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Humanities

9/27/21

Exploring Utopias and Dystopias in Ray Bradbury Works

Everyone knows that technology has made the lives of humans much easier, but what would happen if society was solely controlled by technology, or if the appliances in a home could control themselves? Ray Bradbury, a 20th century author, explores these questions in his short stories, “Pedestrian” and “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains.” In his first story, the science fiction author establishes a world where technology has completely overrun the lives of the citizens living in a city. The next story takes place after a nuclear explosion, when a house is operating entirely by itself. Suspenseful tone, relatable characterization, and dramatic shift help “Pedestrian” more effectively convey its theme, that utopias and dystopias overlap significantly, better than its counterpart “August 2026.”

Though both stories have a peaceful, tranquil tone that proposes the possibility of a utopian, technological society, “August 2026” is not as effective, due to its explicit expression, in comparison to the thought-provoking implicit strategy of “Pedestrian.” Humans have an immense reliance on technology: phones have built-in calculators, weather apps, calendars, and more. At the start of “Pedestrian,” we see the peaceful quiet that has resulted from the takeover of technology- no honking horns, hustled pedestrians, or screeching cars. To convey the monotonous yet peaceful tone, Bradbury uses many adjectives within long, choppy sentences.

For example, Mr. Mead, the main character, is walking down a “silent, long, and empty” (1) street. This approach includes more imagery and tone, which allow the reader to *feel* the same way that Mr. Mead feels. For example, the “crystal frost” that “cuts the nose” (1), suggests the idea of an icy, bone-chilling setting that sends anticipation shooting through the reader. The slow, dragged-out tone helps the readers understand the city’s mundanity. Technology has taken over the city, keeping most people inside. Though this futuristic city seems bland, there is no crime and little conflict. At one point, Bradbury describes how Mr. Mead, comes to a “moonlit” intersection. Mr. Mead thinks for a few minutes then chooses his path, “but it really made no difference” (1). There was no traffic, cars, or accidents. It can be comforting to have less pressure on decisions. Many people would love to not have to make another decision in their life, but some could not live without control. This idea demonstrates how a utopia for some, may seem like a dystopia for others. In “August 2026,” Bradbury uses a different approach, forcing a peaceful tone. He exhibits how technology has made the lives of middle class families easier by discussing a house which operates completely independently, serving its owners. Although the house is abandoned, the technology still makes breakfast, and washes the dishes. It also announces, “Today is Mr. Featherstone’s birthday.” (1) Who would not want to be woken up by a homemade breakfast and reminded of your schedule and dates? For many people the lack of responsibility creates a utopian feel. The writing in this story is very matter-of-fact and does not promote any strong feelings from the reader. Bradbury’s sentences are short, straight to the point and robotic in comparison to the long, descriptive sentences of “Pedestrian.” This is less effective because there is less to interpret. Interpretation gives the reader time to question, and internally debate the content presented by the author, resulting in a deepened understanding and commitment to read more. In “Pedestrian” there is more opportunity for the reader to see the

overlap between utopia and dystopia. Despite a shared message, the lack of emotional connection in “August 2026” makes its direct approach less effective. “Pedestrian” does a better job of showing the peaceful scene, through its descriptive word choice and mindful pacing.

“Pedestrian” does a better job of displaying the transformation from peace to chaos, than “August 2026,” due to its more efficient use of imagery. In the middle of “Pedestrian”, an ominous tone begins to imply a sense of impending doom, which hints at the transition from “utopia” to “dystopia.” In “Pedestrian” the shift begins when the police car pulls up beside Leonard Mead. The car turned a corner “quite suddenly” (1) and flashed a “fierce white cone of light.” (1) As a reader, it is curious to hear about a car, when the town is so seemingly quiet. Even Mr. Mead notes that it is rare to see the *one* police car in the city of 3 million. This line instantly catches the reader’s attention. Next, a “metallic” (1) voice calls to Mr. Mead. At this point in the story, it feels like there is a change taking place. Mr. Mead’s peaceful walk has been interrupted by this cold, hard, and robotic voice. To convey this shift, Bradbury uses imagery to build mood. He describes the highways, glowing with “moon radiance” (1) and the “metallic whisper” (1) of the police. Bradbury’s writing style is incredibly effective in this part of the story, resulting in an eerie feel. In “August 2026,” Bradbury attempts to create a similar feeling by describing the nightly routine of the house. The bath fills with hot water, the dishes are cleaned and “manipulated like magic tricks,” (2) and the beds are warmed. He describes this process in great detail, in such a way that feels too-good-to-be-true. The approach shows the calm before the storm. As opposed to “Pedestrian,” this tactic evokes less emotion and engagement from the reader.

The surprise of the cliffhanger at the end of “Pedestrian” gives it a more effective ending than “August 2026.” Both of the stories quickly become “dystopian” and intense, as technology

results in chaos and disarray. In “Pedestrian,” tension continues to build up until the end. Mr. Mead engages in a stressful conversation with the police, in which he gives short, direct answers. The “silent, gray” (1) houses and “high, clear” (1) moon watched as Mr. Mead was accused and ridiculed for walking. At this point readers begin to feel bad for Mr. Mead. He becomes a very personable character as he argues, and tries to convince the police of his innocence. At the end of the conversation he shouts, “I protest!” (1) as he is coerced into the police car. Readers are now completely captivated and want to know the fate of Mr. Mead. However the story ends shortly after Mr. Mead is arrested. After getting into the car, the last we hear of Mr. Mead, is when he points out his house, the only one with the lights on. He is ignored and driven off into the “chill November night.” To most readers it is unfair and ridiculous that Mr. Mead was arrested so quickly. Many people may sympathize with Mr. Mead and ask themselves, “What kind of society arrests people for walking?!” The abrupt, anti-climactic end to the suspenseful story, convinces readers that Mr. Mead is indeed living in a dystopian society, and allows them to question how we perceive other realities. “August 2026” ends in a much more graphic, dramatic way. In the morning, the house is engulfed in flames. Bradbury describes the scene as the house “tries to save itself.” (2) The fire in “ten billion angry sparks” (2) overtakes and destroys the house as well as the surrounding landscape. With this ending, there is no doubt of the horror technology caused, but it does not give as much of a prompt for readers to dive into the similarities and differences between utopias and dystopias, and therefore is less effective.

The gray area between utopia and dystopia is highlighted in both “Pedestrian” and “August 2026.” However, Bradbury’s utilization of tone, characterization, and shift, make “Pedestrian” more effective at conveying this theme. The stories serve as a reminder that our

backgrounds, experiences, and values can change the way we perceive the world, and what we think of as good or bad.