenario even when it is much less plausible than other explanations. The first direct evidence of the conspiracies in human society is the aliens' awareness that governments are deceiving people.



Conspiracy thinking comes from the top down, as governments lie to their citizens about technological developments like spaceflight. The official story that UFOs don't exist is reinforced throughout all levels of society by casting sightings as the result of mental illness. Many people have seen UFOs but haven't reported them for fear of being called delusional, which shows a manipulation of belief—even when there's visible evidence to support people's testimonies.



The inverse correlation between perceiving the truth and feeling empowered to act on it has two consequences. First, this generates indifference among young people, and with good reason: when they have tried to confide in the authorities in the past, their elders have dismissed their experiences of phenomena like UFOs. Second, it demonstrates authority figures' coercive power to silence the truth. These conspiracies ultimately make people unwilling—or unable—to trust their own perceptions.



First Attempt at a Warning. After landing on the planet, the envoys attempted their first warning. The elders seemed unafraid and didn't understand that the bright **sunlight** had just made the spacecraft invisible. The envoys decided to intercept the elders' thoughts and communicate with them telepathically. But there was an obstacle that the envoys couldn't understand and that made the process time-consuming; they believed they might run out of power while trying to communicate with the elders.

The elders aren't scared by the warning of the earthquake, because it is old news to them. The message begins in daylight, which symbolizes the fact that the elders already see the danger clearly. However, the envoys are in the dark about the earlier earthquake and human indifference. In their report, they have already mentioned the nature of the block, but in the chronology of their mission, they haven't yet discovered it. The daylight timing and care with which the envoys convey their message contrast with the truth that the elders know about the earthquake but don't care.



Incapacity for Fear. To avoid unnecessarily alarming the creatures, the envoys fed the news of the impending **earthquake** directly into their creatures' minds very slowly, over the course of 24 hours. The farmers failed to react, and the envoys assumed that fear prevented their understanding. They repeated the message, but there was still "no change in [the farmers'] mental structure." Hypothesizing that this group was somehow deficient for their purposes, the envoys decided to find others to warn. Hindsight indicates that the farmers already knew about the threat, but at the time, the envoys attributed their failure to the specimens' age and corresponding lack of openness to new ideas.

The envoys distrust their own perceptions and repeat the message because they are still operating under incorrect beliefs about human behavior. As they narrate the report, they have the benefit of hindsight. But their failure to generate alternative hypotheses, like their earlier inability to explain the "gap" in human knowledge, shows that they haven't yet been able to move beyond their mistaken beliefs. This mental block wastes precious time and energy. The elders are indifferent, not because they are defective specimens, but because human indifference rises from thought processes that the aliens have yet to uncover.



Second Attempt at a Warning. It took three days after the landing for any youth come close enough for the envoys to make their second attempt. Just as the **light** of day faded, four youths arrived, and the envoys used the same method—but less time—to convey their warning. Again, they had to repeat the message because they didn't think the four youths could absorb it. But the youths neither rejected it nor were paralyzed with fear. Instead, they repeated variations on the phrases "it's going to be real bad," "[half] the city might be killed," and "[they] say we only have five years." Eventually, one took up a musical instrument and set these sentiments to music, singing about how they "eat and drink and love," to deal with their mortality. Following the song, the youth returned to their activities.

If light symbolizes enlightenment in the story, the four youths' arrival at sunset (when light gives way to darkness) foreshadows their inability to perceive the truth. They understand the danger but don't seem to understand that they could take steps to protect themselves and others. It also emphasizes the aliens' ongoing blindness to aspects of human nature. The youths' refrains about the disaster's inevitability show their perceived helplessness and their indifference to life-saving knowledge. Their song's lyrics further allude to the flower child movement in the 1960s and 70s, with its emphasis on free love, momentary pleasures, and drug culture.



Phase I Abandoned. The envoys decided to stop using telepathy to transmit the warning and begin Phase II, which involved directly entering some of the creatures' minds and causing them to say the warning. At this point, the envoys still didn't understand that people didn't react to the warnings because they already expected the impending **earthquake**.

The envoys are still blinded by their own biases and cannot accept the evident truth that their message hasn't moved any of the humans they've tried to warn. However, they are still committed to their mission, and they step up their efforts to save these creatures from their immobilizing indifference to life.



Phase II Attempted. The envoys travel into the city with the four youths. The trip began at dawn and continued until full **light**. The envoys were shocked by the foolhardy way the youth handled the vehicle, their laughter at near collisions, their “recklessness, [and] their indifference to death or pain.” Surprised by this lack of survival instinct, the envoys considered that they were unlucky enough to encounter many creatures whose indifference made them “defective.”

When the four youths stopped at a fueling station, the envoys noticed three dazed, shaggy-haired youth sitting on a bench. The envoys realized that these youth were under the influence of a drug that heightened their sensitivity; for this reason, they perceived the envoys’ presence, unlike the youth in the car. The intoxicated youth associated the envoys with the **light** of the “sun’s appearance over the roof.” Because the drug had relaxed the youths, the envoys hoped that they would be open to possession, and they entered the trio’s minds (at considerable risk to themselves, due to the nature of the drug).

This phase of the mission was particularly dangerous for the envoys because they were not initially able to “differentiate between the effects of the drugs and the effects of their senses.” They report that the drug depresses functions like walking and talking while increasing the sensations of “sound, scent, sight, [and] touch.” The envoys’ mode of perception is very different to this species’. Even without the drug, they would be prone to losing their balance and being overwhelmed by the beauty and color that this species perceives in the world.

Necessity to Condense Report, Power Failing. While the envoys would like to elaborate on their experience of the drugged youths’ minds, they are aware that their transmission is in danger of being broken up, so they return to recounting of their mission. They caused the young creatures to shout and sing about the coming disaster while they awaited transportation into the city center. Once there, they continued to make the youths shout out their message. The envoys yet again expected a “response to which we could respond [...] with advice or offers of help.” Instead, the few people who noticed them at all refused this connection with a “glance or a short indifferent stare.”

Once again, the distance created by the envoys’ odd descriptions of cars and laughter offers an anthropological lens for observing human behavior. And the observation isn’t kind: the youth disregard life and safety, laughing at near-misses and failing to reduce speed or drive carefully. The night-to-day duration of the car ride to the city parallels the envoys’ gradual enlightenment: although they haven’t yet understood how truly universal humanity’s indifference to life is—still considering these youth somehow defective—they are on a collision course with that knowledge.



The long-haired people on the bench are under the influence of a mind-altering drug—perhaps marijuana or LSD—again alluding to the flower children. These human specimens are more receptive to enlightenment—and, by extension, the envoys’ message—in their drugged state. They perceive the envoys’ presence and correctly associate it with light. This pessimistically suggests that human consciousness needs to be altered or bypassed in some way to allow for clear perception of the truth.



The envoys’ destabilizing experience of the world through the youths’ minds hints at how differently they must perceive things. Although the drug renders the possession riskier, they continue with their altruistic mission out of concern for the human community. The envoys imply that they don’t perceive through physical senses, and they suggest that human experience of the world, mediated by sensory stimuli, may reduce their ability to perceive the substance—rather than the appearance—of things.



The envoys are shocked that everyone seems to be indifferent to their direct appeal from the youths’ bodies. The few people who take notice of the youths ignore them, suggesting their outside status and lack of authority. Disregard also suggests the shallow way in which humans perceive one another. Given the ongoing allusions to flower child culture, mistrust of the trio may arise because the youths are hippies. The envoys, though, are shocked at human indifference. That they continue to search for a response that makes sense to them suggests that they haven’t yet been able to grasp significant truths about human nature.



Capture by the Authorities. Suddenly, the envoys heard a loud sound. They initially thought this was finally a reaction to their message or a warning to the citizens. But instead, it was an official-looking vehicle that took the youth to jail for being a public nuisance. Rather than questioning the youths about their warning, the jail's doctor rendered them unconscious with a drug. He mentioned the **earthquake** that struck the city 65 years ago, which was shocking news to the envoys. The doctor, like other authorities, thought that the youth suffered from "paranoia," which the envoys understood to mean "a condition when people show fear of forthcoming danger and try to warn others about it."

As the envoys describe their shock at this turn of events, their transmission is interrupted by a "news flash" that describes the heartwarming story of Janice Wanamaker, a two-year-old child with a congenital heart condition in desperate need of lifesaving operation. Janice is saved by five "ordinary people, not rich folks," who have each "given up a month's pay" to send her to a special medical center. When the envoys' report resumes, they note the details of the previous **earthquake**, which tore up hundreds of miles of earth, killed hundreds of people, and was followed by fires.

Humour as a Mechanism. The envoys relate two notable features of the doctor's reaction: his use of humor, which they identify as "a device for the release of tension or to ward off or relieve fear," and euphemistically referring to the **earthquake** as "the fire" rather than its proper name. The envoys note that humor and euphemism indicate fear and helplessness, which they find odd since the creatures could simply leave the city. Their report is interrupted by another snippet of local transmission, this one advertising a new suburb to the west of the city that will contribute to its growth.

The Jettisoning of Phases I, II and III. The envoys now viewed both Phases I and II as failures and also decided that Phase III, which was to be a combination of the two, should be abandoned altogether. At this point, they had learned that they should "assume the shapes of older animals" because "the authorities disliked the young," although they were still unsure as to whether the creatures as a group were "capable of listening to the older ones."

The description of the police car and jail, filtered through the envoys' outsider perspective, again makes everyday objects seem strange. The common knowledge of earthquake danger, combined with active hostility to preventive actions, reveals the depth of human indifference. However, the envoys still can't perceive the factors driving this indifference and hostility. The doctor diagnoses the youths with paranoia, essentially suggesting that they're delusional. But based on their own observations, the aliens guess that "paranoia" simply describes perceiving a danger and trying to mitigate it. This highlights the irony of the human situation: those who most clearly see the danger are labeled delusional, while those who are most deluded are considered sane and put in positions of authority.



This first news flash juxtaposes individual acts of altruism with concern for the community. Lifesaving treatment for dire illness is available at great cost, and Janice Wanamaker receives it only because selfless people make personal sacrifices for her. Later reports will explore this individual approach to problems, which seems to contrast with the aliens' communal efforts. The care for Janice's singular life contrasts sharply with the death and devastation that the 1906 earthquake caused.



Again, the alien perspective casts a fresh light on human behavior. They identify euphemism—using mild, pleasant words instead of rude or unpleasant ones—and laughter as mechanisms humans use to reduce their anxiety. Their reliance on these mechanisms, which have no real effect, contrasts starkly with their refusal to reduce anxiety through actions that actually solve problems. At this point, the envoys have collected plenty of examples of how fear and helplessness lead to indifference toward life. The local broadcast advertising a new suburb hints at another factor driving this indifference: a desire to keep the city prosperous and growing. City planning will come up several times in the rest of the report.



The extraterrestrials are beginning to understand an important truth: belief has less to do with what is said and more to do with who says it, because of the gap humanity creates between perception and belief. Elders dislike the young and squelch contradiction—as the envoys have recorded—through conspiracy, propaganda, and obscuring the truth.



Inability to Assess Truth. The envoys interrupt their report to remark that this species is incapable of judging the truth of a statement on its own merits. Rather, they accept new ideas only from sources they already trust. Therefore, the envoys suggest, future missions should prioritize the creation of credible and respected characters to impart the facts. For example, had the youth claimed to see aliens, the authorities would have rejected the report out of mistrust of the reporters. If, however, other authorities “observed [...] with instruments [...] three rapidly vibrating **light** structures”—the same aliens—they would be more readily believed. In addition to the messenger, great care must be used to select familiar, believable words for the message.

Adaptation to their Norm for their Dominant Animals. The envoys “incarnated” as two adult males, taking care to arrange in a way that would inspire trust, including conservative clothing and hairstyles. While mature women and the youth were allowed more flexibility in terms of color and style of dress, adult males had to conform. The envoys focused on carrying their bodies in a sober way and making facial expressions that conveyed their peaceful intent.

In disguise, the envoys walked around the city, where they were surprised by the lack of attention paid to them. They were “fair copies” of the creatures, but close observation would have betrayed their alien nature. Nevertheless, no one seemed to notice. Everyone they talked to knew about the impending **earthquake**, but “they did not really believe it.” During these conversations, the envoys learned about an institute that existed to “study the past upheaval and make plans for the forthcoming one.” The envoys’ broadcast is interrupted by a news bulletin about the tragic collapse of the stands at a baseball stadium. Sixty people were killed. The accident evidently occurred because safety procedures were minimized to maximize the stadium owners’ profits.

The envoys analyze their findings to explain their dawning realization that humans can’t differentiate between truth and reality. Instead, they accept their beliefs from authority figures, a situation that helps explain why people avoid the truth and are readily deceived. Their example uses the symbol of light in the context of belief: the young person and the scientist in the story both observe extraterrestrials who are made of light. The youth sees this directly, while the scientist uses an instrument. The young person’s unmediated account would be distrusted, while the scientist would gain authority by describing the phenomenon as it was sensed with instruments. The example points to the power of the older cultural authorities compared to the youth. It also shows how readily humans believe information gathered by authorities over what they themselves can see. This idea links back to the envoys’ earlier accounts of how reports of UFO sightings are met with disbelief and misinformation.



Unlike the humans, the envoys accept the situation they encounter, and as they begin to understand it more fully, they adapt their methods accordingly. Because people are more willing to believe an accepted authority’s statements than their own experience, the envoys adopt the shape of the people who have the most authority in American culture (adult men).



Again, the envoys are surprised at how little human beings notice. Their imperfect disguises are readily accepted, suggesting the depths of people’s willingness to defer to authority instead of their own perceptions. Knowing is somehow separate from believing, a paradox that lies at the root of human indifference and paranoia. The interrupting broadcast illuminates another aspect of this indifference: 60 people died in a stadium collapse simply because the owners prioritized their profits over safety measures. This begins to suggest that self-interest is at the heart of capitalism, an idea that the story will continue to explore through news broadcasts like this one.



The Institute. The envoys entered the Institute for Prognosis and Prevention of Earth Disturbance as observers. It is a place where 50 “highly skilled technicians’ work equipment that is just as advanced as the technology on the envoys’ planet. The institute exists because it’s common knowledge that another **earthquake** will happen soon, yet the technicians responsible to forecast it live in the dangerous city willingly and cheerfully. The envoys consider that these people might be extremely brave but ultimately conclude that they, like the youth in the car earlier, “are in some way set not to believe what they say” about the impending danger.

The next interruption of the report concerns a tragic fire in a housing complex. A brave and selfless hero passing by on the street entered the building three times, saving two small children, an elderly woman, and a baby before evidently perishing in the blaze.

A Basic Mechanism. The envoys use their experience at the Institute to explain how the creatures avoid action by way of discussion and debate—“one of their mechanisms for maintaining themselves in impotence and indecision.” Thus, the technicians at the Institute issue warnings one after the other, all of which come true. Yet when the envoys tried to talk about preventive actions to take, the technicians treated them like suspicious troublemakers. These technicians weren’t afraid to discuss “the timing, the nature, the power” of **earthquakes**, but they were hostile to discussions about “transfer of population or rebuilding the city elsewhere.” The envoys suspect that many methods that the creatures believe bring change or save lives instead delay meaningful action.

Another news bulletin cuts in. Someone is protesting a plan to raze three skyscrapers in order to erect higher buildings in the city, when the money for this project could be used to build affordable housing for the many people that need it. The envoys then continue to report on the importance of discussion in this society, but a second bulletin boasts of the city’s conventions and tourism, which prove how attractive “the city, its situation, its climate, its amenities” are, before noting that “it is essential to step up the building of new hotels, motels and restaurants” to draw in and accommodate more visitors.

The geological technicians’ willingness to live and work in the city, although they are perhaps the best-positioned to understand the risks, illustrates human indifference toward life while emphasizing the necessity of aligning one’s beliefs with reality in order to survive. The vexed relationship between these experts and the less-aware citizens and city planners, who hear the warnings but don’t heed them, again speaks to the power of conspiracy thinking. It makes less sense to heed a call to leave the threatened city when the earthquake experts continue to live there willingly.



The tragedy in this news report is relatively small-scale, as the fire only burns one apartment building down. Still, the individual hero can only save a few people’s lives. The report thus emphasizes the value of individual lives and sidelines the larger group of people who suffered in this tragedy.



The envoys’ analysis of how humans seem to prefer talking about problems to fixing them suggests that indifference lies in the gap between knowing and acting. Even worse, talk can replace action. Yet again, the envoys’ surprise at the gap between humans’ knowledge of the danger and willingness to act shows that perceiving does not necessarily mean believing. Although there are simple solutions available, human unwillingness to align belief with reality makes the solution seem more horrible than the problem.



The local debate about increasing the value of buildings in high-rent areas rather than building affordable housing demonstrates indifference to human suffering yet again. By contrasting high-rises to affordable housing, the report indicates how capitalism encourages self-interest over the common good. This indifference to poor people’s suffering is underpinned by a general indifference to life, because no matter what buildings go up, the impending earthquake will endanger the residents. Continual assertions of the city’s attractions and appeals to bring in more residents and tourists serve to undermine belief in the coming disaster.



Indifference to Loss of Life. The envoys report that the citizens of the city have never considered relocating for their own safety. They feel that this indicates an attitude that life is not valued, at least on a societal or global level. However, this indifferent attitude coexists with “infinite care and devotion to individuals or small groups.” The report is interrupted with another story about Joan Underscribe, a wife who spent five years working around the clock to afford a large public memorial to “the best husband a woman ever had,” William Underscribe. The envoys’ analysis of the creatures’ preference for talk over action is further interrupted by a bulletin for an entertainment extravaganza featuring performers from around the world and rich and famous guests.

The envoys determine that the creatures’ main “anxiety-calming mechanism” is something called a “conference,” which involves meeting together to discuss a theme or themes. When this is done socially, it is called a “party.” Those who aren’t at the conference are later told of the opinions shared there. At this point, the envoys are interrupted by a bulletin describing the success of the city’s “conservation year” and calling for a “conference” to extend the awareness and interest it created in the citizens.

Their Education. The envoys conclude that opinions are the primary subject of the creatures’ education—particularly knowing how to differentiate one’s own opinion from those of others. When two of the creatures first meet, they try to discern each other’s opinions and “will tolerate each other” according to how well their opinions agree or disagree. Ideas that many people accept become familiar and are also called “received ideas.” These are rarely met with much opposition, and the mark of an educated person is to have absorbed many of them. Those who have absorbed ideas that are not “to the current standard” are distrusted—particularly if they are women or youth.

The envoys eventually realize that humans are indifferent to suffering in general, but not to more personal, individualized instances of suffering—a revelation that the interrupting broadcasts support. William Underscribe gets more care and concern in death than the city’s insufficiently housed poor people, or the countless people who will suffer and die in the coming earthquake. This social apathy extends to allowing national stars and international entertainers to risk their lives travelling to the city for a week of shows.



By casting human interactions, including parties, as “conferences”—places where people calm their anxieties by sharing opinions on a topic—the story again uses the aliens to invoke a distanced, anthropological perspective. Because the report has already established that talk frequently prevents action rather than enabling it, it’s unlikely that “conferences” actually solve problems. Nevertheless, the next bulletin celebrates the city’s successful conservation year—another absurdity, considering that the city is not taking steps to protect itself from the next earthquake. The bulletin also calls for a conference that is more likely to unify people in false belief than to engage with reality.



The aliens have already established that humans are incapable of assessing the truth for themselves—they are ruled by their beliefs and opinions. New information must come from a trusted source, and a trusted source is defined as one with similar opinions, suggesting that almost all human communication happens in an echo chamber. This is one possible reason why it is so hard for the envoys to break through people’s indifference and hopelessness. That opinions are the focus of human education suggests the time and attention necessary to instill the desired beliefs in the next generation. An education that favors received truth over observed truth leads to a society that’s vulnerable to conspiracy thinking, because it uncritically accepts shared beliefs. There are also social mechanisms in place that reinforce standard ideas: namely, those who have different ideas are shunned. The report has already provided examples of this, such as when the drugged youths were labeled paranoid.



The envoys became well-known at the institute as Herbert Bond (age 35) and John Hunter (age 40). They did not directly ask the technicians why they weren't trying to avoid calamity. They had learned to engage in a roundabout exchange of ideas, saying, for instance, "Let us discuss the factors militating against the taking [a certain] step." This approach was initially successful, but it faltered when words such as "profit motive [...] capitalism, socialism, democracy" entered the conversation. These words provoked such an emotional response that the envoys feared violence, which results when the "range of opinions" on what should be done is "too wide to be accommodated." Notably, the disagreement is on the steps to be taken, not on the fact of impending **earthquake**.

Barbaric Method of Town Planning Unique in Our System, but See Histories of Planets 2 and 4. From discussions at the Institute, the envoys concluded that the creatures plan their cities not based on citizens' needs, but by balancing many conflicting, self-interested desires. For example, many buildings are built directly on the city's fault line because people will pay more to live there. Lest those with commercial interests in these buildings be accused of disregarding others' lives, the envoys note that the planners and builders are themselves among the people who willingly live in the danger zone.

The next interruption is a bulletin celebrating the emergency unit at a local hospital, where doctors and nurses work heroically to save the lives of car accident and street fight victims. The treatments available in the emergency unit mean that people who would have died as recently as five years ago can now be saved. Unfortunately, those living near hospitals not so equipped are usually less lucky, as it takes more time to reach lifesaving treatments.

With their newfound knowledge about how humans communicate and whom they trust, the envoys enter the institute that studies and predicts earthquakes—the place where they should be most likely to succeed with their warning. Here, they find no disagreement about the impending disaster, just about the steps that could be taken to soften it. This suggests that conspiracy and indifference are closely related, as powerful people can exploit both. Here, too, for the first time, the envoys encounter the economic interests that capitalize on human indifference. The technicians are more fired up about the economic costs of evacuating the city than the human costs of the disaster they predict. If the technicians accept economic arguments for staying, the story implies, then the builders and planners are likely to be even more resistant.



This passage recalls the earlier news bulletin on the stadium collapse, which resulted from the owners' concern for profits over safety. Likewise, the city's plan is based on economic self-interest. The story might be alluding here to events following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, where local business leaders rushed to downplay the disaster and rebuild the city on the same site as quickly as possible. Commercial interests can override safety due to humanity's apathy and willingness to disregard danger; the owners and builders who live in the danger zone both model and encourage this indifference toward life. Although the story suggests that avoiding unpleasant truths might be a natural human reaction, history and the aliens' warnings both contradict the citizens' incorrect beliefs.



Thus far, the envoys' report has established how people tend to prioritize individual lives and interests are over the common good. The new emergency department demonstrates this imbalance: its lifesaving benefits are very real, but they are only accessible to people close enough to arrive quickly. Previous bulletins mentioning new suburbs (featuring many amenities but not necessarily a hospital) and the city's severe housing crisis raise questions about how many people will actually benefit from this new emergency unit.



The Institute Found Not Useful. Having concluded that they could make no more progress at the institute, the envoys returned to the city center to contact the young. Because of the mistrust between the youth and the elders, the envoys had to reincarnate as a young man and woman. They found that the young people liked to “discuss and talk and sing endlessly.” The purpose of their conversations is to create “sensations of satisfaction and agreement with each other.” The envoys wasted a fourth of their remaining fuel on a futile attempt to convince the young to exit the city and find a new place to live.

The report has frequently mentioned older people’s narrow ideas and conservative attitudes. The entrenched attitudes and shared beliefs at the Institute insulate its technicians from true perception of the earthquake’s danger. Although the envoys hope that the young, who are more open-minded, will be receptive, the youth also prefer to hear their peers reflect their preexisting opinions, which suggests that the young are just as vulnerable to being manipulated by conspiracy theories as the old. This suggests that indifference and inability to perceive the truth are perhaps universal human flaws.



Failure with the Young. Unfortunately, the envoys waited until after the **daylight** had faded, the worst possible moment, for this attempt. Several youths turned the occasion into a “conference” in which they addressed the crowd through sad songs. The envoys tried to discuss how to prevent congregation in the most vulnerable areas (ironically, the gathering of the youth was happening in just such a place), how to prevent mass deaths and injuries, and how to treat injuries.

The envoys meet the youth after sunset, when the literal darkness of night parallels the metaphorical darkness of the youths’ minds. Instead of understanding the envoys’ instructions on mitigating the disaster, the youth remain in the metaphorical darkness as they deny their ability to create change. The generalized indifference to danger in humans is on display even in the choice of a venue for the gathering, as the beach is a particularly risky place to be in an earthquake.



Despair of the Young. However, the state of “disabling despair” in which the young exist totally prevents a belief “in their own effectiveness.” The envoys’ attempts to spur the youth to action resulted in the same redundant, hopeless conversation they heard from the first group of youths and more sad songs.

The sources of indifference, this episode suggests, aren’t limited to commercial interests—they can also arise from the youths’ deep belief in their own inability to make a difference in their society. The aliens’ continued warnings are met with hopelessness about trying anything, even when they offer clear and specific instructions.



Mass Suicides. There was also a mass suicide event where hundreds of youths swam out to sea or jumped from the nearby cliffs. The envoys’ narration of this event is interrupted by another local broadcast detailing a plan to build a large bird sanctuary in the city that has been made possible by a large donation of money. The sanctuary will provide a place where “species threatened with extinction due to man’s cruelty and unconcern” can live and be bred to avoid extinction.

The young are so indifferent to life that, rather than take steps to preserve their own lives, many commit suicide. This act is a dramatized version of the citizens’ general behavior, since remaining in the city in the face of certain destruction indicates a similar disregard for their own lives. Humanity’s disregard for life isn’t limited to their own species, either. The sanctuary for birds who are nearly extinct due to human activities alludes to events that were driving the environmentalist movement in the 1960s and 70s. Like the housing crisis, this broadcast is an example of the calamities that humanity could avoid but chooses to ignore.



The envoys decided to make their final warning by combining a piece of common knowledge with one of the creatures' anxiety-soothing mechanisms. They rejected the idea of a conference and staged presentation of songs. They considered a third mechanism, where new or upsetting ideas are acted out as a drama that the creatures view personally in small groups or broadcast widely on a device called a television. Things that aren't currently acceptable, when acted in this way, can become familiar through consistent exposure. These dramas can also be used to depict boring life experiences in a more stimulating way in order to make life seem more tolerable. In both ways, dramas soothe the creatures and prevent them from rebelling.

The envoys reassumed the identities of Herbert Bond and John Hunter. Noting that Great Britain enjoyed a prestigious reputation because of its military power, the envoys provided British credentials for their characters. They convinced a television station to broadcast a debate between themselves and two local professors.

Laughter, Functions of, See Above. The theme's debate was "[don't] judge by words but by actions." The envoys' statements provoked laughter. Their report details two types of laughter among these creatures: antagonistic laughter ("laughing at") and laughter of agreement ("laughing with"). While the latter seems less threatening, it is more dangerous because it "arouses feelings of anxiety in those watching," especially when the ideas challenge accepted norms. The audience laughed in a loud and prolonged manner as the envoys developed their argument: that the species is indifferent to suffering and death, that they fear the wrong things, and that they cannot see the contradiction between the facts they know and the actions they make.

A verbal game of this sort is guided by rules and judged by an audience. Two local professors debated the envoys. While the envoys were serious, their opponents took a "light and humorous" tone to state the opposing view. The envoys switched from their general theme to the specific scenario of the impending **earthquake**. When they did, the audience stopped laughing and became very hostile. The reaction among the audience watching via television was so pronounced that the messages they sent to the "relay point" of the broadcast broke the "equipment for listening to these messages."

Here, the envoys acknowledge how much effort it takes to make a belief common among the people. And although it sometimes seems like the envoys themselves take a long time to accept truths about humanity, they have only been on Earth for a few days. Their story models an alternate choice that humanity could make to embrace the truth. The process they describe, of using television define and reinforce acceptable beliefs, is a long-term project, which is why it's not an option for them. The power of television to define what is and isn't tolerable or acceptable is another way in which the authorities and social elites control people through conspiracy and propaganda.



The envoys resort to changing people's attitudes by making themselves seem authoritative—not only as adult males, but as British citizens. They think this might be successful because Britain has a history of military power, remembering that human society is largely controlled by war. These credentials do seem to offer the envoys some power, as they succeed in getting their debate televised, despite the flaws they've already noted in their ability to project their human incarnations.



The debate's theme strikes right to the heart of human indifference as the envoys understand it: it's generated and maintained by talking instead of taking action. The analysis of laughter highlights how ideas that differ from received beliefs make people anxious, especially in a society that values authority over reality and belief over truth. The report distinguishes between laughing at and laughing with; the audience laughing in agreement with the aliens' themes suggests that perhaps humans are more aware of the truth than they've let on, although they're still unwilling to act. Because the envoys visit a world where opinion is formed by authorities rather than reality, changes in opinion are profoundly destabilizing.



The low-level disregard for the envoys' message finally erupts into outright hostility, because they have taken on the form of authorities and have dared to question received ideas. The audience will not tolerate this attempt to break through its self-imposed conspiracy of ignorance. They demonstrate their preference for received ideas and established beliefs with much more anger, complaint, and reaction than they had for the envoys' earlier warnings.



The local professors maintained a calm demeanor during the debate, but afterwards, they were nervous and became hostile toward the envoys. They worried that their jobs were in jeopardy for their part in this performance, and they attacked the envoys as foreigners. With a threatening crowd outside, the envoys were escorted by the television producers to a safe place within the building to protect them from the murderous mob that had been watching the debate. The envoys agreed to avoid further disruption.

As the envoys describe this turn of events, their report is again interrupted. A voice commands listeners to bring their deceased loved ones to “us, who are friends of your family.” In this apparent advertisement, the voice promises that just as someone cares for their parent, sibling, or spouse in life, so too will the dead be cared for by the people the voice represents. The resting place is promised as a secure place in which to honor the memory of the dead.

Running short of power, the envoys realize that they can do nothing else. They haven’t achieved their mission’s goals, and they haven’t even been able to understand the root cause of their failure. When their guards’ vigilance dropped, they dematerialized and returned to their craft. Their description of their escape is interrupted with a local broadcast detailing the creatures’ reaction to the debate, which viewers found highly offensive. It protests that the locals, not the envoys, must live with the knowledge the **earthquake**. The envoys’ “bad taste, crudity of tone, ugliness of manner and insensitivity” hurt local viewers’ feelings.

The professors and the audience object to the envoys’ ideas. But in the context of Cold War paranoia and international hostility, they attach their dislike to the envoys’ foreignness—even though no one actually understands how alien the envoys truly are. It’s easier for these people to accept lies from their government—for example, that UFOs don’t exist—than truths from foreigners.



The advertisement for a cemetery recalls the monument to William Undersubscribe earlier in the story. Both incidents illustrate humanity’s obsessive care for individual loved ones even after death. The commercial asserts that the cemetery’s owners—who presumably operate it out of self-interested motives like the rest of the humans—are “friends” when they are, in fact, a business. They cast their mission as altruistic, but the promised resting place lies in a city doomed to destruction. The imaginary deceased loved ones become little more than a reminder of the many who will die in the impending earthquake.



The envoys have reported as much as they have been able to learn about humanity during their mission. But while they have a lot more insight now, they still haven’t figured out a way to get the citizens of the city to heed their warning. The citizens’ belief that it’s their responsibility to rise to the occasion of the danger in which they live, even though they aren’t taking meaningful action, relates to the envoys’ earlier revelation about humans’ willingness to believe they are peaceful when they are, in fact, at war. The locals believe they are prepared, when in fact they reject the very reality of the danger. Belief trumps rational action in the face of this clear danger. Moreover, the reaction to the debate provides further evidence of humans’ focus on words over actions. The main objections are to the envoys’ tone rather than the content of their warning—suggesting that humans will remain willfully indifferent until the disaster happens. And, finally, the envoys’ foreignness is stressed, alluding to the general atmosphere of isolationism and xenophobia (fear of foreigners) in the Cold War-era United States.



Departure from the Planet. The six envoys are reassembled at their ship and prepare to depart. They report their findings to base. A society that is doomed to disaster and unwilling to prepare for it will not survive; only those who are sensitive to misfortune will have an advantage. The people who behave according to social norms, as well as society's leaders, are doomed by their inability to flexibly adapt to the coming catastrophe. On the other hand, the marginalized, insane, and criminal will have a competitive survival advantage. As their transmission breaks off abruptly, the envoys pin their final hopes on individuals and groups who could be secretly taking steps that might protect them from the **earthquake**.

The West Coast Examiner. A local newspaper runs an article reporting that Sam Baker of Long Ridge saw a UFO take off near his home around sunset the day before. It rose suddenly and disappeared quickly from sight. Baker is not the only citizen to report strange sightings, but the "official explanation" finds that the **light** of "unusually vivid sunsets" has recently caused "strong reflections and mirages" in the area.

Military Sector III to HQ (Top Confidential). The military command of Sector III reports that a UFO landed on the 14th and stayed at its landing point for seven days. As with the previous landings on this site, no one was seen leaving the craft during that period. This was the 13th UFO to land in the area, as well as being the largest and the most visible, according to the military's informant. While an entity called M8 hypothesizes that the craft is of Chinese origin, the report writers contend that it is from the country's own Naval Department 15 and expresses frustration with the assumed intrusion into their zone of control.

Air Force 14 to Centre. Air Force 14's report concurs that the craft was the 13th UFO in the area, and that it was unmanned. The Air Force thinks the craft is Russian. They note two additional landings south of the city recently, which have coincided with people disappearing. The writers think that they can't declare this a "coincidence" any longer. They hypothesize that the craft are manned by creatures invisible to the naked eye, an idea supported by the fact that scientific equipment can barely bring the craft "within vision." The writers ask their superiors if they should continue to minimize the disappearances, for which they can find no common denominator other than proximity to the UFOs' landing sites.

The envoys may perceive the truth more accurately than the humans do, so they abandon their mission and leave the planet once the evidence convinces them that their mission is futile. The envoys understand that social elites' efforts to maintain order and control in society have dampened people's survival instincts, and in this way, the elites have engineered a system that guarantees its own destruction. Those who reject received ideas in favor of the truth will be better positioned to survive. Common beliefs can control behavior, but they can't change reality—those who are judged paranoid for not buying into society's conspiracies are, in the end, the least delusional of all.



The envoys' departure is noticed, just like their arrival was. But this time, someone has tried to alert the authorities, who quickly assert that what Sam Baker saw was a trick of the light. Baker was enlightened enough to see the truth, but the elites cover it up with conspiracy. The final sunset hints at the dark fate of a people who will accept propaganda instead of believing the truth that they can perceive with their own senses.



The final sections of the story highlight the paranoia inherent in the Cold War mentality. No one knows where the UFOs originate, but there is no shortage of theories that assign blame to military adversaries. However, Military Sector III is even paranoid about other branches of the military invading their area of responsibility. If the "war-making machinery" that controls the world initially seemed to represent national governments, this memo suggests that even the military is controlled by its own "war-making patterns" via infighting.



While the Air Force shares Sector III's Cold War paranoia about foreign weapons, this memo's writers demonstrate more openness to perceiving the truth, even if they still need it to be mediated through technology. They express discomfort with perpetuating a conspiracy to cover up the truth in order to maintain socially accepted opinions.



The West Coast Examiner runs another story noting that large groups of people—as many as 50,000 at a time—are leaving the city and traveling to known UFO landing sites.

Air Force 14 to Centre. Concerning the same circumstances, Air Force 14 reports that despite their Total Policy 19, rumors have escaped. They advise an action that risks setting off a public panic but that they consider necessary: cordoning off the area where Be Ready for the Day cult members are gathering. They suggest announcing that it's been contaminated by a radioactive leak to provide a plausible cover story.

The Air Force's assessment that each UFO sighting coincides with disappearances is supported by a newspaper report that claims that large groups of people are leaving the city and intentionally travelling to UFO landing sites. This suggests that some of the citizens may have heard and heeded the envoys' messages. However, these acts of preservation are still individual; there is no suggestion that broader efforts to protect life are taking place.



Despite official attempts to control the UFO narrative, enough people have disappeared to have broken the official explanation's hold over at least some people. Rather than reconsidering their beliefs in light of this mass exodus, however, the military powers propose doubling down on conspiracy to prevent further disappearances. The escaping citizens suggest that it's possible for humans to assess the truth independently of received ideas. But the military's willingness to prevent these actions suggests that human indifference cannot be solved on an individual basis—rather, it requires a societal paradigm shift.





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