Close Reading: There Will Come Soft Rains...

There Will Come Soft Rains

In the living room the voice-clock sang, Tick-tock, seven o’clock, time to get up, time to get up, seven o’clock! as if it were afraid nobody would. The morning house lay empty. The clock ticked on, repeating and repeating its sounds into the emptiness. Seven-nine, breakfast time, seven-nine!

In the kitchen the breakfast stove gave a hissing sigh and ejected from its warm interior eight pieces of perfectly browned toast, eight eggs sunny-side up, sixteen slices of bacon, two coffees, and two cool glasses of milk.

"Today is August 4, 2026," said a second voice from the kitchen ceiling, "in the city of Allendale, California." It repeated the date three times for memory's sake. "Today is Mr. Featherstone's birthday. Today is the anniversary of Tilita's marriage. Insurance is payable, as are the water, gas, and light bills."

Somewhere in the walls, relays clicked, memory tapes glided under electric eyes.

Eight-one, tick-tock, eight-one o’clock, off to school, off to work, run, run, eight-one! But no doors slammed, no carpets took the soft tread of rubber heels. It was raining outside. The weather box on the front door sang quietly: "Rain, rain, go away; rubbers, raincoats for today..." And the rain tapped on the empty house, echoing.

Outside, the garage chimed and lifted its door to reveal the waiting car. After a long wait the door swung down again.

At eight-thirty the eggs were shriveled and the toast was like stone. An aluminum wedge scraped them down a metal throat which digested and flushed them away to the distant sea. The dirty dishes were dropped into a hot washer and emerged twinkling dry.

Close Reading

Notice that the story opens with no exposition. The reader is given no background information but is instead immediately presented with an unusual situation- a house of voices. These voices drive the story. Personification is used constantly to describe the house's actions. "...Tick-tock, seven o’clock, time to get up time to get up, seven o’clock! as if it were afraid that nobody would." Already the "character" of the house has hinted to unknown knowledge. As it becomes obvious that there no humans are going to appear it also becomes clear that this talking, moving house is the main character of the story.

This presents the reader with some obvious questions: Where are the people? Why is the house making breakfast, singing out times and reminders, if there are no human masters to be served? While the answers to these questions are not directly stated, certain things can and should be inferred through the deeds of the house. It is constantly reaffirming the idea that there once was a family living here.

Bradbury is skillful at juxtaposing the fabulous with the ordinary. The setting for this tale is the 21st century in a automated house with no people, yet the main action here is the making of a traditional toast & egg breakfast. The words of the clock are reminiscent of children rhymes. Indeed, the weather box uses the familiar song of "Rain, rain, go away..." These everyday humanistic events contrast starkly against the emptiness of the house.
Nine-fifteen, sang the clock, time to clean.

Out of warrens in the wall, tiny robot mice darted. The rooms were acrawl with the small cleaning animals, all rubber and metal. They thudded against chairs, whirling their mustached runners, kneading the rug nap, sucking gently at hidden dust.

Then, like mysterious invaders, they popped into their burrows. Their pink electric eye faded. The house was clean.

Ten o'clock. The sun came out from behind the rain. The house stood alone in a city of rubble and ashes. This was the one house left standing. At night the ruined city gave off a radioactive glow which could be seen for miles.

Ten-fifteen. The garden sprinklers swirled up in golden founts, filling the soft morning air with scatterings of brightness. The water pelted windowpanes, running down the charred west side where the house had been burned evenly free of its white paint. The entire west face of the house was black, save for five places. Here the silhouette in paint of a man mowing a lawn. Here, as in a photograph, a woman bent to pick flowers. Still farther over, their images burned on wood in one titanic instant, a small boy, hands flung into the air; higher up, the image of thrown ball, and opposite him a girl, hand raised to catch a ball which never came down.

The five spots of paint— the man, the woman, the children, the ball— remained. The rest was a thin charcoaled layer.

At this point a new type of descriptive diction is applied to the house’s actions—naturalist or animalistic. This imagery seems almost oxymoronic with the make-up of the house, “all rubber and metal.”

The almost fanatic cleaning of the small mice-like machines and continuous tolling of the clock seem to indicate a household that was accustomed to order and routine. This household was also used to elegance and convenience. There is a distinct diction used to describe the actions and interior of the house.

The house is “delicate” and elegant. Even its toast is “perfect.” These descriptions of this one standing house contrast with description of the rubble that surrounds it.

Here Bradbury begins to give away his secrets. He does not blatantly tell the reader that some atomic holocaust has occurred but instead reveals this indirectly through a description of the outside of the house and its surroundings. A "silhouette" is all that is left of each of its masters, imprinted on the west wall of the house. Not only is the cause of their death explained but also the course of it. Each of the charred images is busy, mowing the lawn, picking flowers, playing ball. This was a family at play, unaware that they were about to experience a "titanic instant" that would be the rest of their life.

From the opening sentence the house has been afraid—afraid no one would get up, afraid of being alone. Here that fear is reinforced. By using the altar metaphor this fear becomes clearer. The house is afraid because it has been left behind. It is alone and masterless.

Yet the house continues to do all that it knows to do. Even though its actions serve no practicle purpose, it "angrily" cleans up after the dog, "angry at inconvenience." The metaphor of a temple or altar continues as invading pieces of dirt are seen as "offending" intruders, treated like an idol such as Baal. Perhaps the house thought
and opened. The dog, once large and fleshy, but now gone to bone and covered with sores, moved in and through the house, tracking mud. Behind it whirred angry mice, angry at having to pick up mud, angry at inconvenience.

For not a leaf fragment blew under the door but what the wall panels flipped open and the copper scrap rats flashed swiftly out. The offending dust, hair, or paper, seized in miniature steel jaws, was raced back to the burrows. There, down tubes which fed into the cellar, it was dropped like evil Baal in a dark corner.

That if it removed such an evil presence, its “gods” would return.

It is ironic that for all the fantastic ability of this house it still can not act outside of its wired programming. The family dog is starving, dying, and the house continues to pump out pancakes for an empty kitchen.

This scene where the dog turns on itself is symbolic of what happened to its masters- their own creations were turned against them and destroyed them. This is also foreshadowing for the upcoming demise of the house. As much as the house tries to eliminate the dead dog and the sense of “decay”, it itself is decaying. It is only a matter of time before it dies.

We begin to see the extended metaphor that describes the house and its minions as military components.

Again the actions of the house are given a naturalistic description. It is ironic that for all these people seemed to desire to shut out nature, suppress it, and control it for their convenience, their creations end up imitating it.

Again we see a paradox of an artificial nature being brought into this technologically obsessed home. This nursery brings the irony home: humans destroy forest, humans build fancy-shmansy home over destroyed forest, human desperately try to recreate the forest with "walls of glass", "iron crickets", and the "aroma of animal spoors."
tissue wavered among the sharp aroma of<br>animal spoors! There was the sound like a<br>great matted yellow hive of bees within a<br>dark bellows, the lazy bumble of a purring<br>lion. And there was the patter of okapi feet<br>and the murmur of a fresh jungle rain, like<br>other hoofs falling upon the summer-starched grass. Now the walls dissolved<br>into distances of parched weed, mile on<br>mile, and warm endless sky. The animals<br>drew away into thorn holes and water<br>holes.

It was the children's hour.

Five o'clock. The bath filled with clear<br>hot water.
Six, seven, eight o'clock. The dinner<br>dishes manipulated like magic tricks, and<br>in the study a click. In the metal stand<br>opposite the hearth where a fire now<br>blazed up warmly, a cigar popped out, half<br>an inch of soft gray ash on it, smoking,<br>waiting.
Nine o'clock. The beds warmed their<br>hidden circuits, for nights were cool here.<n
Nine-five. A voice spoke from the study<br>ceiling:
"Mrs. McClellan, which poem would you<br>like this evening?"
The house was silent.<br>The voice said at last, "Since you express<br>no preference, I shall select a poem at<br>random." Quiet music rose to back the<br>voice. "Sara Teasdale. As I recall, your<br>favorite...

"There will come soft rains and the<br>smell of the ground, And swallows<br>circling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,<br>And wild plum trees in tremulous<br>white;

Robins will wear their feathery fire,<br>Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not<br>one Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor<br>tree, If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at<br>dawn Would scarcely know that we
were gone."

The fire burned on the stone hearth and the cigar fell away into a mound of quiet ash on its tray. The empty chairs faced each other between the silent walls, and the music played.

At ten o’clock the house began to die.

The wind blew. A falling tree bough crashed through the kitchen window. Cleaning solvent, bottled, shattered over the stove. The room was ablaze in an instant!

"Fire!" screamed a voice. The house lights flashed, water pumps shot water from the ceilings. But the solvent spread on the linoleum, licking, eating, under the kitchen door, while the voices took it up in chorus: “Fire, fire, fire!”

The house tried to save itself. Doors sprang tightly shut, but the windows were broken by the heat and the wind blew and sucked upon the fire.

The house gave ground as the fire in ten billion angry sparks moved with flaming ease from room to room and then up the stairs. While scurrying water rats squeaked from the walls, pistoled their water, and ran for more. And the wall sprays let down showers of mechanical rain.

But too late. Somewhere, sighing, a pump shrugged to a stop. The quenching rain ceased. The reserve water supply which filled the baths and washed the dishes for many quiet days was gone.

The fire crackled up the stairs. It fed upon Picassos and Matisses in the upper halls, like delicacies, baking off the oily flesh, tenderly crisping the canvases into black shavings.

Now the fire lay in beds, stood in windows, changed the colors of drapes!

And then, reinforcements.

From attic trapdoors, blind robot faces peered down with faucet mouths gushing green chemical.

The fire backed off, as even an elephant must at the sight of a dead snake. Now there were twenty snakes whipping over the floor, killing the fire with a clear cold venom of green froth.

But the fire was clever. It had sent flames outside the house, up through the attic to the pumps there. An explosion! The attic brain which directed the pumps was shattered into bronzeshrapnel on the beams.

The fire rushed back into every closet and felt of the clothes that hung there.

The end of the house is near. It is about to follow in the footsteps of its masters and be overcome by one of the most primitive forces of nature—fire.

The fire takes on a life of its own. The diction used to describe the fire gives it an air of intelligence and animal hunger.
The house shuddered, oak bone on bone, its bared skeleton cringing from the heat, its wire, its nerves revealed as if a surgeon had torn the skin off to let the red veins and capillaries quiver in the scalded air. Help, help! Fire! Run, run! Heat snapped mirrors like the first brittle winter ice. And the voices wailed Fire, fire, run, run, like a tragic nursery rhyme, a dozen voices, high, low, like children dying in a forest, alone, alone. And the voices fading as the wires popped their sheathings like hot chestnuts. One, two, three, four, five voices died.

In the nursery the jungle burned. Blue lions roared, purple giraffes bounded off. The panthers ran in circles, changing color, and ten million animals, running before the fire, vanished off toward a distant steaming river...

Ten more voices died. In the last instant under the fire avalanche, other choruses, oblivious, could be heard announcing the time, playing music, cutting the lawn by remote-control mower, or setting an umbrella frantically out and in the slamming and opening front door, a thousand things happening, like a clock shop when each clock strikes the hour insanely before or after the other, a scene of maniac confusion, yet unity; singing, screaming, a few last cleaning mice darting bravely out to carry the horrid ashes away! And one voice, with sublime disregard for the situation, read poetry aloud all in the fiery study, until all the film spools burned, until all the wires withered and the circuits cracked.

The fire burst the house and let it slam flat down, puffing out skirts of spark and smoke.

In the kitchen, an instant before the rain of fire and timber, the stove could be seen making breakfasts at a psychopathic rate, ten dozen eggs, six loaves of toast, twenty dozen bacon strips, which, eaten by fire, started the stove working again, hysterically hissing!

The crash. The attic smashing into the kitchen and parlor. The parlor into cellar, cellar into sub-cellar. Deep freeze, armchair, film tapes, circuits, beds, and all like skeletons thrown in a cluttered mound deep under.

Smoke and silence. A great quantity of smoke.

Dawn showed faintly in the east. Among the ruins, one wall stood alone. Within the wall, a last voice said, over and over again and again, even as the sun rose to shine upon the heaper rubble and steam:

"Today is August 5, 2026, today is August 5, 2026, today is..."
This interpretation of the message behind *There Will Come Soft Rains* is taken from Elisabeth Adam's page entitled *The End* because it was so well written.

I repeat, I DID NOT WRITE THIS!!!

"There Will Come Soft Rains" says that, yes, we can build magnificent machines: beautiful houses to cater to our every need, a thousand servants at our beck and call- yet what benefit will they be at the end? When we fry ourselves into radioactive smithereens because we can sooner built houses fit for gods then learn to live in peace with our fellow mortals, what good will our machines be to us then? The loyal family dog searched futilely for his masters, the house tried in vain to save itself from the fires, but their efforts to save their masters were ludicrous, for the master race had exterminated itself and left the servants all alone, impotent. Not one of man's creations could stand at the day of reckoning and save him from extinction- nor would many mourn his passage. This is a humbling thought, that our planet would survive quite well without us were we to rid it of our presence- and that in just a short while, it would almost be as if we had never existed at all.

Times have changed since the writing of "There Will Come Soft Rains", when the threat of nuclear extermination seemed more real than it is now. But should we read it only as a chilling view of what the future might have been? One thing in man's favor: he is ingenious; and in inventing new ways of making his species extinct he has in many ways surpassed himself. If not by nuclear war, than humanity could perish in dozens of other manners: pollution could choke our food supply or kill the plants that produce our oxygen, or we could use up all our resources and be left with billions of people and the infrastructure to support less than one thousandth of that number, or we could destroy our atmosphere and let natural radiation kill us. A madman or a terrorist might engineer a virus to kill all homo sapiens, or one might be loosed on accident by a well-meaning brilliant fool. And how impossible really is a nuclear holocaust? It is not just the large superpowers that are building up arsenals now, but every little country with delusions of grandeur; the more nukes around, the more chance that someone will use one. The most colossal insult to man's pride in our "New World Order", in our interpretation of relative calm as true peace, in our belief in the farce of being on the verge of true and lasting security, is that the end could come by an accident: a careless mistake, a deadly misunderstanding, a fatal lack of communication, a failure to act when the ability to prevent a calamitous disaster would be within our grasp. In our arrogance we do not see the thin tightrope that we walk, and so we continue blithely with our everyday affairs, building our lives of luxury and our castles in the air. Until one day our mistakes cause everything our race has ever achieved to be obliterated. That our society is designed so that such obliteration could come by accident proves how precarious our situation has proven to be- that "There Will Come Soft Rains" has the very real possibility of becoming our future if our overconfidence in our immortality persists.