

## A VISION INTO THE FUTURE: 2053 IN THE PEDESTRIAN BY RAY BRADBURY

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### Abstract

*The genre of science fiction offers narratives based on scientific discoveries, encompassing space, time travel, habitation on other planets and highly advanced man-machine interactions. Dystopian science fiction is one of the reactionary works that warns about futuristic society where humans struggle with fear of technology. Ray Bradbury is one of the most celebrated science fiction and fantasy writers of the twentieth century. He is best known for his highly imaginative science-fiction short stories and novels which blend social criticism and an awareness of the dangers involved in technological advancement. The story "The Pedestrian" was written in 1951, the post- WWII era, and included in The Golden Apples of the Sun an anthology of 22 short stories published in the year 1953. Ray Bradbury, in his short story envisions a twenty-first century dystopian world: the profound control that television has taken over humanity in a society in the year 2053. The protagonist in The Pedestrian, Mr. Mead, is a citizen of television centred world in 2053, a writer by profession in a society where people do not read and write. He enjoys walking at night and does not own a television while others are addicted to watching television. During one of his usual walks, a robotic police car encounters him and considers him to be abnormal for these reasons and decides to take him to the Psychiatric Centre for Research on Regressive Tendencies. He effectively warns society of the dangers of overly powerful technology, our addiction to popular forms of entertainment and its numbing effects on human mind, which will eventually rob us of our imagination and humanity. If society continues to move towards an increasingly technologically based world eventually it could lead to a dystopian society, similar to that in The Pedestrian.*

**Keywords:** Science fiction, pedestrian, Dystopian Protagonist, nonconformist regressive.

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Science fiction genre having evolved from the industrial revolution has brought forth time machines, computers, robots, space travels and aliens. As the settings were always fictional there has been a considerable degree of suspension of disbelief. The genre deals with a myriad of societies, encouraging the possibility of different futures. It stimulates thought beyond the present here and now, explores what may be possible in the future and is able to perform services for the progression of human kind as no other genre can. Science fiction novels try to create a sense of probability through utopias and dystopias where the improbable has the chance of becoming probable. Utopia is a term coined by Thomas Moore which means an ideal society free of crime and where everyone lives happily. Dystopia is anti-utopia and both the terms utopia and dystopia are Greek in origin. Dystopia is best described as an imaginary place where the state or society is miserable and frightening, the condition of life is highly pathetic due to deprivation and terror. It could possibly be and seen as a warning to the contemporary man against some modern trend. Like all other genres the dystopian genre, found an important place in literature, and was instrumental in portraying a utopia gone awry. Science fiction novels that describe societies that are bleak, restrictive, and totalitarian are called dystopias. Dystopian novels are set in a futuristic world where one can draw parallel lines with the present world.

Ray Bradbury is one of the most celebrated science fiction and fantasy writers of the twentieth century. He championed as one of America's greatest story tellers, has helped bring the genre of science fiction into the forefront of literature. In the words of Johnson, Bradbury's focus nearly always remains upon the human element in his stories, but the hardware is a basic element in science fiction and machines inevitably play an important role in his tales about the future. He treats the difficulties and threats man can experience from machines successfully. Bradbury presents a dystopia in which he depicts numbing effects of technology on the mankind that they refuse to think. The Pedestrian is one of his best known short stories which serves as an apt

example for the same. In the story, he describes a society where an individual is punished for being a pedestrian as it is considered a serious offence. The people in this world were living in a society where they never read books, enjoy nature or think independently, ask questions or have meaningful conversations instead they watch television and are addicted to it.

“Bradbury wrote *The Pedestrian*, a science fiction story set in a repressive future anticipating that of Fahrenheit 451 to express his anger at being questioned by police on evening strolls.” (Mogen97) In the early 1950’s he was a young man living in southern California. He did not know driving, and he preferred walking around his suburban neighbourhood at night. Even back then such behaviour was so rare that he was stopped and questioned by the police. If an innocent walk was so suspicious in mid- twentieth- century America, Bradbury wondered how it might be viewed in the future. This incident eventually led him to write this story.

The short story is about a futuristic world in 2053 where people do not read but are enchanted with television. In this story we find the protagonist, Leonard Mead, a citizen of a technology driven world in 2053. Mead enjoys walking through the city at night, something which no one else does. On one of his usual walks he encounters a police car which is possibly robotic. It is the only police unit in a city of three million, since the purpose of law enforcement has disappeared with everyone watching TV at night. On being asked about his profession Mead tells the car that he is a writer, but the car fails to understand, since no one buys books or magazines in the television-dominated society. The police car or its occupants struggle to understand why Mead would be out walking for no reason and so decides to take him to the Psychiatric Center for Research on Regressive Tendencies. The story depicts a truly dystopian society which punishes the protagonists for his twin crimes of going for a walk and failing to own a television. It warns of the dangers that a society could face if technology is allowed to advance without restraint.

Bradbury makes an effective use of irony to bring out his theme of a dystopian society which is become overrun by technology. Mr. Mead, a writer is considered a misfit in this society as he did not let his life be ruled by the “viewing screens” Mead admits that no one has bought any of his writing for sometime because everyone is watching television. His freedom is restricted to go for a walk at night something which he dearly loves by a society that is dominated by technology where the streets appear deserted and desolate.

The result of advancements in technology is shown in “The Pedestrian” through the empty streets and Mead is the only one walking, on the street, During Leonard Mead’s evening walk, he reflects on why people stay at home and what they do. On Leonard’s walk he notes that “The street was silent and long and empty, with only his shadow moving like the shadow of a hawk in mid-country. If he closed his eyes and stood very still, frozen, he could imagine himself upon the centre of a plain, a wintry, windless American desert with no house in a thousand miles, and only the dry riverbed, the streets, for company.” (Bradbury 10)

The above lines are symbolic and use several images to portray the emptiness and loneliness of the streets. Leonard’s shadow is described like a hawk, which shows that he must move without being noticed by the police or anyone in their homes as not to disturb them; it also means that his shadow is his only company. When he closes his eyes the city is described as a wintry plain, a desert, and the streets as dry riverbed. The streets appeared deserted and empty, with everyone in their houses in front of their television which shows the impact of television on the lives of the individuals and is also symbolic of a city under the control of technology.

*The Pedestrian*, shows the presence of people is so sparse that the weeds on the sidewalks have become overgrown due to lack of use. “to put your feet upon that buckling concrete walk, to step over grassy seams” (Bradbury 9 ). This depicts a society that is too enveloped in the technology in their homes to observe the nature and freedom around them. “The tombs, ill-lit by television light, where the people sat like the dead, the gray or multi- coloured lights touching their faces, but never really touching them.” (Bradbury11) In these societies, humans have undergone a drastic change by leading a mechanical lifestyle, by avoiding social interaction and have also replaced books with constant mindless television and have become robot like. The people in this society were simply fascinated by the television which had become an indispensable part of their lives and as a result they preferred to stay indoors to watch television rather than go out to enjoy real nature. Humans have simply succumbed to viewing screens failing to realise that these technological advancements were detrimental to them. The continuous viewing of television in the short story “The Pedestrian” is shown to be a negative impact of advancements in technology.

The Pedestrian is one of Bradbury's most famous stories, and is a classic example of his style of science fiction. The viewpoint is humanistic, and in this case, anti technological. The story's only character Mr. Mead, a writer, is a loner, self exiled from his community, sensitive, and with his own set values. It is 2053, Leonard Mead is the last man in his city who goes for walks. Everyone else stays indoors watching television. Mead is a sensualist who takes particular pleasure in the quiet of the empty streets under the moonlight. He is alive and cannot help noticing as he walks through the deserted streets that a graveyard. It was not unequal to walking through a graveyard where only the faintest glimmers of firefly light appeared in flickers behind the windows." In such a world , Mead is a suspicious character and in the course of this particular walk he is stopped and questioned by a police car. (Johnson, 84).

There are no men in the car, it is only a robot, the car picks up Mead as a suspected lunatic not because he is behaving strangely, but because his answers cannot satisfy the logic of the machine. Mead is considered as an outcast because he does not watch television as all the others do. In this technologically driven society he is regarded insane and as a result is taken to an insane asylum for his non-conformist approach. This is ironic because, although Mead seems to be the only sane citizen who reads books, writes and enjoys walking in fresh air, is considered insane in this dystopian society

"The Pedestrian" is inspired by a rather large event in the history of entertainment. In 1951, televisions were just being created that were commercially available to everyone. The story offers perhaps the more obvious message: the profound control that television has taken over humanity. Unlike the machines which Bradbury likes, the police car has no imagination behind it, nor can it inspire any. Bradbury, envisions a twenty-first century dystopian world which shares a message about the rising use of technology in American life. The story highlights the dangers of a world in which technology is more important to society and social affairs than human beings.

According to Bradbury, in a dystopian society, humans and robots will replace each other because robots will behave like humans, by developing the abilities to express emotions and orally communicate whereas humans will have become mechanical and robot-like. In "The Pedestrian", the author personifies the car as being semi-human in the way that it can move freely around, speak and communicate as freely as a human can and is able to converse with Leonard Mead. During the course of the conversation, the police car exhibits various emotions

and even an elementary thinking process, similar to that of a human.

When Mead explains simply what he is doing, the machine nearly short-circuits: Walking just walking, walking?” “Walking where? For what?” “And you have a viewing screen in your house to see with?” “No” (Bradbury 12) The police car is astonished that Mead is walking for air and to see and does not have a viewing screen so he asks “No?”

On the same lines when Mead asks the police car where it was taking him, “The car hesitated, or rather gave a faint whirring click, as if information, somewhere, was dropping [cards]...under electric eyes.”(Bradbury 13) The car’s reluctance in answering reminds us of the slow process of thinking in humans. In the process of becoming more human, the robots became more interactive and expressive. Bradbury strives to give the police car greater emotional complexity and tries to show the reader just how human in interaction the robotic car is. Finally, the use of the word “metallic” to describe the voice of the policeman suggests to the existence of an automated, mechanical policeman, instead of a human. This is significant because it demonstrates that machines which are cold and devoid of human empathy will slowly replace human jobs. In “The Pedestrian” the symbolic use of the empty police car, the empty streets and the continuous viewing of television all combine to show the dehumanisation of society caused by the overdependence on technology.

In The Pedestrian the protagonist Mead is different from the rest of society as he has the only house which is brightly illuminated and is symbolic of light. It is a pointer to the fact that the house is like Mead who is alive and the only enlightened one among society. Mead and his house in this story represents Bradbury. He spent his life without technology for a very long time by going for long walks, reading and writing books. He never kept track of technology never watched television. The fact that he doesn’t have a “viewing screen” like everyone else shows the reader that he doesn’t conform to the norms of the society and is considered abnormal. He refused to change or escape from the technological society. Another image that stands out is that of the light inside the houses. Most people are described as being awash in a greyish light. This is not like the bright, illuminating light of Mead’s house, which among the dark and unenlightened surroundings shows the contrast between Mead’s nature and others’.

Mead was considered as insane person as his words and actions are totally different from the rest of the people in the society , he is isolated from the rest because he was alone and

separated from others. He was a nonconformist who was living and struggling in a dehumanized society where there was no human interaction but people preferred communicating with machines. Bradbury through this story presents numbing effects of technology on human beings especially in this television dominated society. The society in this story represents the people who were fascinated by machines in this case television. The society began to over rely on it to such a large extent that they began to lose the human connection.

The short story 'The Pedestrian' by Ray Bradbury creates a futuristic view displaying the negative way technology has taken over the society in the year 2053 A.D. In the story Bradbury brings out a contrast between Mead's character who is an abnormal person, but the fact is that he does what a normal person would do in today's society, and the others to display the way technology has changed the social ways of the society and is destroying humanity .

Bradbury makes use of dystopian fiction to bring out the negative impact of machines if overused and their ability to destroy mankind. His works show that the new technological advancements can be destructive to its society and its inhabitants eventually robbing them of their imagination, creativity and most importantly humanity. In the words of M. Keith Booker, the new technological advances of the twentieth century also contributed to the dystopian thought. There was also a fear that this scientific advancement could also cause suppression and subjugation of the human species. While fascinated by the progress of technology in the mid 1900s, as shown through his artful depictions of futuristic inventions, Ray Bradbury critically comments on technology's effect on humanity. By giving in to these temptations, we become distracted from the experiences that ultimately enrich the human life.

From television to robotic police cars, Bradbury effectively warns society of the dangers of overly powerful technology. As society continues to progress towards an increasingly technologically based world, it must keep Bradbury's warnings and criticisms in mind. It is important that the society recognizes the difference between the benefits and convenience of technology and the negative impact it could have if it is allowed to advance without restraint. The story highlights the dangers of a world in which technology subordinates human beings. Left unchecked, technology could lead to a dystopian society, similar to that in *The Pedestrian*.

As the progress of scientific inventions and technology continues to rapidly grow and expand, we can look back on the writing of Bradbury with awe. While writing satirically in setting

depicted in the future, Bradbury invented technology that would be developed decades later in a similar fashion which proves the fact that some of his prophecies have come true. But rather than marvelling about the potential for humans to develop new gadgets, Bradbury warns us of the devastating effects they can have on us and our society. The author's vision into future brings to light the advancements in technology in the near future, but overdependence on it can in turn destroy us if we fail to comprehend their powers and limitations.

*The Pedestrian* depicts the downfall of man by technology's takeover of society as an iconic message of Bradbury to the world. Bradbury in this story shows how television is controlling people's lives and their social habits, making humans slaves to technology. It is a thought provoking one which draws many similarities to our current society and is relevant even in the present time. It depicts Bradbury's vision into future and reflects his concern about human being suppressed in a technology dominated society. Bradbury has taught us to be wary of the new technological advancement and treat them with caution rather than an overwhelming desire that leads to loss of creativity, imagination and above all human touch. Bradbury has transformed the theme of alienation into a broad satire about media addiction. It is this conflict between man and technology which makes it universally appealing.

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