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Technology: a Means to an End, or the End Itself?

Rapid technological developments have spurred a plethora of quality-of-life improvements over the past century, but could they ultimately spell out a means to turn humanity obsolete? Ray Bradbury considers this possibility in two short stories: “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” and “The Pedestrian.” Addressing the use of nuclear weapons in World War II, “August 2026” envisions a world in which the only building left standing amidst a city of rubble is a smart home diligently serving its deceased owners. “The Pedestrian” portrays a society in which humans are confined to their homes by electronic media, and it demonstrates the consequence that a wandering pedestrian faces when he is found outside by a robotic police car. At the heart of both stories is the idea that technological advancement bears irrevocable consequences. Of the two stories, “There Will Come Soft Rains” more effectively delivers its theme—that the dehumanizing nature of technology outweighs the benefits—by utilizing imagery, allusions, and historical context to convey the reality of the scene that it describes.

“August 2026” utilizes characterization and imagery to present a central argument that technology is meaningless without a human presence—calling into question the necessity of rapid technological advancement. Bradbury’s smart house, armed with a voice of its own, speaks uniquely; throughout the day, it makes interjections such as “tick-tock, seven o’clock,” “run, run, eight-one!” and “nine-fifteen, time to clean” (1). The house is inclined to incorporate onomatopoeia, rhyme, and exclamation into its speech. These conventionally informal devices

establish a friendly and energetic tone, suggesting that the house performs its duties with enthusiasm. The creator likely engineered this positive attitude knowingly to please the inhabitants of the house. However, Bradbury stresses that the house itself is far from being human. He conveys this explicitly through its inability to sense the absence of its occupants, and he reinforces the idea by focusing on the house's components, which "hummed out as softly as blown gray leaves in an electrical wind" (2). Using auditory imagery, Bradbury draws attention to the mechanical nature of the movement in the story. Under normal circumstances, the humming of robotic mice should be considered as part of the background of a broader scene at play, but without a human presence, it is brought to the forefront--creating an uneasy mood. The house itself is incapable of assuming a more sophisticated role as its actions are entirely programmed, but Bradbury makes it the focus of the story to deliberately evoke discomfort. In doing so, he demonstrates why technology should remain secondary to humanity's interests: despite its utility and positive attitude, the house is rendered meaningless without humans to serve. Bradbury makes a similar argument in "The Pedestrian," using the empty streets to represent a lack of human presence. As a logical next step, both stories must justify why technology creates this lack of human presence in order to support their respective themes, and "August 2026" more effectively does so.

To justify the dehumanizing nature of technology, "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains" utilizes highly relevant historical context from its time to establish its plausibility, but the outlandish setting of "The Pedestrian" hinders its effectiveness at conveying the same theme. "August 2026" subtly alludes to the bombing of Hiroshima by describing a wall of the house as a "thin charcoaled layer," on which "the five spots of paint - the man, the woman, the children, the ball- remained" (1). Around the time of the story's publication, the bombing of Hiroshima raised

universal concerns about the threat of nuclear warfare. Bradbury plays on this fear in “August 2026,” illustrating a common scenario apprehended by the public. Particularly frightening images associated with Hiroshima are the shadows of those incinerated in the blast, which Bradbury references by etching the house’s former owners in paint against the surface of one of its walls. By acknowledging this historical event, Bradbury adds a factual basis to “August 2026.” He draws a connection between technology and the atomic bomb, demonstrating that science has already advanced to a level capable of destroying humanity and conveying an urgent need to rethink the trajectory of technological advancement. Bradbury takes a different approach in “The Pedestrian,” however; he attempts to portray the dehumanizing nature of technology by envisioning a world where a talking police car confines the population to their “tomblike houses,” where they “sat like the dead” (2). Though technology does tend to limit social interaction, solitary confinement enforced by sentient technology is far less plausible. Arriving at such a scenario could take decades or centuries of progression, which creates a disconnect from reality. “The Pedestrian” presents technological advancement as an issue undeserving of attention in the present day due to this disconnect, weakening its claim.

In “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains,” Bradbury makes allusions to Sara Teasdale's poem of the same name, “There Will Come Soft Rains,” to draw a contrast between previous conceptions about conflict and the modern landscape of technology-driven warfare—a unique connection that “The Pedestrian” does not make. “August 2026” references the poem explicitly; one of the voices in the house narrates its content as part of its evening routine. The poem was written in response to WWI, in which chemical warfare first raised fears of extinction. The setting it establishes is serene: the environment remains unchanged despite the absence of mankind, “and Spring herself, when she woke at dawn / Would scarcely know that we were

gone” (Teasdale 1). The poem adopts a softer outlook on war, reasoning that Nature will at least prosper in the absence of humans. Bradbury deliberately addresses this interpretation, projecting elements of Teasdale’s plot into his own story by describing a world in which warfare drives mankind to extinction. But August 2026 is vastly different from the tranquil landscape that Teasdale envisions. Instead, his world is permanently scarred; the house is the only one standing in a “city of rubble and ashes,” which “gave off a radioactive glow which could be seen for miles” (1). Whereas Teasdale believes the world will be at peace without humans, Bradbury argues that, in the process of destroying ourselves, Nature will be destroyed as well. By rebutting a positive outlook associated with war, Bradbury further supports his claim that technology’s destructive nature outweighs its benefits.

Of the two stories, *There Will Come Soft Rains* more effectively delivers its theme—that the dehumanizing nature of technology outweighs the benefits—by utilizing mood, allusions, and historical context to convey the reality of the scene it describes. In a world of rapidly evolving technology, Bradbury’s concerns have become increasingly relevant. While most technology benefits the whole of society, such as the advancement of medicine, Bradbury points out that other technologies become more potent in their potential to destroy humanity. Technologically driven weapons become more destructive, and electronic media becomes more addictive. Bradbury anticipates this tradeoff between risk and reward and concludes that the reward is not worth the risk. However, he does not account for the possibility of a third option—one in which society recognizes certain technologies as destructive and takes measures to regulate them. This approach has been proven to work, as is the case with the disarmament of nuclear weapons. Ultimately, with diplomacy and careful consideration of ethics, society may continue to advance technology without the fear that it will one-day end humanity.