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A Grim Prediction

Humanity makes advancements in technology every day that improve quality of life and drive our species into the future, but these will never come without consequence. In the 1950's, Ray Bradbury wrote two short stories that caution his audience of the effects of this progress titled "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains," and "The Pedestrian." The former is set in a nuclear fallout scenario in the year 2026 where the only thing left standing is a fully autonomous house that burns to the ground just like everything else in the world. "The Pedestrian" is also set in the future but in a different scenario where nobody ever leaves their house because they are bound to their televisions. Both science fiction narrations indicate that even the most sophisticated feats of engineering humans achieve will never outlast the devastating advancements for technology with worse intentions. Although both texts support this theme, Bradbury's "August 2026" more effectively presents these consequential advancements in technology that will always complement human achievement.

The plots of both stories portray the useful and hurtful technologies that humans have created and how they negatively affect humanity. In "The Pedestrian," the extremity of this technology is less dramatic and the ratio of positive to negative is much smaller compared to the large extremes of assistive to deadly tech of the other story. In "August 2026," the implied advancements that humans have made by this point include the obvious improvements to living situations in smart homes but also the equally impressive nuclear technologies that lead

to the destruction of humanity. These extremes support the theme that with all good technology comes unexpected, or even in some cases expected but dreaded, consequences. Humans developed the ability to build and program small cleaning animals that automatically cleaned the house, a dream of almost any homeowner either in the 50's or even today. This story also presumes houses with the ability to speak to their inhabitants, make them food, let in guests, and plenty of other dull tasks that nobody would complain about not having to do. Although still in a purely mechanical mindset, Bradbury imagined the house where "somewhere in the walls, relays clicked, memory tapes glided under electric eyes" (1), incredible technology that could only ever be imagined at his time but has slowly become reality in the 21st century. With scarily accurate foresight, Bradbury also predicts the inevitable advancement in the harmful and in this case, world-ending technologies that paralleled them. In this story, the bad tech that was developed alongside the good happened to be a nuclear weapon powerful enough wipe out life from the relevant location in "August 2026." Bradbury's reference to a nuclear fallout appears devoid of any emotion as he describes "the five spots of paint - the man, the woman, the children, the ball- remained. The rest was a thin charcoaled layer" (1). "The Pedestrian"'s plot also describes the consequences of positive and negative technological advancement but is less effective in communicating the scale and importance of this correlation. The beneficial technology of autonomous vehicles that Bradbury assumes to be invented by this time is also presented in his writing here. When Leonard Mead is pulled aside by a cop car and is asked to get into the vehicle, he realizes that there is "no one in the car at all." Bradbury assumes that humans have invented automatic policing systems, which would obviously be beneficial. As directed by the theme of this story, these beneficial advancements

come with worse technology portrayed by the encapsulating television. The houses that Leonard Mead walks by are described as “tombs, ill-lit by television light, where the people sat like the dead” (2), obviously implying the worst possible outcome for a society completely addicted to television with no motivation to do anything with their lives. Although this is definitely an outcome we humans should do our best to avoid, complete nuclear fallout is much more difficult to recover from. Therefore, these examples show that the plot of “August 2026” better portrayed the negative affects that come with advancements in technology.

With little human presence in either story, Bradbury sets grim moods for the reader to understand the bleak scenarios presented but because “August 2026” is completely devoid of any human life, it better portrays the dark theme of the story. The first and last thing the reader encounters in “August 2026” is the lonely voice of the house speaking to itself, completely unaware of its desolate surroundings. The constant dialogue offered by the house throughout the story further emphasizes the lonely mood every time the house attempts to communicate to its past owners because we know the horrors of what has really happened to them. Even before the reader starts to develop sympathy for the sentient house, Bradbury introduces the setting as a completely barren Earth post nuclear war, wiped of humanity. Bradbury uses the primal fear of extinction in every human being to really impact the reader and emphasize the theme saying, “The house stood alone in a city of rubble and ashes” (1). The idea of a nuclear war wiping out our species was an even more prevalent fear at the time that Bradbury is writing this piece because the 50’s was the start of a decades-long arms race where the entire world was constantly one-upping each other with better (more destructive) nuclear technology. The readers of his time therefore had an even more negative connotation with the idea of a

nuclear fallout than we do now. This evidence supports the claim that "August 2026" better portrays the theme of negative technological advancement than the much less intimidating thought of the television. In "The Pedestrian," the first half of the story uses long descriptive sentences that set a similarly bleak mood without active human interaction. Leonard Mead explains that for all the years he had walked down these streets, "he had never met another person walking, not one in all that time" (1). The reader immediately pictures the permanent state of loneliness that someone living like this must feel without any social interaction. Our generation right now is particularly sensitive to the reference of a scenario such as this because of our own experience with social isolation this past year. This fear must have also been prominent in the 50's as media consumption moved from purely auditory (radios) to an immersive visual experience (tv's) that plenty of people worried would take over our lives and replace true human experience. In a way this has become a reality in 2021 but not necessarily to the extent to which "The Pedestrian" describes. With this information, one can understand that the grim mood developed by the negative consequences from technology in both stories are effective portrayals of the theme but the considerably more dramatic of the two, and thus carrying more weight, is the mood of "August 2046."

The use of imagery that creates such vividly upsetting portrayals of the future in both short stories reinforce the theme of self-harm and destruction for the human race, but descriptions in "August 2026" do so more effectively. Even though the house is oblivious to its apocalyptic surroundings, the mood is one of impending doom. To better depict the extremity of the situation, Bradbury explains that the house "had shut up its windows and drawn shades in an old-maidenly preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical

paranoia" (2). The description along with the personification of the house are effective devices to detail the horrific scenario in which this takes place. Understanding that the house, which cannot think for itself no matter how smart it seems, is completely shutting itself off from the rest of the world means that even the most advanced piece of technology present knows how bad the world has become on some level. The story comes to an end as the house goes up in flames, symbolizing that even the most sophisticated piece of engineering humans will create will never outlast the destructive advancements for technology with worse intentions. The house has "[given] ground as the fire in ten billion angry sparks moved with flaming ease from room to room and then up the stairs" (3). Eventually the house becomes but a memory of the past leaving only ash behind, a perfectly symbolic ending to warn readers of this theme with cataclysmic consequences. A similar, yet less dramatic, setting is rendered from the imagery in "The Pedestrian." This story seems to be split into two very distinct sections, the first filled with long descriptive sentences used to narrate the walk through our primary setting and the second detailing the conversation in quick back and forth dialogue. This first half is primarily where the imagery conveys the theme of the negative effects of technology. Leonard Mead is the only sentient being present, while all of the rest of humanity enthralled in the concept of mindless television. Mead walks slowly down the abandoned streets and continues to observe the same depressing phenomena one can presume he sees every day. He explains, "it was not unequal to walking through a graveyard where only the faintest glimmers of firefly light appeared in flickers behind the windows" (1). This description paints a vivid image of silence and solitude meant to inform the reader of the dangerous consequences stemming from television. This technology was not new to the world at the time of writing, but the concerns about the effects

it would have on the population were growing. The natural fear that entertainment technology is a reoccurring one that has recently resurfaced with the invention of virtual reality and similar products. In totality, this imagery is effective at producing fear for a world of brainless populations at the whim of technology, but it lacks the spectacular proportions to which the effects of a nuclear fallout are described in "August 2026." That proves that although "The Pedestrian" does still support the theme, it does not do so as well as the other story.

Considering the use of all three of these literary devices to convey the consequences of technological advancement, it is clear that "August 2046: There Will Come Soft Rains" more effectively communicates the theme with a more extreme plotline, a more depressing mood, and much more vivid imagery. The warnings that are presented in these works were concerns from the 50's that represent a scarily accurate representation of where military and entertainment technology is still heading in our future today. If one were to write of the future 100 years from now, they would not end up being too far from the unfathomable truth the future holds for our species.