There Will Come Soft Rains Study Guide

There Will Come Soft Rains by Ray Bradbury

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Contents

There Will Come Soft Rains Study Guide.......1

Contents.......2

Introduction.......3

Author Biography.......4

Plot Summary.......5

Detailed Summary & Analysis.......6

Characters.......9

Themes.......10

Style.......12

Historical Context.......14

Critical Overview.......15

Criticism.......16

Critical Essay #1.......17

Critical Essay #2.......20

Critical Essay #3.......23

Adaptations.......27

Topics for Further Study.......28

Compare and Contrast.......29

What Do I Read Next?.......30

Further Study.......31

Bibliography.......32

Copyright Information.......33

Introduction

"There Will Come Soft Rains" is one of Ray Bradbury's most famous stones. Also known as "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains," the story was written and published in Bradbury's highly acclaimed collection of stories, *The Martian Chronicles,* in 1951. Written in an era in which many people were concerned about the devastating effects of nuclear weapons, the story depicts a world in which human beings have been destroyed by nuclear force. The central irony of the story is the fact that humans have been destroyed rather than saved by their own technology. The atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Japan, were recent memories in 1951, and many readers and critics found Bradbury's images of a desolate planet haunting and cautionary. In a further moral lesson, Bradbury shows how human technology is able to withstand the demise of its maker, yet is ultimately destroyed by nature, a force which prevails over all others. The story, which happens in the future but takes its title from a poem by a nineteenth-century writer, is a prime example of how science fiction literature can encompass moral and philosophical concerns.

Author Biography

Ray Bradbury was born August 22, 1920, in Waukegan, Illinois, where he spent his early years. During the depression, his father, a power lineman, moved the family to Los Angeles in his search for work. Bradbury graduated from Los Angeles High School in 1938. The following year he began publishing a science fiction magazine called *Futuria Fantasia* with a couple of his friends. While expanding his connections in the literary world of science fiction, he worked as a newsboy, and several years later, without the benefit of a college education, he became a full-time writer and was soon winning awards for his short fiction. Many of his early stories were published in the legendary pulp magazine *Weird Tales.* His first book, *Dark Carnival,* was published in 1947 and contained many of these works. That same year he married Marguerite McClure, with whom he eventually had four daughters.

Influenced early on by genre writers like Edgar Allan Poe and H. G. Wells, Bradbury was one of the first writers to combine the concepts of science fiction with a sophisticated prose style. Though his early writing leaned towards futurism and fantasy, in 1950 he published *The Martian Chronicles,* a loosely connected group of stories which included "There Will Come Soft Rains," which quickly established him as one of the foremost authors of science fiction. Though the novel takes place on Mars in the future, it explores themes that were important in the post-World War II era, including racism, censorship, technology, and nuclear war.

Other critically acclaimed works followed, including the semi-autobiographical *Dandelion Wine,* a collection of stories called *The Illustrated Man,* and *Fahrenheit* 451. The latter book was originally published as a short story about a society that outlaws books because they encourage individuality. The novel expanded this idea and critics soon regarded it as one of the landmark books about censorship and dystopian society. *Fahrenheit* 451 became a movie in 1966 directed by Francois Truffaut and starring Oskar Werner and Julie Christie. Many of Bradbury's other stories have been adapted for television as episodes of *The Twilight Zone, Alfred Hitchcock Presents,* and *The Ray Bradbury Theater.* Bradbury himself has written many of these screenplays, and he even adapted his novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* for Disney in 1973. A prolific writer, Bradbury has also published many collections of poetry and edited numerous fiction anthologies.

Even his detractors admit that Bradbury has helped make science fiction a more respected literary genre, often by depicting the future in realistic terms and presenting issues important in contemporary society. Among his many awards are two O. Henry prizes for short stories, an Academy Award nomination for his short film "Icarus Montgolfier Wright," and a World Fantasy Award for lifetime achievement. Bradbury continues to live in Los Angeles where he enjoys painting and collecting Mexican artifacts when not writing.

Plot Summary

The story opens with a clock announcing that It is time to wake up and a hint of premonition that perhaps no one will. In the kitchen, the stove cooks breakfast and a voice from the ceiling announces the setting: Allendale, California, on August 4, 2026.

The automated house prepares Itself for the day, but its inhabitants have not responded to several wake up calls, breakfast, the weather box, or the waiting car. The robotic mice finish cleaning the house, and it is revealed that the family who lived in the house-two parents, a daughter and son-have died. They are now "five spots of paint" against a house covered with a "thin charcoal layer." The city is in rubble and the "radioactive glow" emitted in the area indicates that an atomic blast has wiped out Allendale, if not the world.

The family dog returns to the house and is let in by the front door which recognizes the dog's whine. He is alive but injured from the bomb. Covered with mud he enters the house, and the robotic cleaning mice are annoyed that they will need to clean up after him. The narrator explains that all dust and debris is cleaned by the mice and fed into an incinerator which sits "like evil Baal," a reference to the heathen god of the Old Testament and Satan's chief lieutenant in *Paradise Lost* by John Milton. Within an hour the dog is dead, presumably from radiation poisoning.

Afternoon settles in and the house continues its routine. A card table is set up, drinks are poured, the nursery transforms into a jungle scene. The stove prepares a dinner that will not be eaten and a faceless voice begins to read a poem by Sara Teasdale, an American poet who killed herself in 1933. The poem tells of a soft rain that falls while nature circles, shimmers, and sings, amidst a war that neither birds nor frogs care about--even if all the people die.

At the poem's end, a wind comes up, spills a bottle, and starts a fire that quickly engulfs the house. Mechanical mice and faucets come to the rescue, but the fire prevails. The voices within the house begin to die and the house implodes. All that remains is "smoke and silence." Dawn appears, and one last, lone mechanical voice announces the new day: August 5, 2026.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story opens with the house "waking" up for the day. The "voice-clock" announces the time and continues to announce each scheduled activity – "seven-nine, breakfast time, seven-nine." The house continues to work in the kitchen that makes a breakfast of toast, eggs, and bacon for four people – presumably two adults and two children (coffee and milk for beverages).

As the day continues, the house announces reminders of the date (August 4, 2026) birthdays, anniversaries and due bills. The voice-clock moves on to remind everyone that it is time to be off to work and off to school. Still the house is empty. The weather box announces the rain and the garage prepares by opening its door. By eight-thirty, the kitchen cleans itself. At nine-fifteen, the voice clock announces that it is time to clean and tiny robot mice (coming out of burrows in the walls) clean the house and then return to their burrows. At ten o'clock, the rain stops and we find out that this is the lone house left in a city of rubble that has a radioactive glow at night. At ten-fifteen, the house continues its daily routine when sprinklers begin watering the yard. We now find out that the entire west side of the house is charred and black except for the silhouette of two adults, two children and a ball.

This house is meant to preserve itself and has done so up until this day, protecting itself from the wandering animals that approach it. At twelve noon, the family dog whines at the door. Recognizing the dog's voice, the door lets it in. The dog has changed, however. It has shriveled to bone and is covered in sores. The dog "hysterically" yelps and tries to find its owners, but soon realizes there is no one in the house. It can smell the kitchen cooking pancakes and tries unsuccessfully to get through the door. It finally runs in a frenzied circle and eventually dies. An hour later, the mice sense decay and within fifteen minutes the dog is gone and in the incinerator in the basement. At two thirty-five, the house prepares for a bridge game and guests, complete with refreshments. By four o'clock, it cleans up everything. At four-thirty, the nursery prepares for the children's play time. The house draws the baths at five o'clock. It continues through the evening by preparing and cleaning up dinner, starting the fireplace, lighting a cigar and reading Mrs. McClellan her nightly poem.

By ten o'clock that night, "the house [begins] to die." The wind blows a falling branch through the kitchen window, which knocks a bottle of cleaning solvent onto the stove. Fire breaks out. Even though the house is prepared for fires and begins pumping water, the solvent spreads, as does the fire. It eventually leaks under the kitchen door and into the rest of the house. The house knows what to do to save itself, but the closing doors and pumping water do no good when the windows break and the wind sucks the fire throughout the house. The house tries to shower the fire, but eventually the pump stops because the reserve water has been used up with days of drawing baths and washing dishes when no one was around.

Soon, the fire works its way upstairs. Finally, the "reinforcements" step in – from the attic come robots that pump chemicals onto the fire. The fire moves outside, climbs up the house, and into the attic. With an explosion, the "brain" or computer running the pumps is gone. Eventually, the fire seeps back into every corner and closet of the house.

As the fire spreads, the "voices" die. Every computer and automated system in the house begin frantically and crazily doing their programmed jobs until the house just crashes flat onto the basement except for one lone wall that remains standing – a wall that begins repeating "Today is August 5, 2026…"

Analysis

Ray Bradbury is known for his science fiction writing, but more importantly for his depiction of the future and effects of nuclear warfare. Like much of this writing, "There Will Come Soft Rains" was written in the early 1950's when many people still had the end of WWII fresh in their minds and feared the effects of nuclear weapons. The setting of the story is in the year 2026, which at the time of writing was quite far in the future. Bradbury used his imagination to build what he thought would be *the* technologically advanced house of the future – a house that relied on technology and precise schedules to help the family along their way each day.

The main character of the story is the house. Throughout the story, there is a strong implication that humans no longer exist – certainly not in the house or town, but possibly anywhere. The house strives on order and routine and expects its family to do the same. It is so used to following this routine, it cannot change even when no one is there to reap in the benefits it provides – no one eats the food, plays in the nursery, takes a bath or smokes the cigar. The house also strives for perfection, the morning toast is perfectly brown, the eggs are all sunny-side up and that bath water is clear. The house also fears, however. It is described as fearing no one will get up for breakfast, it quivers and is afraid it has been left behind. As things start to go downhill for the house, (i.e. the spreading fire) it compensates by using a coping mechanism. The house begins doing what it knows best – making food, cleaning, opening and closing the garage door, etc – fanatically.

The other character in the story is the fire. This is not just any fire; this fire is the alter ego of the house. Where the house relies on routine and schedules, the fire relies on cunning and instinct to survive. It is intelligent and uses its instinct to find and destroy the parts of the house that are programmed to destroy it and ultimately prevail over the technological magnificence of the house.

The plot and theme of the story run together. Using personification, the story makes the two characters of nature and technology right to the end. It illustrates the vicious cycle of nature versus technology. The technology that runs this wonderfully convenient home is the same technology that leads to the destruction of human nature in the story. Nature comes to fight back, however, as the fire seeks and succeeds in destroying the house. The theme of "nature prevails" proves itself as we see that the house can shut

out nature, but not escape its true desires. The house is able to keep the wild animals out, but cannot prevent the dog from starving to death. In addition, as the story goes along, the house begins acting like nature as well: the house "flutters," "sprouts," and "showers" throughout the day. Above all the story illustrates the gaining of technology and how wonderful it can be, but points out that all the technology in the world is not worth anything if it cannot bring peace with its many conveniences.

Characters

"There Will Come Soft Rains" is an unusual story in that it contains no human characters. However, because of its anthropomorphic characteristics-its ability to act on its own-the house itself is a character. It continues to function even after the world around it has been destroyed. Although not specifically stated in the story, it is implied that all human life on earth has been obliterated. All that remain are shadowy silhouettes of figures burned into the side of the house by the blast of the bomb.

The house is computerized and has been programmed to proceed with its routine without the intervention of a human being. The computer wakes the house's inhabitants up from their sleep, it cooks the family's meals, cleans the house, and even sets up the card table for the regular bridge game. The house is efficient, dependable, and well-programmed. This is ironic, though, because without the people there, all these functions serve no purpose. The meals go uneaten, there is no one to play the card game, and no one listens when the computer reads the poem from which the story takes it name, "There Will Come Soft Rains," by Sara Teasdale. Thus, the house is dutiful but also rigid and unchanging.

The house is also characterized by the "cleaning mice," who are somewhat annoyed by the mess made by the dog. This animal arrives at the house sick with radiation poisoning and tracks mud into the house. The agony of the dying dog is not acknowledged by the cleaning mice; they express only annoyance when forced to clean up its mess. This is also ironic because it demonstrates the inability of the house to sympathize and its sense of exasperation, normally human emotions.

When the wind blows a tree branch through a kitchen window and knocks over a bottle of cleaning fluid, the house also imitates human behavior by attempting to save itself from the fire. Bradbury makes the house seem like it is experiencing the human instinct for self-preservation. This is another instance of irony, since this "instinct" fails to preserve the house's "life," and exposes its "human" behavior as an imitation only. Thus, ultimately the house represents the inability of technology to replace humans, and the inferiority of technology when confronted by nature.

Themes

Individual vs. Machine

Although the tragedy in this story has already taken place by the time the story opens, it is actually the conflict between human beings and the ma chines they create that is at the heart of this story. In Bradbury's view, people put too much faith In the machines they invent. People have the power to create devices that can destroy themselves, but they have not enacted any measures to prevent this from happening. Bradbury believes that technology is a very wondrous-yet also very dangerous-thing. He illustrates technology's marvels: a house that can clean itself and take care of its inhabitants. On the other hand, technology has also transformed the house's family into nothing but carbon shadows. By writing a story with no human interaction, Bradbury demonstrates the sterility of a world without people. The computerized house has no feelings-it cannot love and it cannot hate-it can only be programmed. Likewise, the nuclear bomb that killed the family had no inherent emotions; it simply did what it was created to do. In this world of "morally neutral" technology, Bradbury proposes that humankind is destroyed by its own hubris, or self-confidence. Once a machine's creator is dispensed with, like the house's family, the machine is empty and meaningless.

Nature vs. Science

Despite the horror Inflicted by science upon the earth in "There Will Come Soft Rains," nature is shown to be an even more powerful force. Humans have created a bomb that destroys them all and a house that is incapable of being destroyed by the bomb. But fire, a force of nature, is able to destroy the house. In the end, the earth, though damaged, still exists. By describing this continuity, Bradbury points out his belief: that the earth was around long before humankind and it will be around long after. From this perspective, the folly of inventing machines that will overrule nature is exposed. Nothing is more powerful than nature, so humans are doomed to destroying only lesser powers, such as themselves.

Death and Fear

By setting the story in a time of human extinction, Bradbury plays upon people's fear of death. He imagines the world without humans, telling readers that they have been reduced to shadow outlines on buildings. For those who have seen photographs of the atomic destruction that ended World War II, they are vivid and horrifying images. An ominous realization this brings about is the fact that even without people, the world will continue. Nature is indifferent to human existence, Bradbury proposes. This realization should instill a healthy fear in people and trigger their instinct for self-preservation. If people realize the tenuousness of their existence, Bradbury seems to say, perhaps they

will take precautions to insure they are not eradicated, least of all by their own technology.

The fear of dying is closely related to fear of killing. Bradbury, like many people during the 1950s and early 1960s, feared that If political leaders no longer feared killing their enemies, then human existence is doomed. This lack of fear was the philosophy behind nuclear proliferation and the concept of mutually assured destruction, which states that nuclear war will not happen if a country is guaranteed to be destroyed by the country it attacks. Thus, moral regard for others' lives would not be a factor In the decision to annihilate millions of people. It is only the thought of being killed themselves that prevents leaders from making a single phone call that could launch thousands of nuclear missiles.

Style

Irony

Bradbury uses irony to great effect in the story. Irony in this case means presenting an outcome of a situation that is the opposite of what one would expect. Thus, it is ironic that the same technology which created a house that can cook and clean is also the technology which destroyed all the people on the planet. Furthermore, it is Ironic that such a sophisticated example of technology, the computerized house, can be destroyed by nature, represented by the tree limb which crashes through the window and starts the fire.

Another irony involves the symbolism of the poem that the computer reads to the empty house. "There Will Come Soft Rains," by Sara Teasdale, was written as a critical response to World War I. After all the wars are over, she says, the earth will continue despite all human efforts to prevent it. Though Teasdale could not have envisioned the devastation of nuclear war, her poem is still relevant. Even a world which has been poisoned for thousands of years with radiation and can support no human life will continue to exist. That the house reads this apocalyptic vision that has already come to pass is the irony of the situation. Humans have been able to foresee their annihilation, and now nothing but their prophecies of it remain. The inherent contradiction that forms the irony of the story can also be said to be paradox. A paradox is a situation which seems to contradict itself. Thus, technology that was designed to protect people-nuclear weapons-has actually killed them.

Simile

Bradbury uses similes, comparisons of unlike situations or things, to enhance the imagery of his prose. For instance, he states that the "nerves" of the house were "revealed as if a surgeon had torn the skin off to let the red veins and capillaries quiver in the scalded air." Thus, by giving the house nerves, he compares it to a living organism, one that is badly damaged. Besides creating a vivid image, this simile also relates the idea that the house can feel. The ability to feel is a human characteristic. Ascribing human characteristics to inanimate objects is a literary device known as anthropomorphism. By describing the house in human terms, the author hopes the reader will identify with it, and thus feel empathy for the idea that it is the last working object on earth. It has lost its purpose-to serve others-because the others are no longer there. Though the house is an object with no emotions, the reader who identifies with it may feel loneliness and be able to imagine the pain of having one's skin torn off. In this way, Bradbury is able to evoke emotion in the reader, the mark of a successful narrative. In another simile, the fire" [feeds] upon Picassos and Matisses in the upper halls, like delicacies." The simile of priceless paintings being compared to food serves to anthropomorphize the fire. By eating the paintings, the fire is given a human

characteristic. In a story with no human characters, the devices of similes and anthropomorphism give the reader something with which to identify.

Historical Context

Aftermath of World War II

Bradbury wrote "There Will Come Soft Rains" in the early 1950s. The memory of World War II was fresh in peoples' minds, particularly the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August, 1945, which brought the war to an end. Though the Allies had won, an increasing tension arose between the United States and the U.S.S.R., and soon a nuclear buildup known as the Cold War began. President Dwight Eisenhower, a war hero, warned of the rising military-industrial complex it took to support the Cold War. In the United States' quest to eradicate communism from the globe, beginning with the Soviet Union, a disproportionate part of the country's resources and economic power needed to be focused on the weapons stockpile. The focus on preparedness for war, critics said, would result in governmental neglect of other important issues, like education, welfare, and economic growth. Nevertheless, few citizens were concerned about these Issues as the 1950s dawned; jobs were plentiful and people were now able to afford goods that had been cost-prohibitive before the war, such as automobiles and televisions. But the threat of nuclear war filtered into everyday life. People built bomb shelters in their basements, and children participated in bomb drills at school in which they learned to protect themselves from a nuclear blast by crawling under their desks and placing their hands on their heads.

Anticommunist Fervor

This fear of communism raged out of control during the 1950s, and it was represented most graphically by the Senate Committee on Un-American Activities, which was organized and spearheaded by Senator Joseph McCarthy. This committee investigated and persecuted many prominent Americans who were suspected of believing in communism. This paranoia, followed by a fanatical attempt to flush out democracy's traitors and eradicate them, became known as McCarthyism. Many writers and artists were taken to court, accused of being communists, and were "blacklisted," meaning they were not able to gain work. Thus, many lives and careers were ruined.

When not focused on the "red menace" of communism, the country turned its attention toward the future. Spawned by the pre-war interest in futurism and modernism as displayed by corporate America at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City, people's imaginations were sparked by the thought of transcontinental highways, labor-saving devices like washing machines and robots, and the possibility of space travel. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) was formed to make space travel a reality. But the U.S.S.R. beat the Americans into space with the launching of Sputnik in 1956, further promoting anti-Soviet feeling in the United States. Government leaders sought to intensify the race by stating that they intended to land a man on the moon before the century was over. The nation's interest in science fiction movies and comic books reflected this fascination with the future.

Critical Overview

Despite the popularity of writers like H. G. Wells and Jules Verne, science fiction was not wellregarded by critics at the time "There Will Come Soft Rains" was published in the early 1950s. Though science fiction movies and books abounded, most received little or no critical attention. Bradbury was an exception to this trend, and indeed his popularity has given rise to the permanent acceptance of Science fiction. Little criticism has focused specifically on the story "There Will Come Soft Rains," however, *The Martian Chronicles,* the collection in which it appeared, has been the subject of numerous articles. Edward J. Gallagher calls it "one of those acknowledged science fiction masterpieces," in the book *Ray Bradbury.* William F. Touponce talks about Bradbury's work in general, praising it for "its rich imaginative vision, and. . . for the way in which it links up with the larger literary movements of the twentieth century, surrealism and existentialism." Specifically regarding *The Martian Chronicles,* Touponce expresses admiration for its themes, which "[express] the guilt of the twentieth century's destruction of exotic and primitive civilizations."

However, Bradbury's detractors complain that his style suffers for the sake of his ideas. Kent Forrester, in an article titled "The Dangers of Being Earnest: Ray Bradbury and *The Martian Chronicles,"* says that "the stories are weakened" by Bradbury's fervent belief in his ideas, "unless we are as enthusiastic about his ideas as he is." He claims that Bradbury "sometimes stops his narration to lecture us." In spite of this criticism, however, Forrester also thinks that Bradbury's visions of the future are "aesthetically pleasing and richly imaginative," and that these qualities "compensate" for "other artistic lapses." Bradbury, in an interview published in *Science Fiction Voices* #2, answers his critics by declaring that he does not care what they think. "Every writer in the science fiction world is a different kind of writer. . . . I'in an idea writer. . . . *The Martian Chronicles* is a metaphor for a way of viewing the universe, of viewing our planet and the other planets. It works because it rings a bell of truth."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Jennifer Hicks is director of the Academic Support and Writing Assessment program at Massachusetts Bay Community College. In the following essay, she discusses the imagery in Bradbury's story.

John J. McLaughlin wrote that "much of the bulk of [Bradbury's] fiction has been concerned with a single theme-the loss of human values to the machine." Nowhere is this more apparent than in Bradbury's collection of stories *The Martian Chronicles.* In this collection, as Edward Gallagher has pointed out, Bradbury has "dealt with the initial. . . attempts to successfully establish a footing on Mars," chronicled "the rise and fall of the Mars colony," and "linger[ed] on the possible regeneration of the human race after the devastating atomic war." Bradbury's story "There Will Come Soft Rains" appears in this last section. Yet, in this particular story there is not one single human character, it takes place in Allendale, California, not on Mars, machines are plentiful, and regeneration seems very close to impossible.

The story portrays the life, or inner workings, of a house, standing "alone in a city of rubble and ashes." The inhabitants of the house, "their images burned on wood in one titanic instant," have been eradicated by what one assumes is an atomic blast that makes the "ruined city give off a radioactive glow which could be seen for miles." The impersonal house, equipped with more technological conveniences than one could imagine, continues about its routine, oblivious to the devastation around it. The voice-clock sings, announces time and the daily schedule; the robot mice dart to do their cleaning; the nursery hour and jungle patterns continue as if someone were there to enjoy it. The only live being in the house is the "dog, once huge and fleshy, but now gone to bone and covered with sores," who enters mid-story. Here the reader is struck by Bradbury's ability to place images next to each other that bring us up short. Rather than feeling compassion or sympathy for the animal, the robot mice whir around busily, "angry at having to pick up mud, angry at the inconvenience." We are reminded that the rodent cleaners are mechanical, that feelings-those highly prized human emotions-do not exist in machines. Later in the story, as the house burns and "trie[s] to save itself," mechanical rain and "blind robot faces," attempt to quench the fire as they were, programmed to do. The flurry of activity and the growing fire create a "scene of manic confusion yet unity." Each of the technological pieces in the story do their work as people have designed them to do, but all are active at once; even the voice in th, library continues to read the poem by Sara Teasdale the American poet known for her lyrics of love who killed herself in 1933. The attempts of the machines are unsuccessful. The house is reduced to "smoke and silence," similar to the town which surrounds it. Clearly, technology has lost, but so too has humanity. With the exception of one last mechanical voice, both people and machines have met with doom. But, the story closes as "dawn show[s] faintly in the east," leaving the reader with a bar, modicum of hope that not all is lost.

Sidney Finkestein wrote that Bradbury should be congratulated for his ability to "show [his] deep honesty [and] courage in making so implicit and unmistakable a criticism of

the destructive forces he sees about his own land." Certainly Bradbury has pictured a place so awful, so replete with destruction, that as readers we want no part of It. We can imagine easily that Bradbury is responding not only to his authorial need to show us how similar our decline can be to the decline of Mars after being settled by earthlings, but also to his horror over the atomic bombing In Hiroshima five years before this story was published. A Catholic priest, present when the bomb exploded wrote of the event: "the crux of the matter is whether total war In its present form is justifiable, even when it serves a just purpose. Does it not have material and spiritual evil as its consequences which far exceed whatever good that might result?" One can imagine Bradbury echoing those words as he mourns the loss of human values to the ease that the machines create.

Many critics deplore Bradbury's lack of real scientific knowledge, yet they credit him with making science fiction a credible literary form because of his ability to create powerful images. Some of these same critics consider Bradbury's work to be surrealistic, a part of a literary tradition that tries to create new images through a startling juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images. As an artistic, philosophical, and literary movement begun in the 1920s, surrealism requires that one suspends his or her logical reason in order to see a reality beyond the surface reality. To accomplish this, Bradbury masterfully weaves in imagery, usually in the form of metaphors or similes which compare two unlike things using the words "like" or "as."

Critic Sarah-Warner Pell acclaims Bradbury's imagery for two reasons. She says that its success is found in the fact that "the meaning or associative value [of the simile or metaphor] is the Saine or nearly the Saine for all of us," and that the images "relate to common experiences of mankind." The images that predominate through "There Will Come Soft Rains" absolutely qualify for those reasons. If we remember that the 1950s was a time when nuclear war and technological progress were feared and air raid drills prepared school children for the worst, the images Bradbury creates in the story are certainly "tied" images that evoke similar meanings to all of us. To substantiate this we need do no more than look at several of the images in "There Will Come Soft Rains." In fact, when we look at the images he uses, we can also discern a pattern that indicates his preference for nature and beauty over technology and war.

Many of the images in "There Will Come Soft Rains" contain references to nature, but the comparisons are almost always done in a negative way. This is how Bradbury juxtaposes his images to give us a sense of the surreal, to help us see that the superficial reality of technology as beneficial is in fact, something else. The stove that cooks by itself, a miracle we all might want, unfortunately creates "toast that was like stone," quite unlike the delicately browned, crunchy-outside-and-soft-inside toast a person would make for herself. So, too, the compulsive cleaning mice that clean up the dog's mud and carcass "hummed out as softly as blown gray leaves in an electrical wind." Although they do clean and thus save the humans the trouble, they are compared to gray leaves and gray is a color often associated with death. We can see further evidence of Bradbury's concern that technology will displace humanity and beauty when the wall reaches out to the tables and folds them "like great butterflies." Again, although a house that can provide for all the needs of it occupants is a wishful thought, we see

that beauty in such an environment is compromised. The fire that "feeds upon Picassos and Matisses . . . like delicacies" and the nerves of the house that are "revealed as if a surgeon had tom the skin off to let the red veins and capillaries quiver in the scalded air" do not conjure up pleasant visions. On the contrary, beautiful works of human art are destroyed with apparent pleasure. Even the art of the surgeon is diminished when the Hippocratic oath to prevent and treat disease is ignored. In addition, the gorgeously changing nursery that could provide hours of amusement to the young sounds like nature, but carries a strong menace with its sounds of a "great matted yellow hive of bees... [and] the lazy bumble of a purring lion." Technology and beauty are at war.

There are however, images that contain no reference to nature. Yet these are predominately negative also. In these we see machinery being compared to humans whose values have gone awry. We see a house that has an "old-maidenly preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical paranoia." Bradbury further paints a picture of the same house and we see it "as an altar with ten thousand attendants. . . but the gods had gone away, and the ritual of the religion continued senselessly, uselessly." There are even dinner dishes "manipulated like magic tricks." Although magic has the power to enthrall us all, Bradbury startles us by reminding us of the manipulative powers some people hold.

"There Will Come Soft Rains" is a simple story. The chronology is clear; the sentences are simple; the ease of reading is hard to surpass. However, the intensity of the Images and the repugnance of the setting make Bradbury's message indisputable. As Richard Donovan puts It, "Bradbury's fear is that man's mechanical aptitudes, his incredible ability to pry into the secrets of the physical universe, may be his fatal flaw."

Source: Jennifer Hicks, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

Robert Peltier is an English instructor at Trinity College and has published works of both fiction and nonfiction. In the following essay, he discusses the subversion of nature in Bradbury's story.

Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains" contains echoes of a theme that has reverberated through the literature of the last 175 years, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and, more recently in the myriad novels, stories, and films about various forms of technology that have turned on their masters: Man is not God and only gets into trouble when he tries to play God.

Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein creates life itself, but the creature he creates is condemned to a monstrous and soulless existence, finally turning to murder when the good doctor, having seen that he is not an all-knowing God and fearing the (further) unanticipated consequences of his actions, declines to create a mate for him.

Hawthorne's scientist, Aylmer, believes he must remove a "birthmark" from his beloved's cheek in order to make her perfect. His inability to recognize the conundrum of nature, that what appears to man to be imperfection is actually part of a greater plan unknowable by mere mortals, leads to his beloved's destruction.

Dr. Jekyll, in trying to create pure good, does not have the scientific or moral sense to realize that a by-product of that good is necessarily pure evil. He may manipulate good and evil, but he cannot rid the world of it.

Ray Bradbury, writing in the middle of the twentieth century, does not suggest that we are going against God's will so much as nature's. We live in a humanist and, at times, cynical era, where belief in an all-powerful and beneficent being is widely considered naive and unsophisticated, but nature is regarded as material and undeniable. It feeds us, gives us air to breathe and water to drink. We repay nature by exploiting it for what are often superficial luxuries. Nature would be, some say, better off without us.

Bradbury seems to agree, and he makes evident who would benefit from humankind's continued existence: the false and evil god "Baal" who sits in a "dark comer of the cellar" as the mechanical and soulless mice make offerings to It of dirt and scraps of decayed dog. This false Idol epitomizes the emptiness of the lives of those now gone from this place.

Baal, being a false god, is yet another creation of humankind, another mockery of nature's creations. And so are all the other mechanical monsters. They are *all* flawed creations which cause humankind's destruction, both in a literal sense (the atomic bombs that destroy the world) and in a metaphorical sense (the mechanized home, drained of the natural juices of life).

In Bradbury's story, there are no people left, and so we are free to enter this house and look around at what they have left behind, speculate on what kind of life they led, what they considered Important. By leaving this story unpopulated, we are invited into the remnants of this world and asked to render judgments on those creators who considered themselves equal to, or perhaps a cut above, the elemental forces of nature. The very fact that there *are* no people says much about the destructive power of their creations, but those smaller, seemingly innocuous mechanical (and perhaps electronic) creations seem even more monstrous as they mockingly, mindlessly perform their tasks which once provided a life of ease-and false security-to their former masters. Humankind has passed away on this planet, and soon humankind's inventions will also die.

Of course, Bradbury is really asking us to make judgments about our own lives and the monsters we create to make our lives easier, to entertain us, and to make us feel safe in a world where we are destroying nature with our greed and arrogance. It is a testament to this story's timelessness that it speaks perhaps even more urgently to us today, as we are more and more distanced from each other and from nature. We have "relationships" in cyberspace but are cut off from real human or natural contact. We live vicarious lives through our television sets-often violent and amoral lives. We fax messages, or send them electronically in a memorandum format, unable even to explore the depth of feeling that letters once conveyed technology races ahead, outpacing our ability to understand its implications as we are led into a less human, less humane future.

Yet there is a strange kind of optimism here, an optimism that speaks not to us, but to nature itself. It seems to say that our self-destruction is itself natural, that human beings are a small blip on evolution's radar screen. The title of the story, taken from the poem quoted within it, suggests that if humankind were gone, nature would not only endure, but it would also not even notice our disappearance: "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." So there is a paradox here: humankind is a part of nature, not its master, and therefore we must not attempt to change nature. Yet we are constructed by nature in such a way that this attempt issues from our very essence. Therefore, our destruction is inevitable and natural.

Again, the absence of people in the story leads us to look at the world through nature's eyes, not our own, and to become self-aware and critical of our participation in the world.

What kind of world did humanity create while it *was* extant? Here Bradbury's deft touch is most evident We can see how this empty world was empty even before the great destruction, with mechanical mice vacuuming and a sing-song clock telling us time (it is worth thinking about time, its fearsome, inevitable pace being announced In fairytale rhyming meter in a vain attempt to trivialize its passage). As we grow further and further away from nature, our lives become more and more shallow. Instead of reading poetry-perhaps our last connection to deeper, philosophical thought-it is read to us by an electronic voice. Instead of going out to play in nature, our children watch it projected

upon nursery walls. This dull, mechanical world was empty long before the people were taken from it.

But they are gone now as nature, in the form of humankind, has rid itself of humankind. In the end, in a parody of humankind's atomic inferno, the house is consumed by fire, and the machines, madly trying to douse the fire are mere mechanical echoes of those human beings who thought that, not only could they control an ever increasing arsenal of doomsday weapons, but those weapons were a necessary deterrent to their own use. The house tries to give warning as voices wail: "Fire, fire, run, run, like a tragic nursery rhyme, a dozen voices, high, low, like children dying In a forest, alone, alone." These voices are as useless as the human voices might have been before the attack. Their creators, thinking that these mechanical voices would protect them, did not heed the voice of nature nor even the human voices of art and literature that might have brought them more in touch with the natural. The "Picassos and Matisses," consigned to the upper halls (where they were passed by daily, rather than placed in a room where one could sit and contemplate them), did not "humanize" their owners anymore than the mechanical recitation of poetry caused them to consider more than the pretty rhyme and meter. If it had, if people had paid attention to such things (like Bradbury's story itself, one would assume), then humankind would not have dissolved in its own nuclear oven, for it is the artist who is closest to nature and, perhaps, to God.

Bradbury, in his book *Zen and the Art of Writing,* asserts "how rare the motion picture, the novel, the poem, the story, the painting, or the play which deals with the greatest problem of our time, man and his fabulous tools, man and his mechanical children, man and his amoral robots which lead him, strangely and inexplicably, into immorality." This story is a partial response to that deficiency . We continue to create without regard to what we are creating, without regard to either moral or practical implications (beyond the basic profit motive). We clone sheep, alter DNA, run genetic tests on fetuses, build weapons of mass destruction, eradicate smallpox from the face of the earth, invent a vaccine for polio, send rockets into space, and on and on and we call it all progress. There should be a philosophical basis for differentiating what can enhance our lives and what can only make them empty and mechanical. That basis may be art. That basis may be stones like this one, but--considering that we have become more, not less, dependent upon mechanical comforts, and we have become less literate and less philosophical-perhaps art is not enough.

Source: Robert Peltier, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Forrester discusses The Martian Chronicles, *the Ray Bradbury collection which includes the story "There Will Come Soft Rains." He states that Bradbury's fiction* is *often overwhelmed by the author's exuberant sentimentality.*

I read my first Ray Bradbury story when I was about ten, and it was love at first sight: prose as rich as the cream filling of the Twinkies I loved, creatures bizarre enough to please a ten year old palate, machinery and rockets abundant enough to satisfy a boy living in those pre-Romantic 1950s.

I drifted away from science fiction and Bradbury about fifteen years ago. But I never forgot Bradbury's stories. I remembered the blue triangle baby in "Tomorrow's Child," the writhing pictures on the skin of the Illustrated Man, the Martian's crystal homes in *The Martian Chronicles.* When my interest in science fiction was reawakened about three years ago, I especially relished the thought of rereading Bradbury's stories, whose images had stuck in my memory for over a decade. However, when I reread Bradbury, I found disquieting elements that I hadn't noticed when I was younger. There was, for instance, a shrill devotion to ideas at the expense of his narratives.

Few people love their ideas as much as Ray Bradbury loves his. He overstates them in newspaper interviews, he forces them into the mouths of his heroes, who then try to harangue us into right reason, and he sometimes stops his narration to lecture us. I'in reminded of Wells, who eventually became more fond of his role as lecturer-moralist than of his role as a storyteller.

Bradbury once estimated that he had turned out almost three million words of fiction before he made his first sale. Those three million words taught Bradbury how to handle prose rhythms and lush description, but they didn't teach him cold-blooded revision.

Never has an author asked so much of his readers. Bradbury's nostalgia for a golden age, his hatred of "glitter-eyed psychiatrists, clever sociologists, resentful educationalists, antiseptic parents," and his anti-materialistic biases occasionally seduce him into artistic lapses. Once an advocate of Technocracy, Bradbury has turned on his previous love with a passion.

In "And the Moon Be Still as Bright," for instance, the sensitive Jeff Spender likes wood instead of chemical fires, castigates Americans because they love Chicago plumbing too much, quotes Byron, and knows that "living is life." All well and good. However, when Spender shoots to death six fellow crew members because they are materialistic philistines, Bradbury continues to justify Spender's behavior. "How would you feel," Spender asks rhetorically, "If a Martian vomited stale liquor on the White House floor?"

Moreover, Captain Wilder, Bradbury's spokesman for the *via media,* sides with the mass murderer. Wilder secretly hopes that Spender will escape, he almost shoots Parkhill in the back when that entrepreneur charges after Spender, and he demands of his men

that Spender be shot "cleanly." Finally, Wilder gives Spender a hero's funeral when he buries him In a Martian sarcophagus The last we see of Spender is his "peaceful face."

It would seem that readers who are not blinded by Spender's noble sentiments would be fed up with him by the time he kills SIX people. Bradbury asks too much of us when he comes Just short of justifying Spender's behavior on the grounds that he doesn't want to see the golden houses and tile floors desecrated. That is, Bradbury put sullied flesh on an idea and then asked us to admire the flesh along with the idea.

Bradbury's ideas are so violently drawn in *The Martian Chronicles* that the stories are weakened unless we are as enthusiastic about his ideas as he is. Bradbury can't resist, for Instance, forcing his characters onto soap boxes, where they spend their time lecturing us on Rousseauan primitivism, the pleasures of the imagination, and the crassness of American society. At least a fourth of "-And the Moon Be Still as Bright" consists of Spender's lectures on ecology and aesthetics; and Stendhal in "Usher II" and Dad in the "Million Year Picnic" are as preachy as Spender. Bradbury lacks either the inclination or the skill to weave these sentiments into his plot.

In an article in *Extrapolations,* Robert Reilly, Infatuated by Bradbury's "neo-humanism," suggests that the Martians of *The Martian Chronicles* are well-defined and consistent when he calls them a "courteous," "reserved" and gentle race. And It is true that in the fourth expedition Wilder calls the Martians a "graceful, beautiful, and philosophical people." Later, in the story "The Off Season," we see the Martians behaving as kindly as Wilder tells us they behave when, after Sam Parkhill murders a few of them, they turn their cheeks and give Sam Parkhill their land.

Yet these same Martians, under the exigencies of Bradbury's plots, are quite a different people. When Bradbury needs the first Earth expedition murdered, he uses a Martian, one of those "gentle" creatures, as the murderer ("Ylla"). Ylla's husband, who lives In that crystal-pillared house built by a race that knows how to blend "religion, art, and science," becomes a cold-blooded killer when his jealousy is aroused. The second expedition is wiped out by a Martian psychologist who thinks they are Martian madmen, and we find out that there are an incredible number of Martian madmen among a population that is supposed to be so reasonable and philosophical. Finally, the seventeen members of the third expedition are murdered in their beds by these Martians that we are told by Bradbury to admire. Under the influence of Bradbury's plots, the Martians kill. Under the influence of his "neo-humanism," we are *told* that the Martians are cleaner and nicer than we are.

Bradbury also occasionally becomes so enamored with his prose that he forgets to ask himself if his descriptions fit his stories. For instance, the conclusion to "The Third Expedition" contains the kind of evocative tableau-with its brass band, coffins, and mourners-that Bradbury is so fond of. However, It is so Implausible that it should jar any reader who is not completely caught up in Bradbury's prose. Never have the Martians been pictured as whimsical humorists, yet here they are participating in an American burial after they have killed the American visitors. The "mayor" makes a speech, the "mourners" cry, and the brass band plays "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean." What are

we to think of all this? Until this time, the Martians have shown no sentimental attachment to humans, no traces of whimsy, and no interest in psycho-drama. Yet there they are, still dressed in Earth clothes and Earth faces, forced to act in an implausible scene because the author loves to describe a nostalgic burial and is unable to stop his pen. As an isolated tableau, the burial scene is a masterpiece. It has the power of pleasing our taste for the unexpected and sensational. But the scene doesn't satisfy our need for a well- made plot and internal consistency. That Bradbury is writing fantasy science fiction is no excuse. The world that a fantasy author creates-like the worlds created by medieval theologians-must be internally consistent.

But enough of this. Despite their literary "flaws," I remembered Bradbury's stories, when I had forgotten most of the others. So I reexamined his stories in a search for [what] made his stories memorable. My first discovery was that I-perhaps we-can forgive an author his shortcomings if he can make up for them in other ways. Daniel Defoe didn't know when to stop a story, but we easily forgive him. We remember Crusoe's island adventures and forget his boring overland trip back to England from Portugal. We can forgive Alexander Pope his personal attacks on his various enemies because of his sustained inventiveness and cleverness. So despite his shortcomings, Bradbury's strengths make his books memorable.

Although his prose is occasionally overcooked it is still, in small chunks, superior to any other prose in science fiction. It is prose, like good poetry, that sticks in the mind. Let me point to a single example out of *The Martian Chronicles.* It's hard to forget those dormant robots waiting in the cellar in "Usher II," because Bradbury's prose rhythms are appropriate to the action and because he is master of the small, sensuous detail that captures our imagination:

Full grown without memory, the robots waited In green silks the color of forest pools, in silks the color of frog and fern, they waited. In yellow hair the color of sun and sand, the robots waited. Oiled, with tube bones cut from bronze and sunk in gelatin, the robots lay in coffins for the not dead and not alive, in planked boxes, the Metronomes waited to be set in motion. There was a smell of lubrication and lathed brass.. .. And now there was a vast screaming of yanked nails Now there was a lifting of lids.

Bradbury has more to offer than prose: his imagination is inventive and vivid. I don't agree with Danon Knight that Bradbury has a "mediocre" imagination. Bradbury does not work like Hal Clement, whose controlled visions construct coherent extraterrestrial environments and then people them with believable and appropriate creatures. Bradbury's mind creates the outlandish (stealing a cup of gold from the sun, blue triangle babies, etc.); and when his prose is working, he carries it off. His visions of the Martians and their environment in *The Martian Chronicles* may be contradictory, but they are aesthetically pleasing and richly imaginative. Crystal homes, blue-sailed sandships, coffined robots, singing books, rockets that turn the winter landscape into summer-these details go a long way toward compensating for other artistic lapses.

Let me list a few images out of Bradbury's stories and see if you don't remember the same ones I remember: the scurrying metal mice in "There Will Come Soft Rains" who

are used as miniature vacuum cleaners, and who continue to work feverishly as their house burns down; the mechanical coffin in "Wake for the Living" that embalms the brother and then digs his grave and covers it behind him; the children's nursery in *The Veldt,* with electronic walls that fill the room with the smells and sounds of African lions; the crushed butterfly on the boots of the time traveler in "A Sound of Thunder." And always the running children in tennis shoes, the rockets belching flames, the old-fashioned burials.

But most of all, Bradbury deserves our praise for those stories that deal with, in Damon Knight's words, our "fundamental prerational fears and longings and desires." Bradbury knows, as all good writers know, how to touch that residue of ancient images that we carry around with us: lost Edens (which come in the form of small American towns of the 1920s), new green beginnings for the pioneers on Mars, nostalgia for universally lost childhoods, the fear of the wicked that this way comes. Bradbury-thank goodness-never tires of touching these strings.

Do these strengths of Bradbury overcome his weaknesses? I think they do. In that one thing that is, to my mind, important to most science fiction-an artist's ability to engage us in that world of oiled robots, strange beings, tune paradoxes, other worlds, and bizarre futures-Bradbury is very good. And that', why I remembered Ray Bradbury.

Source: Kent Forrester, "The Dangers of Being Earnest. Ray Bradbury and *The Martian Chronicles,"* in *The Journal of General Education,* Vol 28, No I, Spring, 1976, pp. 50-54.

Adaptations

The Martian Chronicles was adapted as a film for television in 1979, starring Rock Hudson, Bernadette Peters, Roddy McDowell, and Darin McGavin. Directed by Michael Anderson and produced by U.S.A. Fries Entertainment, It is available through Fries Home Video.

. "There Will Come Soft Rains" was adapted as a graphic story for the comic book *Weird Fantasy,* Vol. 1, No. 17, October, 1996.

Topics for Further Study

Find out about the house that Microsoft founder and billionaire Bill Gates built in the Seattle, Washington area. What will computers do for that house? How is it similar to the house described in "There Will Come Soft Rains"?

Research nuclear technology. Is it possible that a bomb could destroy all human life on the planet? How accurate is Bradbury's description of the effects of the bomb, especially the idea that the blast could be so intense that it would burn the images of the people into the side of the house?

Find out what critics have said about Sara Teasdale's poem, "There Will Come Soft Rains." Why do you think Bradbury chose this particular poem as the title for his story?

Compare and Contrast

1951: The first thermonuclear device is detonated by the United States in the mid-Pacific. The island atoll of Eniwetok is obliterated by the blast. Few precautions are taken to protect nearby inhabitants from radiation poisoning.

1997: A significant percentage of the United State's electricity is generated by nuclear power plants, despite several near meltdowns in the last few decades, including mishaps at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania, and Monroe, Michigan.

1951: The world's first commercial computer, the Univac, is produced by Remington Rand. The machine fills an entire room and requires several experts to run it.

1997: The Pentium chip manufactured by the Intel Corporation is installed in 90 percent of all new personal computers. A common microprocessor chip is about the size of a fingernail.

1951: Bell Telephone initiates the first long-distance direct telephone dialing.

1997: Communications corporations forge an agreement with the government to develop digital, high-definition television signals for television sets which will also be used to access the Internet.

What Do I Read Next?

"The Veldt," a story included in Bradbury's collection *The Illustrated Man,* tells of a brother and sister who have the power to go anywhere in the world through their nursery's electronic screen. Like in "Soft Rains," the results of this technology can be deadly.

I, Robot (1950) by Isaac Asimov is one of the author's earliest collections of science fiction stories written according to his "Three Laws of Robotics," which state that a robot may not harm humans, must obey orders, and must protect its own existence.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) by Edgar Allan Poe. In this classic horror tale, Roderick Usher insists that his house seeks to destroy him as the hapless narrator witnesses both the house's and Usher's disintegration.

On the Beach (1957) by Nevil Shute, a novel in which survivors of a nuclear holocaust await their doom on an Australian beach.

Further Study

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

Night. Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the Criticism subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on Winesburg, Ohio. Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition, Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. Richard Wright: Wearing the Mask, in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535