

Bradbury's Little Philosophies: Enhancing Middle and High School Literacy with the Thematic Analysis Model

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In a 1974 interview on the public television program *Day at Night*, Ray Bradbury recounted the time he spent as a child with the defrocked minister turned magician, Mr. Electrico. In the interview, Bradbury fondly recalled, “We would walk along the shore of Lake Michigan and talk. He would talk his little philosophies, and I’d talk my large ones.” When host James Day questioned Bradbury, “Why were yours large and his little?”, Bradbury, sporting a playful smile, quipped, “Well, a boy always imagines that what they have to say is more important than anything said by an older person. You discover later it’s the reverse.”

Having grown up on early cinema and the adventures stories of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells, Bradbury knew how to write stories that keep readers engaged through nimble, high concept plotting. But Bradbury was also a writer concerned with asking pressing questions about the world in which we live. These questions, as Bradbury would put it, are the little philosophies—the everyday questions that define us, but that have no easy answers. It is the action of large philosophies that draws readers in, but it is the little philosophies that keep readers talking and thinking well after the story has been read. These little philosophies—themes—are often hidden below the surface and can only be teased out of the text through careful analysis.

For secondary students to be able to uncover these little philosophies, they must be taught how to meaningfully analyze texts for theme. This means that educators need a model for thematic analysis that moves middle and high school students beyond literal comprehension while enhancing their ability to skillfully analyze and interpret the subtextual elements of stories in order to create thematic statements that describe the hidden meaning of the text. The model presented

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here draws connections between character and plot while detailing how narrative structure and standardized thematic questions can be used to teach readers how to dig meaningfully into the subtext of nearly any story. This model will be applied to five of Bradbury's commonly taught stories: "All Summer in a Day," "A Sound of Thunder," "The Pedestrian," "There Will Come Soft Rains," and "The Veldt."

Struggling Readers & Analysis

According to data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress 2019 Nation's Report Card, only "34% of 8th graders performed at or above *NAEP Proficient* in reading" with 10 states performing more poorly than in 2017 and 42 showing no significant difference ("NAEP Nations Report Card—The NAEP Reading Achievement Levels by Grade" 2019). This means that 66% of 8th grade students are unable "to provide relevant information and summarize main ideas and themes" and that they were unable "to make and support inferences about a text, connect parts of a text, and analyze text features" ("NAEP Nations Report Card—The NAEP Reading Achievement Levels by Grade" 2019). Similarly, only 37% of 12th grade students met proficiency in 2019, and since the assessments were first administered in 1992, the number of students who placed in the "below basic" range has increased from 20% to 30% ("NAEP Nations Report Card—The NAEP Reading Achievement Levels by Grade" 2019).

These scores indicate the need for literacy instruction that provides educators with specific strategies for moving students from literal comprehension to interpretive comprehension. A key strategy for increasing interpretive comprehension is thematic analysis. Bradbury's stories are particularly well suited for this type of analysis because they work on both the surface and subtextual level. In fact, this is likely one of the reasons why some eighty-five years after his first published story, educators continue to return to Bradbury.

What is Theme?

To understand why students are failing to move beyond literal comprehension, we must acknowledge the challenges faced by educators, particularly where theme is concerned. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines theme, in part, as "a salient abstract idea that emerges from a literary work's treatment of its subject-matter" (Baldick 2015, 358). The *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* notes, in simpler terms perhaps, that "the theme of a work is not its subject but rather its central idea, which may be stated directly or indirectly" (Cuddon and Habib 2014, 721). Bradbury scholars Eller and Touponce (2004) acknowledge the challenges inherent in thematic analysis, writing that "literary thematics touches upon the most complex and murkiest problem of all literary theory: how to speak about what literature speaks about" (5). For struggling readers, these concepts can be particularly challenging.

To complicate matters further, middle school and high school educators typically conflate the concepts of theme and moral—teaching that, in addition to being the central idea of a story, theme is also a universal lesson learned by the reader. This means that broad themes, such as "war," "love," or "revenge," are typically passed over in favor of more specific statements, such as "in war, no one wins," "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," and "if you seek revenge, first dig two graves." While this idea of theme may not perfectly align with definitions provided above, it is

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useful in that it asks students to wrestle with “salient abstract ideas” and to “speak about what the literature speaks about.”

Before introducing the thematic analysis model, it is important to understand how theme functions. Conveniently, Eller and Touponce provide a starting point for better understanding the role of theme in a story, writing that it “has at least two functions: to create interest and arouse sympathy in the reader and to lend the work coherence” (5).

Provoking Sympathy

The first function, “to create interest and arouse sympathy in the reader,” provides important information regarding how the task of identifying theme should be taught. Stories can contain themes like “love” or “technology”—ideas that broadly describe an overarching idea of what the text is about. These broad themes may “create interest,” but do they “arouse sympathy in the reader”? Moreover, the reader does not necessarily need to engage in an analysis to determine these single-word themes, and, undoubtedly, simply stating that a text is about technology raises more questions than it answers: what does the text specifically say about technology? Is technological advancement always good? Should we let technology play such a prominent role in our daily lives? This broad approach can be helpful for starting the process of analysis, but it should not be considered the end goal of thematic analysis at the middle school and high school level.

When we read “The Veldt,” we aren’t just reading a story about technology, we are, very specifically, reading a story about the dangers of technology. Bradbury was appealing to the reader to consider the costs of our interactions with the sorts of ubiquitous and often seemingly benign technologies that are supposed to make our lives easier—an issue that readers can perhaps relate to, and sympathize with, even more in our current times than they could when the story was originally published in 1950. Broadly, the theme of “The Veldt” is technology, but a close reading of the subtextual elements of the story reveals that a more precise theme could be described in a statement such as *we lose our humanity when we rely too heavily on technology*.

Thematic statements like these provoke sympathy in the reader because they are both universal and relatable. Who, particularly in this modern age, hasn’t felt the isolation and detachment that results from our constant connection to our devices? While we hope that students won’t be able to relate to the urge to do away with their parents in favor of technology, it is easy to imagine that they can relate to the fact that technology can cause us, at times, to feel as if we have lost our humanity.

Narrative Coherence

The other function of theme, as noted by Eller and Touponce, is “to lend the work coherence.” Interestingly, this directive points to a clear connection between narrative coherence and the aroused sympathies of a reader—two ideas that, on their face, may seem unrelated. Upon closer examination, however, it is clear why these two ideas are inextricably linked. In *Poetics*, Aristotle argued that a story is “whole” only when it contains “a beginning, a middle, and an end” (13) and that the “imitation is unified if it imitates a single object, so too the plot, as the imitation of an action, should imitate a single, unified action—and one that is also a whole. So the structure of the various sections of the events must be such that the transposition or removal of any one section

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dislocates and changes the whole” (15). As Eller and Touponce indicate, theme is the direct product of narrative coherence. Every element of the story, from character to setting to plot, should work together to develop the theme. Practically speaking, this means that if any detail of the story is transposed or removed, the theme would be inexorably changed.

To demonstrate this point, I often ask students to consider what would happen to the theme of the story if the resolution of “The Veldt” was altered. Imagine Wendy and Peter’s parents, sweating on the veldt, searching the nursery in bewilderment for their troubled children. Then imagine that Wendy and Peter emerge having decided that their addiction to the nursery has gone too far, and everyone leaves the nursery together to have a nice family dinner cooked by the Happy-life Home robotic chef. The reaction amongst students in regard to this hypothetical resolution is almost universally the same: the story no longer works. This is because the new resolution changes the theme. This exercise, which can also be done with parts of the story aside from the resolution, teaches students that every element works in unison to create a specific theme and that each element can then be analyzed to determine how it serves to further that theme.

The Thematic Analysis Model

The thematic analysis model is primarily built around the relationship between character and plot. Bradbury acknowledged this connection when, in his essay, “The Joy of Writing,” he wrote about his “formula,” telling aspiring writings that the way to craft a story is to:

Find a character, like yourself, who will want something or not want something, with all his heart. Give him running orders. Shoot him off. Then follow as fast as you can go. The character, in his great love, or hate, will rush you through to the end of the story. The zest and gusto of his need, and there is zest in hate as well as in love, will fire the landscape and raise the temperature of your typewriter thirty degrees (Bradbury 1994, 13).

Here, Bradbury echoes Aristotle when he writes that a story is coherent when it follows a singular, unified path—when the character wants something, and, through plot, works towards it. His formula also implies, as Aristotle plainly stated, that a story is coherent when it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Instructing students to analyze those basic parts of a story is challenging, however, because they can be so broadly interpreted.

Breaking a story into three acts, however, can help bring greatly needed clarity to narrative structure. In the simplest terms, Act I (beginning) is the part in which the protagonist is introduced and their *want and/or need* is established. Act II (middle) is defined by *conflict* that is directly related to the protagonist’s want or need. Act III (end) presents a *resolution* in which the protagonist either gets what they want or need, or they don’t.

This structure is the heart of the thematic analysis model. By analyzing the struggle of the protagonist, students begin to relate what they are reading to their own struggles—their sympathies are being provoked. In this way, the story becomes more personal and more real. While they may not consciously recognize it, the element that students are connecting with is the salient abstract idea that is the central idea of the text: the theme. As Eller and Touponce write, they are able to speak about what the story is speaking about.

While this approach may sound trivial, this simple structure is the basis of the thematic analysis model because it empowers students to be able to analyze both the textual and subtextual elements of a story in a way that is powerful yet approachable. Literacy expert Kylee Beers (2003)

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writes that it is critical for teachers to show struggling readers “how to build meaning” in a text by “pull[ing] the invisible process of comprehension out to the visible level” (104). The thematic analysis model makes this process visible while also demystifying how stories work.

In addition to structure, the thematic analysis model asks students to consider the following questions throughout their analysis: Who is the protagonist? What is the protagonist’s external want? What is the protagonist’s internal need? What is the conflict specific to the want and need? In the resolution, does the protagonist get what they wanted or needed? What universal lesson does the reader learn as a result?

To demonstrate how the thematic analysis model works, I will now use it to analyze five commonly taught Bradbury stories. Despite the differences within those stories, the model will reveal their commonalities related to character and plot. It should be noted that, for the sake of clarity, the following analyses are largely absent of any discussion in regard to symbolism, metaphor, or motif. That is not to say, however, that these elements should be excluded from discussions with students in the classroom. In fact, they should be discussed in a way that makes the teacher’s thinking visible as a means of inviting students to begin engaging in higher order thinking. Lastly, it is important to note that these analyses are designed to give a brief overview of the model and that the themes being presented for each story are by no means the only possible themes.

“All Summer in a Day”

Act I: Protagonist & Want and Need

“All Summer in a Day” tells the story of a group of nine-year-old students who live on the sunless, rain-plagued planet Venus on the day of a rare solar event that only occurs once every seven years. The story centers around the protagonist, Margot, who, in contrast to her classmates, remembers the heat and feeling of the sun from her time living on Earth. Margot is not doing well. She is sickly, affected deeply by the lack of sunlight to which the other students have seemingly grown accustomed. Margot, more than the others, needs to see the sun, needs the reminder of her home and the nourishment that it provides. For Margot, the occasion appears to be almost a matter of life and death.

Margot’s external want and internal need are inextricably linked. She wants to return to Earth, but, more importantly, the reader gets the sense that she *needs* to return to Earth in order to live:

Only when they sang about the sun and the summer did her lips move as she watched the drenched windows.

And then, of course, the biggest crime of all was that she had come here only five years ago from Earth, and she remembered the sun and the way the sun was and the sky was when she was four in Ohio. And they, they had been on Venus all their lives, and they had been only two years old when last the sun came out and had long since forgotten the color and heat of it and the way it really was. (Bradbury 1980, 533-34)

Act II: Conflict

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Margot, however, cannot forget. Bradbury returns again and again to descriptions of Margot, writing about both her physical distance from the other students as well as her pallid complexion. Bradbury writes that “she was different and they knew her difference and kept away” (534). Margot is kept outside of the group, marginalized both by the other students as a result of their jealousy and resentment, and due to her own need to leave the rainy climes of Venus and once again bathe in the light of the sun.

In an escalation of the conflict, and as the result of jealous rage, another student locks Margot in a classroom closet just as the sun is emerging. In the excitement, Margot is quickly forgotten as the children rush out to relish the brief time they have in the sun. This conflict relates specifically to Margot’s need to see the sun—she has lost the one thing about which she cares most. Conflict is at its most effective when it works in direct opposition to the protagonist’s wants and needs. In this case, the sympathies of the reader become heightened as a result of this specific torment: Margot’s desire to see the sun is stolen away because of jealousy. The sense of injustice is felt more particularly when the other children go out and bask in the light of the sun while Margot is locked away in the darkness of the closet.

Act III: Resolution

In the story’s resolution, the storms return and the sun is blotted out once again. The students return to the classroom, and, remembering that Margot is locked in the closet, they open the door, overcome with shame. Bradbury writes that “They could not meet each other’s glances. Their faces were solemn and pale. They looked at their hands and feet, their faces down” (536). When the door is finally opened, there is silence. Importantly, Bradbury does not return the focus of the story to Margot, instead allowing the reader to linger on the emotional reactions of the classmates. This resolution is significant because it centers the reader’s attention not on Margot, but rather on the shame that her classmates feel as a result of their actions. They have stolen from Margot what she needed most.

Theme

Broadly, this is a story about bullying and jealousy, but, more narrowly, this is a story about the very primitive desire that we do not want people to have the things that are missing in our own lives, and the horrible things that we are capable of doing when we feel jealousy. Margot’s classmates hate her for no other reason than the fact that she has memories of a world of which they can only dream. From analysis, two possible theme statements emerge: *jealousy can make people do horrible things*, and *we don’t want others to have the things we don’t have*.

A more advanced analysis may also consider the strain that Margot’s young classmates are under themselves. In that event, students may explore thematic statements that seek to empathize with those characters. One could argue that the theme *people can lose their sense of morality when placed in extreme situations* could also be applicable.

“A Sound of Thunder”

Act I: Protagonist & Want and Need

In “A Sound of Thunder,” Bradbury (2005) writes about a future in which time travel is a reality, and the protagonist Eckels employs the services of Time Safari, Inc. to take him back in time, millions of years into the past, so he can live out his dream of hunting a tyrannosaurus rex. The

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hunt occurs the day after a presidential election, and, much to the relief of Eckels and the others in the Time Safari, Inc. office, the moderate candidate emerged as the victor.

Eckels' external want is plainly stated in the text: he wants to experience the thrill of hunting a creature unlike any he has hunted before, and he wants Time Safari, Inc. to help him fulfill that desire.

Act II: Conflict

Bradbury takes this simple premise, however, and complicates it with a few distinct threads of conflict. The first of these relates to Eckels' nervousness. Just prior to leaving for the safari, Eckels asks: "Does this safari guarantee I come back alive?" (203). This question foreshadows the extreme fear that Eckels exhibits later in the story as he and the hunting party come face to face with the tyrannosaurus. It also establishes Eckels' internal need, which is to keep his cool under pressure. Bradbury makes clear through their interactions that safari leader Mr. Travis doesn't respect Eckels and is openly concerned about Eckels' ability to successfully hunt and kill a dinosaur without losing his nerve.

Repeatedly, we see the tension between Eckels and the more confident Travis, beginning when Eckels accuses Travis of trying to scare him. Travis fully acknowledges that he is indeed trying to scare him, replying, "We don't want anyone going who'll panic at the first shot. Six safari leaders were killed last year, and a dozen hunters" (204). Ultimately, when Eckels finally has his opportunity to hunt the tyrannosaurus, he does panic, determining in a state of sheer terror that "it can't be killed," stating in disbelief, "I miscalculated, that's all. And now I want out" (210). Eckels, in a state of panic, flees from the dinosaur and back to the time machine.

The conflict is compounded by the fact that there are strict rules in regard to time travel. As Travis explains more than once to a nervous Eckels, changing even one small element of the past can have drastic repercussions in the future. He warns that: "By stepping on one single mouse. So the caveman starves. And the caveman, please note, is not just any expendable man, no! He is an entire future nation. From his loins would have sprung ten sons. From their loins one hundred sons, and thus onward to a civilization" and that "A little error here would multiply in sixty million years, all out of proportion" (207).

Upon their return to the present, the hunters find that not everything seems as it did before they left for their excursion. As the realization hits the team that something horrible has occurred, Eckels looks down and sees a beautiful butterfly inelegantly smashed on the bottom of his boot. The present has been altered: the air smells differently, the spelling of the words on the Time Safari, Inc. sign have changed—and the presidential election has gone not to the moderate candidate, but to a dictatorial brute named Deutscher.

Act III: Resolution

Bradbury has a keen understanding of how to wrap up a story quickly upon its resolution, and "A Sound of Thunder" is a good example of this technique. In the story's resolution, Travis, infuriated by Eckels' carelessness in the face of fear, raises his hunting rifle and, the reader can infer, he shoots and kills Eckels.

Theme

This is a story that my students have struggled with in the past. Between Mr. Travis' speeches about the paradoxes of time travel, and discussions of a presidential election, there is a lot of information to analyze, some of which can seem extraneous to students. That said, there is one

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theme that is born from the warning that Travis tries to convey to Eckels throughout the story: *our actions have consequences*. Interestingly, once students determine this theme, they can identify it over and over upon rereading for, in fact, Travis spends the majority of the story highlighting this theme in different ways.

“The Pedestrian”

Act I: Protagonist & Want and Need

“The Pedestrian” tells the story of Mr. Leonard Mead, a writer who lives in a future dominated by technological distractions. People no longer read, opting instead to stay in and watch television. Bradbury makes Mead’s want immediately clear, writing that walking leisurely for hours in the “misty evening” was what he “most dearly loved to do” (Bradbury 2003, 600).

Act II: Conflict

Mead, however, is an unusual man in the year A.D. 2053. While he is out in the open air, appreciating nature, the rest of the inhabitants of the city are sitting idly in their smart homes watching television. Bradbury writes that as Mead walked, “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” (600). This conflict tells the reader that Mead is a man that doesn’t fit in with the norms of society. He is apart, marginalized, even if it appears to be only slightly so.

Then, the conflict suddenly escalates: Mead “was within a block of his destination when the lone car turned a corner quite suddenly and flashed a fierce white cone of light upon him” (601). An autonomous police vehicle begins to question Mead, asking why he is outside. Mead’s marginalization is explored further when the police vehicle challenges him, stating that writing is not a profession. Bradbury writes that “Magazines and books didn’t sell anymore. Everything went on in the tomblike houses at night now [...] The tombs, ill-lit by television light, where the people sat like the dead, the gray or multicolored lights touching their faces, but never really touching *them*” (602). If Mead is different from others because he wants to walk quietly around his city, this interaction tells the reader that something more is going on. In addition to being alone in nature, Mead is also a man who feels alone intellectually.

After some back and forth, Mead is commanded to get in the vehicle. As he begins to stumble away, he sees that the car is completely autonomous. There is no driver speaking to him, only a computer. Mead complies and learns that he is going to be taken to the “Psychiatric Center for Research on Regressive Tendencies” (603).

Act III: Resolution

Again, Bradbury delivers a quick resolution. As they drive away, they pass Mead’s home, “brightly lit, every window a loud yellow illumination, square and warm in the cool darkness” (604).

Theme

More than any of the other stories I have discussed, the resolution of this story relies upon metaphor. The brightly lit rooms of Mead’s home are a stark contrast to the dark, tomb-like homes described throughout the story. Mead needs those lights, the reader can infer, to read. More importantly, however, the lights symbolize brightness and intelligence and vitality. The allusions

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to death and tombs, when contrasted with Mead's home, creates a possible theme that could be encapsulated in statements such as *we lose our humanity when we no longer think for ourselves*, and *we lose our humanity when we become dependent upon technology*.

“The Veldt”

Act I: Protagonist & Want and Need

In “The Veldt,” parents George and Lydia Hadley want their family to become less dependent on technology, particularly the holographic nursery with which their children are becoming increasingly fascinated. At the start of the story, Lydia pleads with George, stating her want clearly for the reader: “I just want you to look at it, is all, or call a psychologist in to look at it” (Bradbury 1997, 7). Unlike the other stories that have been analyzed thus far, students will occasionally argue that this story has two protagonists, as we see the story nearly equally through George and Lydia's eyes as they try to figure out what is happening in the nursery. More reasonably, however, it seems like Lydia is the protagonist because it is her want and need that moves the plot forward while George's actions largely generate conflict.

Act II: Conflict

Lydia's plea for George to look at the nursery is the start of the conflict as it appears that George feels that Lydia is overreacting. Although he agrees to walk with her to the nursery, he seems more concerned with spoiling Wendy and Peter, telling Lydia that “nothing's too good for our children” (8). When they enter the nursery, Lydia's fear that something in the nursery is “different now than it was” (7) seems to be confirmed. When they enter the room to inspect it, they find an African veldt complete with prowling lions that feel “startlingly real” (9). Within moments, “the lions came running at them. Lydia bolted and ran. Instinctively, George sprang after her. Outside, in the hall, with the door slammed, he was laughing and she was crying, they both stood appalled at the other's reaction” (10). Lydia begs George to ban the kids from the nursery. This request is critical to the story because it creates conflict with the children, which George acknowledges to Lydia when he warns her that the children will have a negative reaction.

As Lydia becomes increasingly frightened by the realistic nature of the nursery, she decides that the family has become too reliant on the technologies that their smart home provides. Here, George agrees, directly stating a possible theme of the story. Bradbury writes, “As for the nursery, thought George Hadley, it won't hurt for the children to be locked out of it awhile. Too much of anything isn't good for anyone” (12). This new need, to be more connected with each, heightens the conflict with the children, who do not like the idea of being restricted from the nursery.

Eventually, a psychologist is called in to examine the room. He warns George that they've “let this room and this house replace you and your wife in your children's affections. This room is their mother and father, far more important in their lives than their real parents” (21). When George ultimately shuts the nursery, the children “fling themselves onto a couch, weeping” (22) and tell their parents that they wish they were dead.

Act III: Resolution

The story resolves when the children beg for one more moment in the nursery. Taking pity on them, Lydia agrees. As George and Lydia finally realize the extent of the damage that their smart house has caused for their family, they are called to the nursery by Wendy and Peter. When they

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run, they find that they are alone in the veldt because the children have locked them in the nursery. And, it can be inferred, they are eaten by the lions.

Theme

One possible theme of this story is stated directly by George when he thinks *too much of anything isn't good for anyone*. This theme is reinforced throughout the story, first through the children's reaction to being cut off from the nursery, and then by the psychologist David McLean. There are other themes present as well. Just like in "The Pedestrian," this story proves the theme that *we lose our humanity when we become dependent on technology*. In fact, this theme is present in many of Bradbury's stories, but "The Veldt" explores the darker corners of this idea by having the children kill off their parents to get what they want. The next story, "There Will Come Soft Rains," is thematically similar, but takes an even more dramatic approach in its view on the balance between technology and humanity.

"There Will Come Soft Rains"

Act I: Protagonist & Want and Need

"There Will Come Soft Rains" is unlike any of the other stories that have been analyzed thus far. On its face, the story seems simplistic, but Bradbury employs a number of skillful techniques to develop the theme. In it, Bradbury tells the story of a smart home that goes about its day preparing meals and cleaning for a family that, we come to learn, has been killed in some sort of nuclear event. Interestingly, the smart home fills the role of the protagonist in this story. Bradbury uses personification to give the home agency, signaling to the reader that it is a viable protagonist. Bradbury writes, "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 that nobody would" (Bradbury 1980, 76). This also indicates to the reader what the home wants, which is to dutifully serve the family that occupies it.

Act II: Conflict

The conflict that appears throughout the story serves two purposes. First, it shows the reader that, increasingly, the house is having difficulty fulfilling its desire to serve the absent family. Second, it paints a picture of atomic war that becomes darker and darker with each benign task that the house blindly tries to complete. Bradbury writes that, "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" (77). On the face of the house, "five spots of paint—the man, the woman, the children, the ball—remained. The rest was a thin charcoaled layer" (77).

Despite the nuclear fallout, the house continues to try to serve. When animals approach, the shutters are lowered "in an old maidenly preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical paranoia" (77). When a bird alights upon a window, it is dutifully shooed away. Of this tireless effort, Bradbury carefully informs the reader that "The house was an altar with ten thousand attendants, big, small, servicing, attending, in choirs. But the gods had gone away, and the ritual of the religion continued senselessly, uselessly" (77). The house, it is made evident, is carrying out its duties, without pleasure, and, now, without use. The family, referred to here as

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“gods,” clearly are not deities of some higher order, but are instead distinctly human. The house cannot recognize that fact, however, and thus it keeps working, endlessly, and without purpose.

As night arrives and the house prepares the room for sleep, it recites the Sara Teasdale poem from which the story derives its title:

“Robins will wear their feathery fire,
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;
And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.
Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree,
If mankind perished utterly;
And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn
Would scarcely know that we were gone” (79).

Not long after this moment, the house begins to burn to the ground. Picassos and Matisses are quietly destroyed. Despite its best effort to contain the blaze, the house explodes, leaving a lone wall standing amidst the debris.

Act III: Resolution

In the final line of the story, the house, almost completely destroyed, dutifully announces the day's date to begin another day.

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Theme

Of all the stories that have been analyzed thus far, this is perhaps the most complex. The protagonist is a house. The family is dead. The conflict is built around a series of simple chores that become increasingly hard to accomplish due to the aftermath of a nuclear event. So, what does it all mean? What is the theme of this story? This is a story about routine and the trivial errands and tasks that we complete mindlessly as we move through our days. By removing the family and placing the house in the center of the catastrophe, Bradbury highlights the futility of our daily existence in the face of nuclear war. The house, despite everything, however, keeps going. He extends this idea by introducing the Teasdale poem, acknowledging that nature will continue on, even after we've used technology to destroy ourselves.

On the most pessimistic end of the scale, a reader might determine that the theme of the story is that *modern life is meaningless*. A more optimistic reader may determine that the theme is something like *we have to endure even in the face of difficulty*. Additionally, students could explore themes more directly related to technology, writing a theme such as *technology is only as smart as the people who make it*.

In Conclusion

A decade after Bradbury's death, new volumes and collections of his stories are still being released. Through his little philosophies, Bradbury continues to connect with readers in new and ever-evolving ways. In classrooms across the world, students will engage with the same questions and problems with which Bradbury grappled. In this way, Bradbury, as Mr. Electrico commanded him, will live forever. This is a testament not only to Bradbury, but also to the power of theme.

When we teach students how to analyze and determine theme, we are empowering them to explore the world through literature. With decades of stagnant and declining literacy scores, it is imperative that we approach this problem with the same zeal with which Bradbury approached his writing. By applying the thematic analysis model, we can begin to move students towards greater critical thinking, moving them from literal thinkers to interpretive thinkers.

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THE NEW RAY BRADBURY REVIEW

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Abstract

In its measurement of American students over the last thirty years, the National Assessment of Educational Progress has shown that performance related to reading comprehension and literacy continues to decline, with nearly a third of students now failing to meet basic literacy proficiency. This article proposes a new model for thematic analysis to improve literacy-based outcomes amongst intermediate and secondary students. Through an examination of five Ray Bradbury short stories, the author shows how this model can be used to move students beyond literal comprehension while enhancing their ability to skillfully analyze and interpret the subtextual elements of stories in order to create thematic statements that reveal the hidden meaning of a text.

Keywords Bradbury, Ray, Characterization, Educational technology, Literacy, Narrative plot, Reading instruction, Storytelling, Thematic Analysis