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Portrayal of Themes in “August 2026” and “The Pedestrian”

444 minutes. 7.4 hours. This is the shocking statistic of how much the average American spends looking at a screen each and every day. These hours, which were once spent socially, with kids playing with each other and adults talking over a cup of coffee, are now spent with people craning over a phone, their only human interaction through pictures on social media. However, the dangers inherent in the use of technology had already been displayed by the early 1940's: nuclear bombs had been dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to end World War II, and television had become widespread. Ray Bradbury was an American writer who lived in this era and wrote short stories, “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” and “The Pedestrian,” addressing the use of technology. The story of “August 2026” focuses on a lone house in a world that has been devastated by a nuclear bomb, and “The Pedestrian” focuses on Leonard Mead, a man who still walks in a world where all anyone ever does is watch TV. Though Bradbury's use of structure in “The Pedestrian” is more effective, overall, “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” conveys the theme that humans will eventually destroy their humanity through a need for progress better through its title and portrayal of the ultimate fate of humanity.

The title “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” more effectively communicates the overall theme than the title of “The Pedestrian”. The title “August 2026: There Will Come Soft

Rains” consists of two parts: “August 2026” and “There Will Come Soft Rains”. The first, “August 2026”, sets the story in the future, approximately 75 years ahead of Bradbury’s time. The part “There Will Come Soft Rains” refers to a multiple things: rain and its beauty, a poem by Sara Teasdale of the same name, nuclear war, and how all three contrast each other. When Bradbury first mentions rain, he writes, “And the rain tapped on the empty house, echoing,” (1) hinting that something is off. The seemingly serene and peaceful rain turns out to be the aftermath of a horrible event. The house is not described as “bustling” or “lively” but rather as “empty”. This references the fact that all the humans who once lived in the house are dead, killed during a nuclear fallout. As such, the word “Rains” could refer to acid rain which is known to occur after a nuclear bomb is dropped. “There Will Come Soft Rains” alludes to the poem by Sara Teasdale of the same name. In this poem, Teasdale writes that, “Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree/if mankind perished utterly;/And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn/Would scarcely know that we were gone” (3). This poem summarizes the whole story through the similarity of robots to the nature that Teasdale describes. The robots that are present in “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” “scarcely know that [the humans] are gone.” They are humankind’s last legacy, and yet know nothing about the state of the world around them; the automated machines do not “mind” that humans have “perished utterly” because though they contain traces of humanity, they do not possess the feelings, emotions, or awareness that makes human beings so very human. In a similar way to how humanity is destroyed by a nuclear bomb in “August 2026”, the title of “The Pedestrian” refers to the theme that technology will lead to the end of humanity. The meaning behind “The Pedestrian” is a reference to the fact that the protagonist, Mr. Leonard Mead, is the only person left who still walks and enjoys the

outdoors. Bradbury states that “In ten years of walking by night or day, for thousands of miles, [Mead] had never met another person walking, not once in all that time” (1). Bradbury suggests that Mead is the only person left who has retained his humanity. Whereas Mead is an individual who is capable of thinking for himself, everyone else has been brainwashed by the TV that they stare at day. This sedentary life-style is contrasted with how Mead walks; in the same way, the word “The” refers to the fact that Mead is the one and only person who can still be considered a “Pedestrian”. While this title does connect to the theme of the story, the multiple meanings behind “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” better illustrates that technology will destroy humanity.

The structure of “The Pedestrian” better illustrates the theme that a need for technological improvement will destroy humanity than “August 2026”. “The Pedestrian” focuses on a single human being, with prose akin to that of the typical novel, while the protagonist of “August 2026” is a personified automated house that doesn’t know that the humans it is serving are gone. While the structure of “August 2026” is arguably more jarring, with the personification of the robots and the steady tick of time that is heard throughout, the focus of “The Pedestrian” on the protagonist, through a narrative akin to that of the typical novel, with quips such as “that is what Mr. Leonard Mead most dearly loved to do,” (1) readers connect to Mead, and are more shocked when he is taken in by the police. A major part of Bradbury’s effective use of a narrative style is that the dialogue between the police car and Mead directly contrasts the aspects of humanity and the intelligence of robots. For example, when Mead tells the police car “I guess you’d call me a writer” (1), the police car responds with “No profession” (1), because it cannot understand what a writer is, there being no such profession in its databanks. A human would understand what a

writer is, even if by then there would be no need for one, but a robot lacks the emotional intelligence to distinguish even a simple thing such as what a profession is or isn't. This contrast between humanity and technology both through the narrative and dialogue is what makes the structure of "The Pedestrian" so effective. The personification of robots in "August 2026" implies that they are humankind's legacy and that humanity still lives on within them. When the robots die, humanity is wiped away as well. Bradbury writes things such as "ten more voices died" (4), and though this refers to machines, the two words "voices" and "died" are generally considered to be connected to humans, and thus imply that they are equivalent. By personifying the machines, but not making them aware of their surroundings, Bradbury is highlighting the differences between human beings and robots, but also acknowledging that robots have fragments of humanity. In contrast, "The Pedestrian" is very clear as to what is human and what is not; its police car is completely mechanical and has no trace of humanity within its algorithms. These portrayals of robots are then accentuated through the writing style of Bradbury in the two stories. It is because of its narrative style that "The Pedestrian" ultimately portrays the theme better than "August 2026".

In describing the fate of humanity, "August 2026" better portrays the theme that humans will eventually destroy their humanity through a need for progress than "The Pedestrian". In "August 2026", the human race is annihilated through the use of a nuclear bomb, with traces of humanity still living on through the machines that they've created. "The Pedestrian" portrays the human race as still being alive, with humanity still being present through brave individuals who are not afraid of being different. The ultimate fate of humanity in "August 2026" is more effective at communicating the theme that humanity will be destroyed by technology because by

the end, there are no traces of humanity left, even in the robots. After the fire, one of the robots says “Today is August 5, 2026” repeatedly because it has been broken, and everything that had even a shred of humanity is “upon the heaped rubble and steam” (4). At the beginning of the story, even though all that was left of the human species were “five spots of paint,”(1) robots continued to display what humanity was like by doing what they were programmed to do every day, as if humans were still alive. However, once these robots are wiped out as well, it is as if humanity had never existed in the first place. It is because of this that “August 2026” is so effective at communicating its theme. In “The Pedestrian,” the end fate of Mead is that he is taken away by the robotic police car, “leaving the empty streets with the empty side-walks, and no sound and no motion all the rest of the chill November night” (2). This is a grim fate, but at least there are still people who are alive; in “August 2026” there is a finality to the ending that makes it much more thought provoking. The people in this world cannot change their mistakes; they are dead and humanity will never exist again. This is why the fate of humanity in “August 2026” more effectively conveys the message that technology will destroy humanity than “The Pedestrian”.

Ultimately, “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” more effectively communicates the idea that technology will destroy humanity itself than “The Pedestrian” does. Though “The Pedestrian” uses its structure better, through focusing on the protagonist’s humanity, “August 2026” uses both its title and portrayal of the ultimate fate of humanity in order to more effectively convey the theme. The concept that technology will destroy humanity is perhaps more widespread in this era than Bradbury’s, because technology has become extremely widespread and widely used in an array of different fields. It is true that there are bad uses of

technology, but technology isn't inherently good or bad. It is the way that it is used and the people that use it that changes how morally correct it is to use it. In the end, the only way to ensure that technology will not destroy humanity is to use it responsibly. It is this and this alone that the human species will remain humane.