The Pedestrian

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAY BRADBURY

From his earliest years, Ray Bradbury was inspired by the intrusion of fantasy into everyday life. As a child, he avidly read horror stories, collected early science fiction magazines, and attended magic shows. High school marked the end of his formal education, but by that time, Bradbury had already established himself as a talented short story writer. In the prolific years to come, Bradbury wrote celebrated novels including *Fahrenheit 451* as well as hundreds of short stories, some of which were collected in *The Martian Chronicles* in 1950 and *The Illustrated Man* in 1951. Though many of his works include futuristic settings and imagined technologies, Bradbury resisted categorization as a "science fiction" writer—he maintained that his works were more like myths about human nature than speculative fiction. Indeed, many of his short stories use fantastic settings or futuristic technology as tools for exploring timeless themes like nostalgia, censorship, or anxiety about the future. When he died at 91, Bradbury was regarded as one of the most prominent science fiction writers of his time.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The years following World War II saw a number of historical developments relevant to the plot of "The Pedestrian." Television was a new technology, and its popularity exploded in the postwar period, with increasing numbers of homes owning a set and network programming being developed to meet rising demand for home entertainment. This time period also saw the rise of the 1950s suburban domestic ideal, as servicemen returning from World War II often bought tract homes in the suburbs that popped up around major cities. Fueled by massive public investment in roadways, suburbanization contributed to the growth of car culture. "The Pedestrian" imagines how these developments will have changed city life 100 years in the future. The story predicts the city as a hive of activity during the day, cars filling the streets. At night, however, city streets are practically deserted as everyone remains indoors, numbed into complacency by their televisions.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In its dystopian vision of the future, "The Pedestrian" is influenced by Bradbury's reading of science fiction by H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, as well as contemporaries Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. Like these writers, Bradbury questions the benefits of technological and social progress, showing how it can have dehumanizing effects on the population. "The Pedestrian" also anticipates the themes of Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, demonstrating deep suspicion of social conformity in a society that no longer reads books to cultivate thought and individuality. Dystopian fiction like "The Pedestrian" has continued to be a relevant and popular genre, as shown by the impact of novels like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, and films like *The Terminator* and *The Matrix*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Pedestrian
- **When Written:** 1950
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles
- **When Published:** August 7, 1951
- **Literary Period:** Post-war
- **Genre:** Science Fiction
- **Setting:** A city in the United States, the year 2053
- **Climax:** Leonard Mead is taken to a psychiatric institution
- **Antagonist:** A robotic police car
- **Point of View:** Third person limited omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Inspiration: Bradbury was inspired to write "The Pedestrian" by an event that took place in 1949. While walking down Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, he and a friend were stopped and questioned by a police officer. As in the "The Pedestrian," no one else was walking the street, causing the police to become suspicious.

Car Culture: Bradbury never learned to drive a car, instead using public transportation or a bicycle, a fact that provides some context for the negative portrayal of automobiles in "The Pedestrian."

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Pedestrian" is a dystopian short story that describes one night in the life of Leonard Mead, resident of an unnamed city in the year 2053. Mead enjoys walking the city streets alone every night. As he walks the empty streets, he passes the homes of other citizens, who are inside watching television. He has done this for ten years and never encountered another person, since all the other people remain inside their homes, mesmerized by the light entertainment programs on their television screens. The other citizens are described as if they are dead: "gray phantoms" who live in "tombs." As he walks, Mead enjoys taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of **the**

natural world. He also talks to himself, addressing the people in the homes, asking under his breath what they are watching on television.

On this night, however, Mead meets a robotic police car—the only one left in the city, since crime is virtually nonexistent. The car interrogates Mead, trying to discover why he is out by himself. This questioning reveals that Mead is nonconformist in many ways: he doesn't own a television, he is unmarried and lives alone, and he is a writer in a society that doesn't value the written word. Upon revealing the depth of Mead's nonconformity, the car instructs Mead get in and tells him he is being taken to a psychiatric institution to be studied for regressive tendencies. The car then drives away with Mead inside.

CHARACTERS

Leonard Mead – Mead, the only named character in the story, is an adult male living in an unnamed city in the middle of the 21st century. He is unique among city dwellers; he lives alone, doesn't own a television, and his profession as a writer is outdated, since no one reads anymore. Moreover, his favorite activity is to walk the streets alone at night. For ten years on these nightly walks, Mead has passed the homes of the other citizens and never met another person. Despite being a loner, Mead seems contented in his isolation, and he enjoys his solitude. He appreciates nature, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells on his walks. His enjoyment of nature and his imaginative reveries show that Mead has cultivated a Romantic sensibility, allowing him to maintain his individuality in the face of pervasive social conformity. Mead's contented solitude is interrupted, however, when he encounters the city's only police car, which interrogates him and reveals his lack of conformity to social norms. At the story's conclusion, the car takes Mead away to a psychiatric institution to be studied for his "regressive tendencies." Since Mead is the viewpoint character of the story's narration, the reader gains access to his thoughts and feelings, increasing sympathy for him and highlighting through his perspective the deadness and repression of the city he lives in. As an unrepentant individualist, Mead strongly contrasts with the ghost-like other citizens and the mechanical, robotic police car, and his characterization demonstrates the rewards as well as risks of social nonconformity.

Other Citizens – Mead passes the homes of these characters on his nightly walks. These characters are undifferentiated and dehumanized. They are not given individual identities; rather, they are described in general terms and associated with death: they are like ghosts and "gray phantoms," their neighborhoods are likened to graveyards, and their homes are "tomb-like." They whisper and murmur in their dimly lit homes as they watch light entertainment shows. During the day, they drive around the city in automobiles that are described as if they were insects. The portrayal of the other citizens shows how technological progress and social conformity can cause people to lose their individuality and even their humanity.

Robotic Police Car – The only other character besides Mead who speaks, it is revealed that the car is robotic and operated remotely. Its "iron voice" speaks to Mead in a harsh, accusatory tone as it interrogates him. The car asks why Mead is walking alone, and then it inquires about his profession, home life, marital status. Its questions reveal by implication the expectations of social conformity that Mead fails to embody. Representing swift and unforgiving state power to enforce social conformity, the car possesses the absolute authority to incarcerate Mead, as happens at the story's conclusion. The car's harsh tone and its inhumanity reinforce the theme of dehumanization in the story.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

TECHNOLOGY AND DEHUMANIZATION

Ray Bradbury's short story "The Pedestrian" narrates the life of Leonard Mead, a resident of an unnamed city in the year 2053. For 10 years, Mead has walked the city streets alone, night after night, past homes of other citizens who sit transfixed by their televisions. He is ultimately arrested merely for walking freely on the street, an absurd event that reveals Bradbury's grim view of 21st century: it's a dystopian world where technology has deadened the populace and enabled state power to enforce conformity. Bradbury's short stories and novels frequently explore the social costs of technological progress. Through imagery of death, descriptions of humans in cars as insects, and Mead's interaction with the robotic police car, "The Pedestrian" expresses the pessimistic view that the technological advances of the 1950s (like televisions, automobiles, and computers) will ultimately rob people of their essential humanity and give undue power to machines.

As Leonard Mead walks through the city, the streets, homes, and people are all described with imagery of death. Through this use of morbid language, Bradbury predicts that one of the most exciting technological advances of his time, the television, will eventually deaden its viewers. Walking through the "silent and long and empty" streets is like "walking through a graveyard." This establishes the landscape as one that has been robbed of all vitality by the television, which everyone is inside watching. The homes Mead passes are described as housing

the dead: "tombs, ill-lit by television light." The houses, too, are devoid of any signs of liveliness, and people's pacification in front of their televisions inside these deathly structures indicates that modern technology is the cause. Passing one "tomb-like building," Mead sees "gray phantoms" through open windows, and he hears "whisperings and murmurs" from the people within. The people inside watching their televisions are motionless and emotionless, metaphorically dead: "the people sat like the dead, the gray or multicolored lights touching their faces, but never really touching them." The people of 2053 are clearly more concerned with what is happening in the fictional, sensationalized realm of television than they are with their own physical surroundings—though they are superficially "touched" by what they watch, it has no meaningful, tangible impact upon them. Mead, then, is established as the last living soul in a world of empty, lifeless "phantoms" who are wholly consumed by technology.

In comparing the masses to the dead, Bradbury portrays people as having lost their uniquely human life force and spirit. He takes this notion a step further by critiquing the automobile's effects on humans, likening people in cars to mindless, swarming insects rather than complex, sentient beings. Bradbury describes the city in the daytime as "a great insect rustling and a ceaseless jockeying for position as the scarab-beetles, a faint incense puttering from their exhausts, skimmed homeward to the far direction." The people driving are not mentioned. Instead, the city of automobiles resembles a swarm of insects scurrying around. While walking puts Mead in direct, reverent contact with the beauty of his **natural** surroundings, those around him have become wholly disconnected from nature via their televisions and cars.

Even Mead, the sole pedestrian remaining in his city, is not immune to the dehumanizing effects of the automobile. As soon as he comes in contact with the police car, he is also likened to a helpless insect, "[standing] entranced, not unlike a night moth, stunned by the illumination, and then drawn toward it." Here, Mead's personality and individuality seem to disappear the moment he is forced to interact with the cold, robotic authority of the police car. Interrogated by the voice from the police car, Mead is further described as being like a bug on display: "The light held him fixed, like a museum specimen, needle thrust through chest." This image of Mead as an insect killed to be studied foreshadows the story's ending, when he loses his freedom and is taken away to a psychiatric institution, and thereby wholly stripped of his humanity and agency as an individual.

While technology is clearly dehumanizing people, Bradbury also depicts machines as becoming more human. The police car that accosts Mead in the street is made of the materials of technology but has human qualities, such as its "metallic," "phonographic" voice that questions Mead. The voice from the car strips Mead of his individuality, defining him as deviant by the standards of this society, despite being subhuman itself. Mead is instructed to get in the back seat of the car, which is like "a little black jail cell with bars." The "clean and hard and metallic" smells of the police car further reinforce its power to strip Mead of his humanity, as this unpleasant artificial environment starkly contrasts with the delightful, entrancing smells of the outdoors that he enjoyed on his walk earlier in the story. As Mead gets in the car, he sees that there is no one driving it. He asks the car where he is going, and it is revealed that the car is robotic and run by a remote computer: "The car hesitated, or rather gave a faint whirring click, as if information, somewhere, was dropping card by punch-slotted card under electric eyes." It is this robotic, inhuman entity that ultimately decides Mead's fate and sentences him to be locked in a psychiatric institution and stripped of his dignity and freedom. Modern innovations like televisions, automobiles, and computers are manmade innovations, and Bradbury warns against the dangers of relying on these machines to the point that they control humans, rather than the other way around.

When "The Pedestrian" was published in 1951, sales of televisions were booming, car culture was taking over American cities, and computer technology was on the rise. Through his portrayal of a listless, soulless population contrasted with the sentient, authoritarian technology in the story, Bradbury predicted that within the next century, these technological developments would dehumanize and disempower the populace, turning neighborhoods into graveyards, homes into tombs, and people into phantoms and mindless insects. Moreover, he predicted that technology would be harnessed to enforce obedience to the social status quo and punish those, like Leonard Mead, who didn't conform.

NONCONFORMITY

In "The Pedestrian," the citizens of the future city are described as being all the same, scurrying around like insects during the day or mesmerized by their televisions at night. Leonard Mead is different from everyone else, yet he does not feel lonely or alienated. Instead, he asserts his individuality in a society that expects conformity, and he lives a fulfilling life by doing what he enjoys rather than following social norms. Though Mead is ultimately punished for his nonconformity, he is the only character in the story who seems happy or fulfilled. Therefore, Bradbury suggests that in a society that is corrupt or broken, nonconformity is necessary to maintain one's humanity.

Mead's nonconformity is most apparent in his enjoyment of solitary walks. While others in the city do not walk around alone for pleasure, this is precisely "what Mr. Leonard Mead most dearly loved to do." Bradbury describes Mead's long walks alone with words that convey individual empowerment: "stride," "march on," "his journey." The only description of other people in this conformist society shows them to be lifeless and

disconnected, so the sense of purpose and true pleasure that Mead experiences through his nonconformist actions seems even more important and unique. Furthermore, Bradbury suggests that Mead's pleasure in walking is not simply unusual in his society, but also perhaps dangerous. Mead feels that he must be secretive about his walking, and he "wisely" protects himself from being discovered by wearing sneakers, which make less noise. Mead knows that he is deliberately defying the norms of the city, and his effort to prevent being found out indicates that his society is unwelcoming to nonconformists, and also maybe punitive towards them. This shows how strong Mead's sense of self is: in order to be fulfilled and find happiness, he is willing to put himself at risk.

When a police car stops Mead on one of his walks, Bradbury reveals the extent of Mead's nonconformity, which goes far beyond his solitary walks. As the police car interrogates Mead, it first asks for his "business or profession." Mead replies that he is a writer, which the car notes as "no profession." The car marks "no profession" because, with television dominant, no one reads magazines or books anymore, and Mead "hadn't written in years." This is another nod towards this society's erasure of a person's sense of self: Mead cannot possibly have an occupation that he alone would appreciate, so writing—as far as the police are concerned—does not exist. This once again places Mead at odds with his society, since writing is clearly important enough to his identity that he says it's what he does, and yet those around him consider writing to be so irrelevant as to not exist.

In addition to revealing Mead's writing, the car's interrogation leads Mead to acknowledge that he doesn't own a television—a nonconformity so significant that the car simply responds with "crackling quiet that in itself was an accusation." In this society, everyone has a television and it seems to be their sole source of entertainment. For Mead to not participate shows the extent of his alienation from others, and also gestures to a facet of Mead's humanity-saving individualism. While passive television consumption seems correlated with the members of this society lacking any individuality and failing to derive any real fulfillment from their lives, Mead's commitment to actively pursuing his personal hobbies—such as walking or writing—rather than passively watching the same thing as everyone else seems to have preserved his happiness and sense of self. Furthermore, on learning that Mead is unmarried, the robotic car seems angry, addressing him from behind a "fiery beam" of light and shouting, "Don't speak unless you're spoken to!" Everyone else, it seems, is married—it's a way of being tied to this society that Mead has rejected. The police car, a direct enforcer of mandatory conformity under the state, makes it clear that Mead's individualism and nonconformity will not be tolerated.

At the story's end, Mead is punished for his nonconformity. Upon discovering his outdated profession, failure to use modern technology, purposeless walks, and bachelor status, the car takes him to "the Psychiatric Center for Research on Regressive Tendencies." The word "regressive" usually has a negative connotation, implying movement back to an earlier, less advanced state. Ironically, Mead is seen as primitive and backward because he has preserved his individuality by not conforming to a society that has dehumanized the population with technological "progress." Bradbury doesn't reveal what happens to Mead at the "Psychiatric Center," but it is presumably something sinister. Considering the detached brutality of the police car, the state's strict control of the populace, and the fact that there are no witnesses to his arrest, something terrible could easily happen to Mead. Despite these presumably severe consequences, Bradbury's earlier positive descriptions of Mead—particularly his enduring humanity within an entirely dehumanized society—suggest that his nonconformity is, in the end, worth it. It is better to live fully and be punished for it, the story suggests, than to live the kind of half-life that the sedated citizens of this future world lead.

Many writers from the 20th century explore the theme of alienation, showing how different aspects of modern life – city life, new technologies, and social changes – can lead people to feel estranged from others or even from themselves. By contrast, "The Pedestrian" shows its loner protagonist as relatively contented and happy in his isolation. The citizens of "The Pedestrian" are alienated and dehumanized precisely because of their conformity to a dystopian status quo, so the nonconformist Mead is the only one capable of experiencing happiness. Ultimately, Bradbury's story warns about societies that punish differences so severely, while also showing how in such a society, nonconformity is the only way to stay truly human.

NATURE VS. THE CITY

Nineteenth century Romantic writers portrayed **the natural world** as vibrant and spiritual, valuing nature as a place for introspection. Similarly, Bradbury describes nature in a Romantic way with vivid sensory imagery. Entranced by televisions indoors, all the other citizens lack the imagination and feeling to connect spiritually with the natural world. Mead, however, is a devout pedestrian: he walks thousands of miles outdoors for the sheer pleasure and beauty of the act, communing with nature and finding solace in it. Despite the pervasive urbanization described in the story, the natural world endures. Bradbury shows how even in a dystopian future city where technology is all-encompassing, communing with nature still offers imaginative reverie and spiritual solace.

The story's descriptions of nature use a variety of images to render it vivid, and even spiritual. Tactile images bring the natural world to life for the reader. In the empty streets Mead walks, "There was a good crystal frost in the air; it cut the nose

and made the lungs blaze like a Christmas tree inside." The simile comparing Mead's lungs to a Christmas tree gives his time in nature a spiritual connotation, associating the simple act of breathing cold air with a religious celebration. Walking outdoors, then, is not merely an absent-minded hobby for Mead—it is a reverent act, similar to that of worship, which invigorates and energizes him. Auditory details further convey Mead's impressions of nature: "He listened to the faint push of his soft shoes through autumn leaves with satisfaction, and whistled a cold quiet whistle between his teeth." He also picks up one of the leaves and smells "its rusty smell." This tangible sensory connection with nature creates a sense of "satisfaction" and contentment, which contrasts starkly with the people in the houses Mead passes on his walks, whose faces are touched by the light of their televisions sets but are "never really touching" what is conveyed on an emotional level.

Mead's walks are described with imagery of peaceful solitude and communion with nature, suggesting that it is natural and good for human beings to connect with their environment, rather than cloistering themselves indoors. As Mead walks the "silent and long and empty" street, his only company is his shadow, described as "moving like the shadow of a hawk in midcountry." Comparing Mead to a hawk suggests that he belongs in the natural world and that his solitary walks are as natural as bird flight. Depriving people of their freedom to move about in the world, as is Mead's fate at the end of the story, is akin to clipping a wild bird's wings. Mead's time in nature prompts a turning inward to imagination: "If he closed his eyes and stood very still, frozen, he could imagine himself upon the center of a plain, a wintry, windless Arizona desert with no house in a thousand miles, and only dry river beds, the streets, for company." Since Mead has never met anyone else out walking in all of his 10 years as a solitary pedestrian, the reader can infer that he feels alienated from those around him. In lieu of close human relationships, Mead feels that nature is his companion. His introspective sense of peace within this image of a barren desert shows that he is able to transcend the oppressive urban landscape of his dystopian city, just as the Romantics rebelled against the cold rationalism of their era, by escaping into the timeless sensory pleasures of the natural world.

As Mead emerges for the night, he steps onto a "buckling concrete walk" where he must "step over grassy seams." Walking presents a challenge as it is revealed that Mead "stumbled over a particularly uneven section of sidewalk. The cement was vanishing under flowers and grass." With no one using the sidewalks, they are reverting back to their natural state. Nature itself, then, also seems to be resisting conformist society and reclaiming the urban landscape through which Mead walks, suggesting that the manmade environment of the dystopian city is not progressive or ideal despite its futuristic image—rather, it is devoid of natural beauty and inherently unfit for living things.

Mead's Romantic appreciation of nature represents another aspect of his nonconformity. Unlike other citizens who use the landscape only for driving during the day and metaphorically bury themselves in their homes at night, Mead appreciates, communes with, and is uplifted by his experience outdoors. In the mid-20th century, cities continued their evolution into concrete jungles and suburbs were cutting into green space. Bradbury predicted that in the future, the natural world will be largely forgotten or compartmentalized. However, the simple escape of walking outdoors and experiencing a spiritual connection with nature's sensory details will still be available to those willing to appreciate its beauty, and it can serve as an escape from the dull, lifeless landscape of the modern city.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE NATURAL WORLD

On his solitary walks, Mead experiences and enjoys the natural world, which represents the dormant possibilities of life in this repressed society. Since the story takes place in winter, nature is dormant, but nonetheless the chill air makes Mead's lungs "blaze like a Christmas tree," showing that nature is invigorating and comforting. Unlike the predictable and alienating manmade landscape, nature is imperfect and surprising. For example, Mead stumbles "over a particularly uneven section of sidewalk…[t]he cement… vanishing under flowers and grass." Even though the foliage is not currently growing, the sidewalk has cracked and eroded from the repeated growth of plants that cannot be fully subsumbed by the hard urban landscape. Moreover, just as the "skeletal" leaf form that Mead examines will bud in spring, the ghostly other citizens, made lifeless by their conformity, could one day leave their tomb-like homes and come back to life. This dormant potential of nature introduces an element of hope into the otherwise bleak story, suggesting that despite the current success of state power (represented by the robotic police car) at enforcing repression, nature and humanity will inevitably return. However, like the "hidden sea" that Mead walks toward but never sees, the possibility of rebirth remains a distant ideal.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the William Morrow Paperbacks edition of *Bradbury Stories: 100 of His Most Celebrated Tales* published in 2005.

The Pedestrian Quotes

To enter out into that silence that was the city at eight o'clock of a misty evening in November, to put your feet upon that buckling concrete walk, to step over grassy seams and make your way, hands in pockets, through the silences, that was what Mr. Leonard Mead most dearly loved to do.

Related Characters: Leonard Mead

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 600

Explanation and Analysis

This is the opening sentence of the story, and it introduces several elements that will later prove important. The city's nighttime silence is emphasized by repeating that description twice, and the evening is "misty," giving it a somber, melancholy aura. The concrete is "buckling" as plants creep through "grassy seams," suggesting that the city streets are not regularly maintained and that the natural world is slowly reclaiming the cityscape. The dormant power of nature lurking below the urban landscape is further represented by the story's winter setting, the world barren but awaiting rebirth in spring. The main character Mead is introduced and immediately presented as loner and individualist. Walking through a silent, empty city, encountering no people but connecting with nature, is not just his hobby or pastime, but his favorite activity. The syntax of this sentence is also significant. Mead is not identified until the end, building suspense. The repeated parallel infinitives ("To enter… to put… to step") before Mead's introduction put readers in the middle of the action and bring them closer to Mead's consciousness, immediately engaging sympathy for him.

[O]n his way he would see the cottages and homes with their dark windows, and it was not unequal to walking through a graveyard where only the faintest glimmers of firefly light appeared in flickers behind the windows. Sudden gray phantoms seemed to manifest upon inner room walls… or there were whisperings and murmurs where a window in a tomb-like building was still open.

Related Characters: Other Citizens, Leonard Mead

Related Themes:

Page Number: 600

Explanation and Analysis

As Mead walks through the city streets, he passes the homes of the other citizens. In this passage, the story uses imagery to characterize these citizens as ghostly and dehumanized. Their homes are devoid of color, with their "dark windows" concealing and occasionally revealing "gray phantoms." Mead hears them whisper and murmur, giving an ominous, creepy mood to them and their homes. In fact, their homes are described as places of death: "tomb-like" and arranged together like a "graveyard." Though literally alive, the other citizens are living a ghostly, undead existence through their entombment in separate homes where they fixate on their televisions. In the 1950s when this story was published, suburbs were growing and television was becoming more popular. Bradbury suggests that if current trends continue, in a century's time, people living in suburbia will be like ghosts. Later in the story, the theme of dehumanization is reinforced by comparing people to insects, and there is a subtle comparison in this passage as well, with the light behind the windows compared to fireflies flickering.

If he closed his eyes and stood very still, frozen, he could imagine himself upon the center of a plain, a wintry, windless Arizona desert with no house in a thousand miles, and only dry river beds, the streets, for company.

Related Characters: Leonard Mead

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 601

Explanation and Analysis

During his walk through the silent, bleak city streets past the grave-like homes, Mead pauses in the middle of the street and retreats into his imagination. This passage heightens Mead's characterization as a latter-day Romantic who seeks solitude in order to cultivate a rich imaginative world. Mead is marked as Romantic because he chooses to conjure an image of nature, and the specific landscape he pictures holds significance, as well. He chooses to place himself in a bleak, isolated landscape, "a thousand miles" from civilization. Mead's alienation from his current city is revealed here. In his mind, he leaves behind the ghostly,

murmuring other citizens and instead seeks communion with nature, the "dry river beds" his only "company." Mead imagines an open desert vista that connotes freedom and endless possibility, contrasting the lifelessness and limitation of the city. In his imagination, the natural world represents a hopeful alternative to deadening modern city life.

"What's up tonight on Channel 4, Channel 7, Channel 9? Where are the cowboys rushing, and do I see the United States Cavalry over the next hill to the rescue?...What is it now?" he asked the houses... "Eight-thirty P.M.? Time for a dozen assorted murders? A quiz? A revue? A comedian falling off the stage?"

Related Characters: Leonard Mead (speaker), Other Citizens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 601

Explanation and Analysis

Before and after his imaginative reverie of picturing himself in a desert, Mead talks to himself, addressing the other citizens and asking about their television viewing. The programs they watch include westerns, crime stories, game and comedy shows: sensationalist drama or mindless, light comedy. This section explains why the citizens are ghostly: they are being numbed night after night by intellectually and artistically limited programming. Television in the 1950s was in its early days and much programming fit into the categories described by Bradbury, and he predicts that if currently programming trends continue, eventually viewers will be deadened by them. Mead's attitude toward television programming and its viewers is notable here as well. He knows the sorts of shows they watch since he lists them, but he has chosen not to watch them himself. His casual listing of the options suggests that the actual content does not really matter; the programs are interchangeable and all serve the same deadening purpose. Finally, Mead's direct address to the other citizens shows a flicker of desire for human connection. However, he knows he cannot get it from them, so instead he merely whispers these questions to himself. His social disconnection is reinforced by his asking these questions of "the houses," not the people inside them.

"What are you doing out?"

"Walking," said Leonard Mead. "Walking!"

"Just walking," he said simply, but his face felt cold.

"Walking, just walking, walking?" "Yes, sir."

"Walking where? For what?"

"Walking for air. Walking to see."

"Your address!"

Related Characters: Leonard Mead, Robotic Police Car (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 602

Explanation and Analysis

Mead suddenly encounters a car, the only police car still patrolling the streets. The car immediately begins interrogating Mead since it is highly unusual for anyone to be out walking alone at night. The car's tone is abrupt and decisive, with exclamation points conveying anger. It demands to know why Mead is out walking: what he is "doing out," "where" and "for what" purpose he walks. Mead's reply that he is "Just walking" does not satisfy the car. It incredulously repeats his words: "Walking, just walking, walking?" as if trying to understand Mead's nonconforming activity. Mead's vague reply that he is "Walking for air. Walking to see" suggests the Romantic motives for his walk. He seeks connection with the natural world ("air") and is looking for experience itself ("to see"). The car immediately shifts its line of questioning, showing that either Mead's explanation was unintelligible to it or that it has established his walk as purposeless. It continues its line of questioning that eventually defines Mead as nonconformist, deviant, and criminal. The car represents the power of the state to enforce social conformity and potentially punish those who don't fit in.

"Where are you taking me?"

The car hesitated, or rather gave a faint whirring click, as if information, somewhere, was dropping card by punch-slotted card under electric eyes. "To the Psychiatric Center for Research on Regressive Tendencies."

Related Characters: Robotic Police Car, Leonard Mead

(speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 603

Explanation and Analysis

The climax of the story occurs when the car concludes its questioning and exerts its power by abruptly telling Mead to "get in" the back seat, taking him into custody. Mead protests and hesitates, demanding to know where he will be taken, and the car replies after a short hesitation that it will take him to an asylum to be studied for his "Regressive Tendencies." In this passage, we learn that not only is the car operated remotely since no one is driving it, but also that it is actually operated by a distant computer. Computing technology in Bradbury's time was still in its infancy, often relying on punchcards for storing and processing information. In this future city, technological progress has resulted in such pervasive dehumanization that a person's fate can be decided by a remote, sentient machine. Mead's incarceration in an asylum will remove him from the social fabric; more importantly, he will be studied, presumably to gather information on nonconforming individualists such as himself. Ironically, Mead's nonconformity will ultimately help the state achieve its goal of social repression.

> The car moved down the empty river-bed streets and off away, leaving the empty streets with the empty side-walks, and no sound and no motion all the rest of the chill November night.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 604

Explanation and Analysis

The final sentence of the story concludes Mead's tale on a bleak and hopeless note. There is a simple description of the setting, done in a matter-of-fact style, showing that Mead's fate is sealed and irrevocable. The repetition of "empty" and the parallel repetitive structure of "no sound and no motion" reinforce the story's portrayal of the bleak, vacant, lifeless urban environment. The natural world is referenced briefly in the description of the "empty river-bed streets," suggesting that for a moment, as Mead walked them, they held life, but with his apprehension, they have reverted back to dormancy. As opposed to the story's opening, where the November night provides the backdrop for Mead's imaginative adventures, here the winter evening is silent and death-like. However, Bradbury's mentioning of the "river-bed streets" hearkens back to earlier portrayals of the natural world as full of dormant power, perhaps introducing a note of hope that potential still exists for rebirth of nature and humanity.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE PEDESTRIAN

What Leonard Mead loves most in the world is taking solitary evening walks through the city. At intersections, he peers in all directions, choosing which way to go—although choosing a particular direction makes "no difference." It's the year 2053 A.D. and he is "alone in this world." On these nights, he'll walk for hours, passing darkened houses, which is like "walking through a graveyard." All he sees inside are flickers of light, "gray phantoms," or murmurs from open windows of "tomb-like" buildings.

The story opens with an image of Mead embarking on one of his nightly walks, completely alone on the city streets but embracing the freedom and choice to determine his own path. Mead is described as empowered and decisive, alone but not lonely or alienated. By contrast, the homes he passes and the people in them are described with language of death. Unlike the individualistic Mead, who is outdoors, active, and free, the people in their homes are described as all the same: lifeless, passive, trapped in their grave-like homes, and as good as dead.

When he walks, Leonard Mead's footsteps make no sound because, a long time ago, he "wisely" began wearing sneakers. Were he to wear hard-soled shoes, he would be noticed and disturbed by dogs or by neighbors who are "startled" by a "passing lone figure" in the street.

Mead knows that in walking alone, he is failing to conform to the social expectation that people will remain indoors at night, lulling themselves with television viewing. The notion that people and even dogs would be "startled" to see something as unusual as a man walking alone shows how conformist this society is, and the fact that wearing sneakers is "wise" points to the danger Mead might be in were he discovered walking. He deliberately chooses defiance and nonconformity in order to preserve his chance to cultivate individuality on his walks.

On this night, Mead walks to the west toward a "hidden sea" through frosty **air** that "cut the nose" and makes his "lungs blaze like a Christmas tree inside." He whistles to himself and picks up a leaf, "examining its skeletal pattern" and "smelling its rusty smell."

As he walks, Mead experiences and enjoys the natural world around him. The vivid imagery Bradbury uses to describe the natural world demonstrates its beauty and power over Mead. Nature even gives Mead a sense of spiritual fulfillment, as seen in the allusion to Christmas. It's significant that all the nature here is dormant—it's wintertime, the sea is "hidden," and the leaf is "skeletal." Like the ghost-like people inside their houses, nature is not at its full potential—but it's still beautiful and full of the promise of coming back to life.

Mead addresses the other citizens inside their homes, whispering to himself: "What's up tonight on Channel 4 Channel 7, Channel 9?" He then speculates that they are watching adventure programs, quiz shows, or comedy revues. As he talks to himself, Mead imagines himself isolated and alone "upon the center of a wintry, windless Arizona **desert** with no house in a thousand miles."

Mead's nonconformity is shown by his speech to the other residents. He is talking to himself rather than to them, showing perhaps that he longs for real communication but doesn't find it possible. Moreover, he knows that they are watching mindless light entertainment, but he has chosen a different path for himself: that of imagination, solitude, and connection to nature.

Mead wonders if he hears laughter from one of the houses, but hearing nothing more, he continues walking the empty streets. He has never encountered another person in ten years of solitary walks. Passing an intersection, he reflects on how during the day it is loud and busy with a "thunderous surge of cars" and a "great insect rustling" of city residents driving home. At night, however, the street is empty "like **streams** in a dry season."

Mead's disconnection from the other citizens is reinforced when he thinks he hears them inside, but cannot be sure. It is revealed that Mead has taken solitary walks like this one for ten years, so they represent a recurring pattern of nonconformity and defiance of social norms. Mead's reflections give background on the city environment, showing that it is overrun with cars during the day. The car culture that was taking over cities in the 1950s when the story was written has, by 2053 when the story is set, resulted in pervasive dehumanization, with people likened to insects. At night, devoid of cars, the city is dormant and lifeless.

As he turns toward his home, Mead suddenly encounters a lone car that flashes a "fierce white cone of light" on him, causing him to freeze in the street "not unlike a night **moth**."

The turning point of the story occurs when Mead meets a car that pins him with bright light. The suddenness of this encounter and the car's "fierce" beam of light convey fear and foreboding. The car spells danger for Mead. The simile comparing Mead to a moth shows that, like the other citizens, Mead is in danger of losing his humanity at the hands of state authority.

A "metallic voice" addresses him from the car, ordering him to remain stationary and put up his hands. Waning crime has eliminated the need for a large police force, and this vehicle is the city's only police car.

The voice from the car is authoritative and inhuman, and it immediately identifies Mead as a potential criminal in its ordering him to freeze and raise his hands. The low crime rate shows the extent to which the general population has become conformist and docile, subject to strict state control.

The voice from the car begins to address Mead in a "metallic whisper." It inquires about his name and profession. Mead replies that he is a writer, even though he has not written in years since "magazines and books didn't sell anymore."

The police car continues to be portrayed as harsh, inhuman, and menacing as it methodically interrogates Mead. Mead submits without question to its authority. His characterization as a nonconforming individualist is further developed when he reveals that he still considers himself a writer. He has been unwilling to give up his vocation and identity in order to follow economic trends.

The car asks Mead what he is doing outside, and Mead replies that he is "Just walking." The car then asks where and to what purpose Mead is walking, and he says that he is "Walking for **air**. Walking to see."

Mead's purposeless walks here associate him with the values of Romanticism. The Romantics were critical of capitalism and rationality, instead seeking out intense imaginative experiences and making the pursuit of this the main point of life. The car represents cold scientific rationality in seeking to find out why and where Mead walks, but as shown by his vague responses, he is walking just for sake of walking. The experience itself and what it conjures in his mind are the payoffs of "just walking."

Next, the car interrogates Mead about his home life, asking about his address, ownership of an air conditioner and television, and marital status. Mead replies that he does have an air conditioner, does not own a television, and he is a bachelor. During the interrogation, the car speaks to Mead from behind a "fiery beam" of light, and the silence between its questions is "in itself an accusation."

The car continues its rational interrogation of Mead, seeking demographic information about him. Mead's failure to conform to social norms is established by his answers. He does not fit in a society where people are held to strict expectations of proper behavior. Imagery of violence and an accusatory tone from the car (even in its silences) establish that Mead is giving the wrong answers. His nonconformity crosses the line into deviancy from the standards of society.

Upon Mead telling the car that he has walked alone each night for many years, the car's back door opens, and it orders Mead to get in. Mead protests, and looking into the back seat, observes it to be like "a little black jail with bars." He notices the car's smell of "riveted steel" and "harsh antiseptic."

The climax of the story occurs when Mead is ordered to get in the car, apprehended by state power. Significantly, what triggers this moment is the revelation that Mead has walked alone for a long period of time. His solitary, purposeless walk is not a one-time occurrence, but part of a longstanding pattern of deviant behavior that, when combined with the more general deviancy established by the car's questioning, justifies Mead being taken into custody. The imagery here of jail suggests that Mead is now considered not just a deviant but an actual criminal.

Mead asks where he being taken, and after a hesitation and "faint whirring click" that sounds like a punch-card being processed, like car tells him his destination: "the Psychiatric Center for Research on Regressive Tendencies."

The story finally makes clear what has been hinted at in the descriptions of the car and its voice: it is actually inhuman, robotic, and operated remotely. As such, it shows the extent to which dehumanization has permeated this future world. As people have lost their humanity—insect-like by day, ghost-like by night—machines have become sentient, with the ability and power to make decisions with severe consequences. Mead's identification as "regressive" is ironic, since technological and social "progress" have in fact caused the other citizens to regress. It has taken years, but the state has finally discovered Mead's efforts to preserve his individuality, and now he must pay the price. It is significant that Mead will not be merely punished, but studied. Presumably, the authorities will study him to further refine methods of social control and thereby avoid future deviancy.

Mead gets in the car, and it drives past the dark houses until passing Mead's house, which is the only one lit with "a loud yellow illumination, square and warm in the cool darkness." Mead says, "That's my house," but the car does not reply, continuing to drive through silent, empty streets.

Mead gets in the car willingly, knowing that he is powerless in the face of the state authority wielded by the car. He helplessly identifies his house to the uncaring robotic car as they drive past. His home, vibrant and bright, contrasts with the "tomb-like" houses of the other citizens. It represents an oasis of life, joy, and creativity in the otherwise lifeless urban landscape. Unlike the story's opening, which saw Mead striding out confident and free into the streets, the story ends on a bleak and hopeless note with imagery of silence, coldness, and emptiness.

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