

Daniel Abadjiev

Ms. Small

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Worse Than A Post-Apocalyptic Nightmare

What could be worse than a post-apocalyptic world? Not much, and such a setting often is used to illustrate the dangers of technology gone too far. But is it really the worst possible world? After such a catastrophe, technology will have destroyed itself, and new life can rise from the ashes of civilization. But what if technology only destroys its opposition from nature and eternalizes its grip on society? The science fiction writer Ray Bradbury uses these scenarios for two of his short stories written in the 1950s, “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” and “The Pedestrian.” The first is from Bradbury’s anthology, *The Martian Chronicles*, and expands on the poem “There Will Come Soft Rains” by Sara Teasdale, depicting the last remnants of a futuristic society after a nuclear fallout. Bradbury also wrote the short story “The Pedestrian,” which serves as somewhat of a prologue to his novel *Fahrenheit 451*. In both short stories, Bradbury uses imagery and mood to develop the conflict between nature and technology, but the second story is more effective at presenting the common theme that technology is invasive and threatening, as the second story ends with technology subduing the natural tendencies of a pedestrian, while the first ends with nature’s rebirth and conquest of technology.

The first short story, “August 2026,” juxtaposes contrasting imagery and moods associated with nature and technology to demonstrate the conflict. In the story, Bradbury compares the state of a dog with the state of robotic mice which inhabit a futuristic smart house. The dog is “gone to bone and covered with sores,” but when it dies, “regiments of [robotic] mice

[hum] out as softly as blown gray leaves in an electrical wind” to remove its carcass (2). The dog’s demise represents that nature has decayed, unlike the mice, which are as lively as ever. Moreover, the imagery of “blown gray leaves” represents not only the mice’s vivacity, but how they are a shadow of nature, as they simulate the shape of leaves but cannot reach nature’s depth of color. Technology and nature come into direct opposition when “a failing tree bough” crashes into the house, overturning a bottle of cleaning solvent, which in turn sets the house on fire and destroys the technology within (3). The cleaning solvent mentioned implies that the fire is a purifying force. Additionally, Bradbury includes imagery of the house fighting the fire with various pumps and chemicals, but ultimately the wild, unstoppable force of nature consumes the house. In addition, the description of the house is suffused with a mood of death. Bradbury describes the house in its final moments “like children dying in a forest, alone, alone” (4). This differs from the imagery of rebirth Teasdale uses in the included poem to describe the awake of Spring. Depictions of “swallows circling” and “frogs...singing” create a mood of hope, which contrasts with the demise of technology (3). Therefore, the mood and imagery of the first short story put nature into conflict with technology.

In the second short story, “The Pedestrian,” Bradbury contrasts unnerving imagery and the provocative police presence, associated with technology, with the pedestrian’s connection to nature. The pedestrian’s walk creates a mood of oneness with nature, as he walks with such freedom that “if he closed his eyes and stood very still, frozen, he could imagine himself upon the center of a plain...with no house in a thousand miles, and only dry river beds...for company” (5). Being able to imagine himself in the middle of the wilderness demonstrates that the pedestrian, Leonard Mead, is connected with nature during his walks. However, Mead is the only one who appreciates the night air, as all around him the sidewalks are cracked, and the streets are

like “a graveyard” because everyone else is cooped up inside watching television (5). This imagery creates the sense that nature is almost dead and that Mead is the last wild remnant of a world which now cares only for technology. Throughout the story there is also a constant sense of trepidation which contrasts with the former mood. For example, Bradbury mentions how “the dogs in intermittent squads would parallel [Mead’s] journey with barkings if he wore hard heels” (5). Hence, constant fear of discovery accompanies Mead’s walks with nature. Eventually, he is caught by a police car with only a speaker inside and arrested for walking. Since the car is fully autonomous, it represents technology, and opposes with nature because the police car suppresses the natural urge to walk. Thus, the conflict between technology and nature in the second short story is revealed by the mood and imagery.

In the first short story, technology is ultimately subdued, while in the second story technology remains dominant, which makes the second story more hopeless than the first, allowing it to more effectively unnerve the reader with the theme that technology is a threatening force. In the first story, the fire ultimately purifies the land by eradicating the smart house, which allows nature’s rebirth as described in Teasdale’s poem. Even though the smart house initially controls every aspect of its interior, its ultimate destruction is followed by “dawn show[ing] faintly in the east” (4). Dawn is a symbol of hope and new beginnings, and the mention of dawn after the house’s destruction demonstrates technology’s cession to a time of resurgence. Conversely, the ending of the second short story is hopeless; technology defeats nature. The pedestrian is arrested for his desire to connect with nature by the technologically automated police, and when Mead protests he is given no choice but to comply. This warns the reader that technology is a merciless might. To intensify the sense of despondency, the narrator states, “no one answered [Mead]. The car...[left] the empty streets with the empty side-walks, and no sound

and no motion [disturbed] the rest of the chill November night” (6). The lack of motion or sound combined with the fact that it is night and November, both times of death, create a listless mood. This extinguishes the joy Mead felt when connecting with nature, making the ending hopeless. Bradbury is trying to warn the reader of the dangers of technology in both short stories, but the hope in the first story lessens the impact of this premonition, while the desolation in the second impresses on the reader the theme that technology is an inevitable force of devastation. Hence, the second story is more effective at presenting its dystopian theme.

Both stories use imagery and mood to put technology and nature into conflict, but the first story ends with technology’s defeat and nature’s rebirth, while the second story ends with technology’s triumph over nature. This makes the second story more hopeless and thus more effective at portraying its dystopian theme that technology is invasive and treacherous. Bradbury’s stories warn that technology is progressing beyond control and that if technology does not bring about its own passing, it will be even more oppressive in society. This is important to consider as rapidly evolving technology becomes integrated into every part of daily life. To avoid either situation depicted by Bradbury, humanity must not let technology overtake it.