

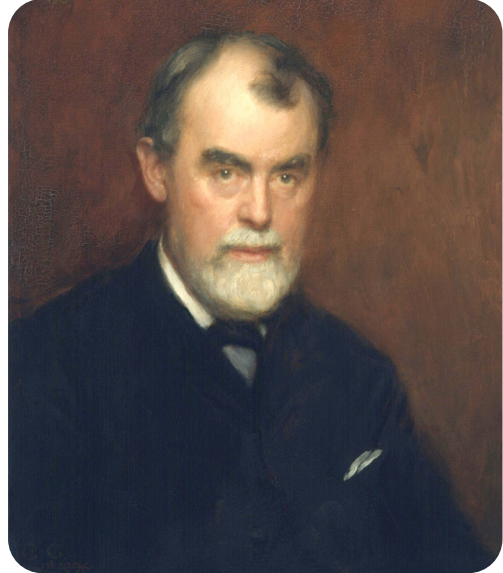
# Samuel Butler • *Erewhon*

## THE AUTHOR

### SAMUEL BUTLER

Samuel Butler was born in the village of Langar, Nottinghamshire, on 4 December 1835 and was the son of reverend Thomas Butler, with whom he had a complex relationship all through his life. He always thought that his father was against him and wrote that his parents were “brutal and stupid by nature”. The child’s education started at home but later continued at Shrewsbury boarding school and then at St John’s College in Cambridge. His father wanted him to enter the Anglican clergy, so after graduation he lived in a **parish** in London to prepare for this, but there his doubts about his faith began. In late 1859 he emigrated to New Zealand to live as far away from his parents as possible. He became a sheep farmer and made a good profit when he sold his farm years later. It was there that he found material for and wrote the first draft of *Erewhon*.

Back in England in 1864, he went to live in Clifford’s Inn, near Fleet Street (the street in the City of London where most newspapers had their main offices), where he remained almost until his death. In the meantime, he inherited his grandfather’s property in Shrewsbury of which he only kept the surrounding land.



The sale of the mansion, instead, allowed him to have an income for his following years. He died in a nursing home in London on 18 June 1902 at the age of 66. According to his wish, he was cremated and his **ashes** were either dispersed or buried in a grave without his name.

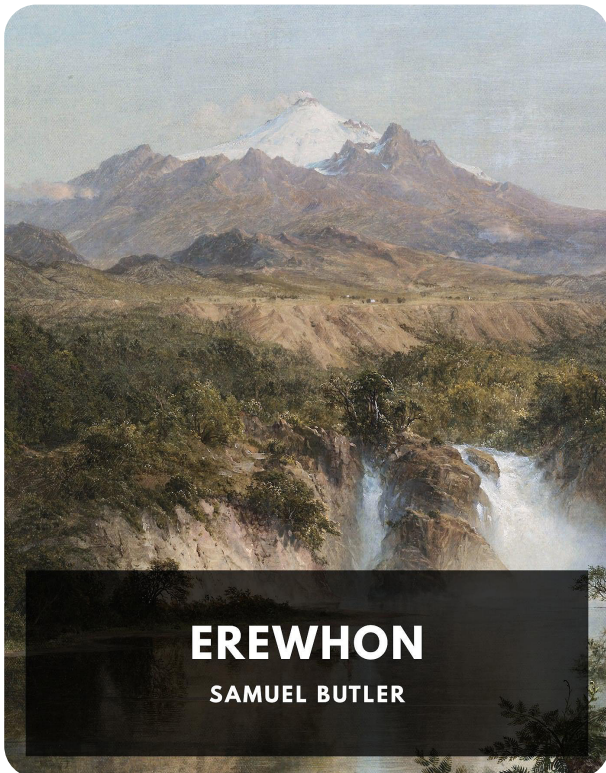
**ash:** *cenere*  
**parish:** *parrocchia*

## THE WORK

### EREWHON

The novel was first published in 1872. Erewhon is the name of a fictional country whose position Butler never explicated, as the anagram of its name (nowhere) suggests.

The main protagonist is 22-year-old Higgs, who works on a sheep farm and is greatly attracted to the mountains he sees in the distance and to what there may be beyond them. Higgs convinces Chowbok, an old native, to accompany him, but Chowbok soon leaves him alone to face lots of difficulties. When Higgs finally arrives at a magnificent plain beyond the mountains, some locals see him and take him to a small town nearby where he is put in **jail** because he has a watch. There, he learns the language and the Erewhonians' customs and way of life. He also discovers that all the people like him because he has blond hair, a rarity in that country. The king and queen decide that, after his imprisonment, he will live with a man named Nosnibor and his family in the capital.



Erewhon is a strange country, based on principles which are totally different from the English ones: for example, illnesses as well as possessing a machine (a watch included) are considered a crime – the sick are put in jail, whereas criminals are treated well and cared for. All machines are forbidden due to a scientist who, two centuries before, had warned the people against the danger of the potential supremacy of machines over men.

While living with Nosnibor, Higgs falls in love with Arowhena, the younger of his daughters, but no second daughter can get married before the elder. So, Higgs moves to another house but he's soon again in danger as Nosnibor finds out that he and Arowhena meet in secret. In addition, the king expresses his fears that Higgs could bring machinery back into the country as he has brought a watch into the country. Higgs realises he needs to escape. He tells the queen that he will go up into the sky in a **hot air balloon**, so that he will be able to speak to the god of air, and the king agrees, hoping that Higgs will fall and die. Luckily it doesn't happen: the young man takes Arowhena with him and the two succeed in passing over the mountain range and descend in the sea, where a ship takes them on board. They get married in England but would like to go back to Erewhon to teach people Christianity. It is only after the sudden arrival of Chowbok in England, though, that his plan is understood.

Samuel Butler was greatly interested in Darwin's theories of evolution, which appeared in *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Four years later, he wrote the letter *Darwin among the Machines*, published under the pseudonym of Cellarius in a New Zealand newspaper, where he maintained that in the future humans would be replaced by machines and become an inferior race. The theme of the evolution of machines independent of men also appears in Erewhon and raises a debate that is still open nowadays.

**hot air balloon:** *mongolfiera*

**jail:** *prigione*

## THE TEXT

## CHAPTER 23, THE BOOK OF THE MACHINES

(reporting the ideas of Erewhonians on machines)

[...]

Do not let me be misunderstood as living in fear of any **actually** existing machine; there is probably no known machine which is more than a prototype of future mechanical life. The present machines are to the future as the early Saurians to man. The largest of them will probably greatly diminish in size. Some of the lowest vertebrate attained a much greater bulk than has descended to their more highly organized living representatives, and in like manner a diminution in the size of machines has often attended their development and progress.

Take the watch, for example; examine its beautiful structure; observe the intelligent play of the minute members which compose it: yet this little creature is but a development of the **cumbrous** clocks that preceded it; it is no deterioration from them. A day may come when clocks, which certainly at the present time are not diminishing in bulk, will be superseded **owing to** the universal use of watches, in which case they will become as extinct as ichthyosauri, while the watch, whose tendency has for some years been to decrease in size rather than the contrary, will remain the only existing type of an extinct race.

But returning to the argument, I would repeat that I fear none of the existing machines; what I fear is the extraordinary rapidity with

which they are becoming something very different to what they are at present. No class of beings have in any time past made so rapid a movement **forward**. Should not that movement be jealously watched, and checked while we can still check it? And is it not necessary for this end to destroy the more advanced of the machines which are in use at present, though it is admitted that they are in themselves harmless?

**As yet** the machines receive their impressions through the agency of man's senses: one travelling machine calls to another in a **shrill** accent of alarm and the other instantly retires; but it is through the ears of the driver that the voice of the one has acted upon the other. Had there been no driver, the callee would have been deaf to the caller. There was a time when it must have seemed highly improbable that machines should learn to make their wants known by sound, even through the ears of man; may we not **conceive**, then, that a day will come when those ears will be no longer needed, and the hearing will be done by the delicacy of the machine's own construction? - when its language shall have been developed from the cry of animals to a speech as intricate as our own?

[...]

**actually:** *veramente*  
**as yet:** *Per il momento*  
**to conceive:** *pensare*  
**cumbrous:** *ingombrante*  
**forward:** *in avanti*  
**owing to:** *dovuto a*  
**shrill:** *acuto, stridulo*

**COMPREHENSION**

**1**  Choose the word from the text that corresponds to the definition.

**1<sup>st</sup> paragraph**

1. First design of something that will later be copied or developed: .....
2. The large size of something: .....
3. In a similar way: .....

**2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph**


4. Very small: .....
5. Replaced by something more modern or useful: .....

**3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph**

6. Main theme, topic: .....
7. Characteristic of something that will not damage anything: .....


**4<sup>th</sup> paragraph**

8. The activity of, what something/someone does: .....
9. Person who has been called: .....
10. Somebody's desires, wishes: .....

**2**  Choose T if the sentence corresponds to the content of the passage, F if it does not. Indicate the lines in the text that show why it does not.

- |  | T                        | F                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. The writer is afraid of the machines as they are at the moment.             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. He thinks they are bigger than they will be in the future.                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. The watch is a deterioration of the clock.                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Only the clock will survive.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. The writer doesn't like the rapidity with which the machines evolve.        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. The writer suggests destroying the advanced types of machines.              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. The machines are able to communicate to each other independently.           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. There will probably be changes in their way of communicating in the future. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**ANALYSIS**

**3**  Choose the best option.

1. The first paragraph introduces the main theme of the chapter:
  - a. the possible harm of the existing machines.
  - b. the difficulties in the development of the machines.
  - c. the problems connected to the development of machines in the future.
2. Machines will probably decrease in size and that...
  - a. has nothing to do with other aspects of their development.
  - b. means that machines may have a development similar to that of animals.
  - c. will make their development more difficult.

3. The watch is taken as an example of ...
  - a. extinction.
  - b. inferiority.
  - c. survival.
4. The writer fears the rapidity in the changes of the machines because...
  - a. men might lose control over them.
  - b. they will become extinct too soon.
  - c. men might not be able to use them.
5. What humans should fear is...
  - a. the dependence of the machines on them.
  - b. their present independence on them.
  - c. the unknown developments of the independence of the machines.

**4**  **Organise the development of the writer's ideas by reordering these points.**

- a. Machines have gone through more rapid changes
- b. The watch is an example of the evolution from a previous type,
- c. and will have developed their own language.
- d. than any other beings before.
- e. Men should control these changes before it's too late.
- f. Now machines still depend on men,
- g. Existing machines are not dangerous yet.
- h. in which they won't need men's senses to communicate
- i. Their development is strictly connected to their decrease in size,
- j. as it happened to some kinds of animals in the past.
- k. connected to the variation of its size.
- l. A possible solution is to destroy the machines.
- m. but humans should worry for the moment

**5**  **Summarise the writer's ideas about machines, expanding the given points.**

- What machines are like (in the writer's times)
- Why they are still harmless
- What their development is linked to
- What he expects in the future
- Why men should take measures against them
- What solution he suggests

## DISCUSSION

**6**  **GROUP WORK** Samuel Butler was the first to hint at artificial intelligence and face topics that are of crucial importance nowadays. Reflect on and discuss these points.

1. How is Butler's idea of the independence of machines linked to artificial intelligence used in Web 3.0?
2. Does the scenario foreseen by Butler correspond to the present situation?
3. Is man still able to control machines as in Butler's times?
4. Do you think that his ideas about the development of a specific language of machines independent of men is about to become true now?
5. Should we be as worried as Erewhonians about the possibility that machines will prevail over us?