

Kiara Lavana

Ms. Small

Humanities Section Q

September 27, 2021

Post World War II America: The Dystopian Utopia Paradox

How does a utopia achieve societal perfection? What stipulates this alleged perfection? Both the works of 20th-century author Ray Bradbury provide insight into the obscure mechanisms that enable a society's ascendancy to perfection. "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains," is the 1950 short story that chronicles the destruction of one technologically sentient house amidst the wake of a nuclear bombing leaving no humans in sight. Likewise, Bradbury's "The Pedestrian" recounts one night in the life of Leonard Mead, a nonconformist resident of an unidentified futuristic city devoid of any human individuality. Bradbury contrived both these stories in the aftermath of the 20th-century's defining climacteric: World War II. Living amidst this period of substantial political and cultural upheaval, Bradbury wrote his stories in an attempt to characterize the unprecedented changes afflicting American society during the ensuing era. In "The Pedestrian" and "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains," Bradbury establishes ostensibly utopian societies with fundamentally dystopian characteristics, revealing the repressive mechanisms present in a society that achieves such perfection. Through the use of mimetic moods, allusions, and motifs distinctive to American society in the 1950s, Bradbury effectively constructs this dystopian utopia paradox to represent the greater period of disillusionment present in post-World War II America.

Despite initially establishing utopian settings in both pieces through allusions to utilitarian advancements, Bradbury also reveals the restrictive downsides to these technological

progressions through negative characterization of the technology and its function in maintaining societal perfection. The introductory lines of “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” note the story’s temporal setting through the house system’s monotonous repetition of “August 4, 2026, ” the date in which the entire narrative of the short story transpires (“August 2026”, 1). Correspondingly, Bradbury also establishes the year “A.D. 2053” as the time period for the subsequent interactions in his futuristic city with his protagonist, Leonard Mead (“The Pedestrian”, 1). Through his structured worldbuilding, Bradbury superficially characterizes both settings as comparatively utopian by detailing the distinct technologies inextricable to the circumstances of both worlds. From the “tiny robot mice” and “ten thousand attendants” engineered to serve the house’s human inhabitants in “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” (2) to the reactive and communicative police car “wandering the empty streets” in “The Pedestrian,” (1) all the technology detailed in Bradbury’s pieces actively operates to serve humans and palliate human exertion. The function of the mice robots specifically ensures the house’s perpetual state of immaculate cleanliness, for not even a “leaf fragment blew under the door” without the “copper rats” instantaneously filing out to collect the “offending dust” (“August 2026” 2). Ostensibly, these technologies insinuate the existence of highly developed societies in each of the stories, as the references to cleanliness directly relate to societal perfection. Even Bradbury affirms that there remained a dwindling “need for the police” in the “The Pedestrian”’s modern city with “crime ebb[ing]” away because of the new advancements (1). Despite these concrete examples of a progressive society, Bradbury employs this same overarching motif of technology within societies to accentuate the fundamentally dystopian mechanisms behind their functioning. For example, as a result of the meticulous maintenance of the house by the “regiments” of “copper scrap rats,” these pieces of technology pay no attention

to the well-being of other living beings, such as the diseased dog (“August 2026” 2). Likewise, the police car from “The Pedestrian ” immediately conveys an authoritative tone devoid of any human emotion when conversing with Mead. It becomes evident that these technologies constructed to maintain some form of perfection, in actuality, emerge as nothing more than agents of conformity tasked with maintaining this societal consonance.

Moreover, through the utilization of purposeful allusions distinctive to American society in the 1950s, Bradbury constructs post-World War II America as a concrete representation of a “dystopian utopia” by explicitly citing technology prominent throughout the Cold War era. For example, in “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains,” the entirety of the outside world consists of “rubble and ashes” from a nuclear explosion (“August 2026”, 1). This reference to nuclear weaponry alludes to the first and only uses of atomic weapons in wartime that transpired at Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States military near the end of World War II. This decision by the United States to wield weapons of such mass destruction remains controversial since a standard narrative presented in America emphasizes the necessity of these radical measures in promptly terminating the war and avoiding excessive American casualties. However, because of its insouciance to sustaining human rights and avoiding unnecessary death, many regard these radical actions as unnecessary and sadistic, especially since civilian populations comprised the majority of Japanese casualties. These circumstances directly parallel the superficially utopian but actually dystopian societies presented in Bradbury’s stories. Accordingly, “The Pedestrian” repeatedly introduces an innovation that took 1950s American society by storm: the television. When walking at night through the deserted city, Mead immediately remarks on the “gray phantoms” possessed by the television inside homes (“The Pedestrian”, 1). Even when detained, the police car interrogated Mead by questioning why he

chose to walk around the city when he could instead use his “viewing screen” (“The Pedestrian”, 2). This allusion directly correlates to the widespread popularity of televisions in the 1950s because of their first implementations into common homes. As this new piece of technology became extensive throughout most communities, a new cultural force now possessed the capacity to influence American culture, creating a more generalized national experience. This indelible mark on American culture prompted rigid societal norms that often dictated daily life in communities. In both stories, Bradbury strategically alludes to mid-20th century technology in order to negatively characterize their implications in post-World War II society, thereby delegitimizing familiar narratives that excessively venerate America’s period of rapid technological advancement.

Furthermore, Bradbury saturates both pieces with specific mimetic moods that characterize the broader climate of disillusionment in post-World War II American society; by correlating the mood of his country at the time to a distal reality in a futuristic setting, Bradbury provides further cognizance on the detriments of the current American culture. For instance, as Mead strolled through his deserted city, passing the “gray phantoms” as if “walking through a graveyard,” Bradbury instantaneously imbues a despondent and isolating mood onto “The Pedestrian,” especially through his omission of all other human companions for his protagonist (1). Through this stylized diction, Bradbury leaves readers with an exceedingly constrictive society with an abundance of societal rules; this characteristic remains resemblant of the stifling national identity forced onto Americans succeeding World War II as the result of a government systematically attempting to distance Americans from any implications of communism. In addition, the police car’s overtly authoritative tone epitomizes the rigid and ruthless societal norms marketed towards Americans throughout the Cold War era— these rules possessed the

capacity to dictate the manner in which people interacted within and outside of their class, organized their family, and expressed emotion in society. Correspondingly, if “The Pedestrian”’s mood and tone served to explicitly mirror Cold War United States, “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” more implicitly adopts a mundane mood with a whimsical tone that remains relatively wholesome despite innuendos to dark or dehumanizing material. For example, after the family dog’s starvation to death inside a “kitchen” overflowing with “pancakes” and other food items, the “regiments of mice” swiftly and nonchalantly sweep the whole area after sensing the dog’s “decay” (“The Pedestrian” 2). The house’s meticulous supervision of its immaculate appearance exposes the mechanical and inhumane nature of maintaining an exterior facade superficially. This false pretense resembles the attractive exterior that American society built for itself during the Cold War, as the government marketed supposedly anti-communist values to Americans, thereby pushing a universal social ideal onto its citizens. While these conservative values were constructed to enable Americans to appear perfect through conventions like the rigid nuclear family structure and established gender roles within society, in actuality, these bounds remained too narrow for anyone living outside of the spectrum of affluent and white in the 1950s. These restrictions showcase how beneath the glossy exteriors constructed in American society after emerging as superpowers of World War II, the destructive machinery that enabled such perfection parallels the exact mechanisms exhibited in both of Bradbury’s dystopian stories.

Bradbury effectively establishes mid-20th century America as a tangible, real-world manifestation of an externally attractive utopia reliant on intrinsically dystopian methods to maintain its fragile facade. By subtly incorporating allusions and technologies notable to 1950s American society, Bradbury exposes the constricting standards forced on Americans through the post-war culture. While a majority of the societal norms aimed to achieve perfect family

structures and distance Americans from any implication of communism, the conservative bounds often led to monotony or rebellion from anyone who failed to settle within the narrow spectrum of American idealism. Therefore, Bradbury characterizes this greater period of American disillusionment and conceptualizes narratives to reveal the destructive machinery behind America's agreeable exteriors. By displaying the nuanced ways in which repressive societal constrictions present themselves in even the most advanced or progressive societies, Bradbury reveals the detrimental repercussions of a society exceedingly devoted to achieving surface-level perfection and glorifying conformity in any epoch of human history.