

“The Illustrated Man” by Ray Bradbury

Discussion Questions

1. Originally, the stories compiled in “The Illustrated Man” were published separately. Ray Bradbury used the story of the Illustrated Man to tie the short story collection together. How do the framing sequences work in relation to the rest of the stories? Does this technique succeed in making *The Illustrated Man* a cohesive whole - in terms of plot, or theme, or mood? Why or why not?
2. It's often noted that science fiction is a reflection, not of the future, but the present in which it was written. Given that perspective, what can we say about the present in which Bradbury wrote his stories? How is it the same or different from our own present? Do the stories feel dated from our perch over 60 years after the collection was originally published?
3. Many of the selections, such as “The Veldt,” “The Highway,” and “Marionettes, Inc.” express an attitude towards the consequences of technological and scientific development. Based on the stories read, what do you think Ray Bradbury’s view on the impact of technology on society? On families?
4. Are the fathers in "The Rocket" and "The Rocket Man" similar or different? Why? What message(s) are being sent through these characters?
5. Why did Ray Bradbury name the children in “The Veldt” Peter and Wendy and how does this choice support the theme of the story? What are the children of the other stories like? What does the view tell us of Bradbury's view of childhood and the responsibilities of parenting?
6. A number of characters in Bradbury's stories are unnamed, including the Rocket Man, the couple in "The Last Night of the World", the Christ figure in "The Man", the white man in "The Other Foot", and the captain in "The Exiles". What is the significance of leaving these characters unnamed and how does it affect the reader?
7. Faith is an important concept in “The Man,” in which an anonymous Jesus-like visitor has appeared on an unnamed planet. One of the space explorers, Captain Hart, dismisses the convictions of the planet’s inhabitants and departs to keep looking for “the man,” while Martin decides to stay on the planet. What is the role of faith in this and other stories? Is faith rewarded in these stories? Is faith important to the human existence? Why or why not?
8. In which stories is the theme of **danger of imagination** present? What lesson is Ray Bradbury trying to teach his reader?
9. Consider sanity as a flexible state of mind, as a way to cope with reality, or a means to better deal with the stresses of modern life. Given that premise, how does sanity function in stories where characters aren't sure of what they're perceiving or experiencing? What is the sane response, and is it always the right response in these stories?
10. “It hung in the center of the room, large and yellow and warm. It made not a sound, and there was no sound in the room. The door was shut and the rain only a memory to his tingling body. The sun hung high in the blue sky of the room, warm, hot, yellow, and very fine.” So Bradbury describes the sun (in the guise of a Sun Dome) in “The Long Rain.” What is the significance of the sun in this and other stories in “The Illustrated Man?”

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11. Some of the stories in this collection present a reversal of power for a minority group. For example, in “The Other Foot,” Willie expresses his opinion on the arrival of a white man’s rocket as follows: “Well...the shoe’s on the other foot now. We’ll see who gets laws passed against him, who gets lynched, who rides the back of streetcars, who gets segregated in shows. We’ll just wait and see.” This story is considered by some critics to be unusual not only for its time, but also for science fiction. Do you agree? What was your reaction to reading this story? Do you feel that the ending too idealistic?
12. Discuss the theme of **revenge**, where it is seen, and why it is important. How does our society view revenge? Do you agree or disagree with that view and why?
13. Bradbury often has a fine eye for the wondrous aspects hidden in everyday life. Consider how he uses this in several of his stories, drawing specific examples. What effect does it have on the reader, how does it influence our understanding of the stories?
14. Bradbury sometimes overturns expectations in his plots, providing a natural consequence of events in a way readers don't foresee. What tools does he use as a writer to set up one expectation, what tools does he use to provide something different but still consistent with the story? Does this always work? Why or why not?

Extra credit: Which “flamboyant superstar” wrote a song inspired by a story in this book? What is the name of the song?

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Story Synopses

Source: Wikipedia

"The Veldt"

A mother and father in a futuristic society begin to worry about their children's mental health when the three-dimensional nursery they bought for them begins projecting a veldt in Africa populated by hungry lions feasting on a set of carcasses. The child psychiatrist they hired suggests that the family is being babied by the automated house they've been living in and should shut it off and be more self-sufficient. The children initially throw a tantrum over the thought of not having the automated house do everything for them (and not having the 3D nursery on), but soon coolly agree to it. When the parents go to look for the kids, the parents are locked in the nursery and realize that the carcasses in the veldt were themselves. The psychiatrist and the children have lunch in the veldt, and when the psychiatrist looks off into the distance, he sees the lions feasting on their fresh prey.

"Kaleidoscope"

A group of astronauts are sent floating helplessly through space after a malfunction in their ship. The story illustrates the final thoughts and conversations of the crew members as they face their death. The narrator bitterly reflects on his life and feels he has accomplished nothing worthwhile. His final thought is a wish that his life would at least be worth something to someone else. Ultimately, the narrator is incinerated as he falls through Earth's atmosphere and appears as a shooting star to a child in Illinois.

"The Other Foot"

Mars has been colonized solely by black people. When they learn that a rocket is coming from Earth with white travelers, they institute a Jim Crow system of racial segregation in retaliation for how white people have treated blacks over the years. When the rocket lands, the traveler tells them that the Earth has been destroyed—including all of the horrific mementos of racial discrimination (such as trees used for lynching blacks). The blacks, feeling sorry for the white travelers losing their homes, decide to take them in and choose not to go through with their segregation plan.

"The Highway"

A husband and wife living by a highway in rural Mexico go on living their normal, idyllic lives as the highway fills with people fleeing a nuclear war. The story ends with some young travelers they help telling them about the nuclear war, and how the world is ending. After the travelers leave, the residents briefly wonder what "the world" is, and then continue on with their lives.

"The Man"

A group of space explorers land on a planet to find the population living in a healthy state of bliss. Upon investigation, they discover that an enigmatic visitor came to them. Further description leads the two spacemen to believe that this man is Jesus (though he is never named, leaving room for other religious personas). One decides to spend the rest of his days on the rejoicing in the wake of the man's glory. The other continues in his spaceship, "chasing 'him' always a step behind, never fast enough to catch up to him, constantly trying to achieve the unachievable." Other members of the crew decide to stay on the planet to learn from the contented citizens, and are rewarded by the discovery that "he" is still on the planet.

"The Long Rain"

A group of astronauts are stranded on Venus, where it rains continually and heavily. The travelers make their way across the Venusian landscape to find a "sun dome", a shelter with a large artificial light source. However, the first sun dome they find has been destroyed by the native Venusians. Searching for another sun dome, the characters, one by one, are driven to madness and suicide by the unrelenting rhythm of the rain. At the end of the story, only one sane astronaut remains and manages to find a functional sun dome.

"The Rocket Man"

Astronauts of this story are few in number, so work as they desire for high pay. One such astronaut goes off into space for three months at a time, only returning to earth for three consecutive days to spend time with his wife and son. The story is told from the perspective of the son, who holds an interest in one day also becoming an astronaut. Talking with his father, the son learns of the constant battle he faces with yearning for the stars at home while yearning for home while in space. Despite this he has several times attempted to quit, staying at home with his family as he realizes his constant absence has nearly destroyed his wife. At the end of the story the father takes off into space one last time, only to meet his end by the sun. His wife and son now avoid the daytime and become nocturnal.

"The Fire Balloons"

A group of priests travel to Mars to act as a missionary to Martians. Once there, they discover that the natives are actually entities of pure energy. Since they lack corporeal form, they are unable to commit sin, and thus do not need redemption.

"The Last Night of the World"

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Source: Wikipedia

In this story, a married couple awakens to the knowledge that the world is going to end that very evening.

Nonetheless, they go through their normal routines, knowing and accepting the fact that there is no tomorrow.

"The Exiles"

Numerous works of literature are banned and burned on Earth. The fictional characters of these books are portrayed as real-life entities who live in a refuge on Mars. However, they are vulnerable, as when all the books on a character are destroyed, the character itself vanishes permanently. When the group of characters learn that some people are coming for them, they stage a counterattack, but are foiled by the astronauts who burn the last remaining books from Earth, unknowingly annihilating the entire colony.

"No Particular Night or Morning"

Two men in a spaceship are having a discussion about how empty and cold space is. The first man is a little bit insane and keeps asking questions about how there is nothing sure in space and there is no night or morning. He refuses to believe anything about reality without sufficient evidence and soon becomes skeptical of everything he cannot directly experience. He said that he doesn't believe in stars because they are too far away. The second man is wandering about the ship when he learns that someone has left the ship, and it is the first man. The first man is still talking to himself and has killed himself by letting himself fly freely through space.

"The Fox and the Forest"

A couple living in a war-ravaged future society on the brink of collapse escape by traveling back to 1938 Mexico (using a traveling agency in which people can travel to different time periods) and enjoying life before chemical, nuclear, and biological warfare ruined everything. Unfortunately, their superiors have also traveled back in time and won't rest until they get the couple back to the future.

"The Visitor"

This story takes place on Mars, which is used as a quarantine for people with deadly illnesses. One day, the planet is visited by a young man of eighteen who has the ability to perform thought transference and telepathy. The exiles on the planet are thrilled with his ability and a violent fight breaks out over who will get to spend the most time with their visitor and enjoy the illusionary paradises he can transmit. In the struggle, the young man is killed and the escape he provided is lost forever.

"The Concrete Mixer"

A reluctant Martian soldier is forced to join the army as they prepare to invade Earth. However, when they arrive, they are welcomed by a world at peace, full of people who are curious rather than aggressive. The protagonist meets a movie director, and it becomes clear that the people of Earth have planned to exploit the Martians for financial gain. He tries to escape back to Mars, but is run over by a car and killed.

"Marionettes, Inc."

A man who was blackmailed into marriage by a woman who was raped (and blames him for raping her) buys a realistic robot to act as a surrogate so he doesn't have to deal with his wife. The robot soon falls in love with the man's wife and locks the real man in the crate in which the robot was delivered.

"The City"

A rocket expedition from Earth lands on an uncharted planet to be greeted by a seemingly empty city. As the humans begin to explore, they realize that the city is not as empty as it seems. The city was waiting for the arrival of humans; the contingency plan of a long dead civilization, put in place to take revenge upon humanity after their culture was wiped out with biological weapons by humans long before recorded history. Once the city captures and kills the human astronauts, the humans' corpses are used as automatons to finalize the city's creators' revenge; a biological attack on the Earth.

"Zero Hour"

Children across the country are deeply involved in an exciting game they call 'Invasion'. Their parents think of it as harmless fun until it turns out that the invasion is real and aliens are using the children to help them get control of Earth.

"The Rocket"

Fiorello Bodoni, a poor junkyard owner, has managed to save \$3,000 to fulfill his lifelong dream of sending one member of his family on a trip to outer space. The family, however, finds it impossible to choose who will go because those left behind will inevitably envy the chosen one for the rest of their lives. Bodoni instead uses the money to build a replica rocket from an old mock-up, and sets up a 3D theater inside the cabin and convinces the children they are actually going through space.