

Texas Christian University

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Ray Bradbury Short Stories



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Why Read Ray Bradbury?

..."I'm working to prevent a future where there's no education,' Bradbury said from his Los Angeles home. 'The system we have has gone to hell, so I'm trying to encourage teachers and parents to rebuild it. We're not teaching kids to read and write and think.'

The author of "Fahrenheit 451" reaches back to his most famous novel for his coup de grace.

'There's no reason to burn books if you don't read them.'

...'I see 'Fahrenheit' all over the place, these days,' Bradbury said. 'Programs like 'Jeopardy' and 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire' are ridiculous. They're the stupidest shows in history. They're making us dumber. They don't give us information, they give us facts, factoids. You don't learn who Napoleon was and how he was motivated. You learn what year he was born, and when he died. That's useless.'

'Millionaire' gives you questions that are so dumb that I can't believe they're going to give anyone a million dollars for telling me where Poughkeepsie is.'

...The Internet's free flow of information may make it harder for dictators to suppress and inhibit access to that information. But, as Bradbury points out, the ephemeral nature of Net data-alterable, erasable-could render the truth something just as fluid.

But Bradbury remains, as always, the optimist. He says he remains an ever-hopeful student of human nature and an idealist at heart."

"About Ray Bradbury." *About Ray Bradbury*. Web. 20 Mar. 2016. <http://www.raybradbury.com/articles_peoria.html>.

"August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains" (1950) by Ray Bradbury

1 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. The morning house lay empty. The clock ticked on, repeating and repeating its sounds into the emptiness. *Seven-nine, breakfast time, seven-nine!*

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

3 "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."

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

5 *Eight-one, tick-tock, eight-one o'clock, off to school, off to*

What is unusual about the opening of this story? What kind of images are invoked by the diction and syntax of the "voice-clock"? What is suggested by the sentence "The morning house lay empty"?

What is suggested by the stove making so much food for a house that "lay empty"?

What kind of information does the house give its occupants?

How does the word "somewhere" add to the reader's sense of uneasiness?

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.

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

7 At eight-thirty the eggs were shriveled and the toast was like stone. An aluminum wedge scraped them into the sink, where hot water whirled 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.

8 *Nine-fifteen*, sang the clock, *time to clean*.

9 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 eyes faded. The house was clean.

10 *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.

11 *Ten-fifteen*. The garden sprinklers whirled 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 a thrown ball, and opposite him a girl, hands raised to catch a ball which never came down.

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

13 The gentle sprinkler rain filled the garden with falling light.

14 Until this day, how well the house had kept its peace. How carefully it had inquired, "Who goes there? What's the password?" and, getting no answer from lonely foxes and whining cats, it had shut up its windows and drawn shades in an old maidenly preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical paranoia.

15 It quivered at each sound, the house did. If a sparrow

Once again, what kind of image is suggested by the tone of the "voice-clock"?

Where are the people? Why does the house continue to function if there are no humans to be served?

What kind of descriptive diction is applied to the house's actions of cleaning?

How is situational irony used in this paragraph?

Note how Bradbury indirectly reveals to the reader what happened to the occupants and the city. What is the contrast between the opening of paragraph 10 and what is revealed further in the paragraph? Note he continues this in the opening of paragraph 11 and in paragraph 13. Why? What is the effect?

Why is the house "afraid"?

<p>brushed a window, the shade snapped up. The bird, startled, flew off! No, not even a bird must touch the house!</p> <p>16 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.</p> <p>17 <i>Twelve noon.</i></p> <p>18 A dog whined, shivering, on the front porch.</p> <p>19 The front door recognized the dog voice and opened. The dog, once huge and fleshy, but now gone to bone and covered with sores, moved in and through the house, tracking mud. Behind it whirled angry mice, angry at having to pick up mud, angry at inconvenience.</p> <p>20 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 into the sighing vent of an incinerator which sat like evil Baal in a dark corner.</p> <p>21 The dog ran upstairs, hysterically yelping to each door, at last realizing, as the house realized, that only silence was here.</p> <p>22 It sniffed the air and scratched the kitchen door. Behind the door, the stove was making pancakes which filled the house with a rich baked odor and the scent of maple syrup.</p> <p>23 The dog frothed at the mouth, lying at the door, sniffing, its eyes turned to fire. It ran wildly in circles, biting at its tail, spun in a frenzy, and died. It lay in the parlor for an hour.</p> <p>24 <i>Two o'clock</i>, sang a voice.</p> <p>25 Delicately sensing decay at last, the regiments of mice hummed out as softly as blown gray leaves in an electrical wind.</p> <p>26 <i>Two-fifteen.</i></p> <p>27 The dog was gone.</p> <p>28 In the cellar, the incinerator glowed suddenly and a whirl of sparks leaped up the chimney.</p> <p>29 <i>Two thirty-five.</i></p> <p>30 Bridge tables sprouted from patio walls. Playing cards fluttered onto pads in a shower of pips. Martinis manifested on an oaken bench with egg-salad sandwiches. Music played.</p> <p>31 But the tables were silent and the cards untouched.</p> <p>32 At four o'clock the tables folded like great butterflies back through the paneled walls.</p> <p>33 <i>Four-thirty.</i></p> <p>34 The nursery walls glowed.</p> <p>35 Animals took shape: yellow giraffes, blue lions, pink antelopes, lilac panthers cavorting in crystal substance. The</p>	<p>Why the use of a “religious” metaphor?</p> <p>How is the dog symbolic of what happened to its masters?</p> <p>The reference to “evil Baal” becomes an extended metaphor. Why?</p> <p>What is implied by the house continuing to pump out pancakes, but not tend to the starving dog?</p> <p>Why does Bradbury use so much language referring to decay and dying?</p> <p>What does the use of the words “sprouted”, “fluttered”, “shower”, and “butterflies” suggest? How do they contrast with other actions of the house?</p> <p>What is the paradox of the artificial nature being brought into this technologically superior house?</p>
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<p>walls were glass. They looked out upon color and fantasy. Hidden films docked through well-oiled sprockets, and the walls lived. The nursery floor was woven to resemble a crisp, cereal meadow. Over this ran aluminum roaches and iron crickets, and in the hot still air butterflies of delicate red tissue wavered among the sharp aroma of animal spoor! There was the sound like a great matted yellow hive of bees within a dark bellows, the lazy bumble of a purring lion. And there was the patter of okapi feet and the murmur of a fresh jungle rain, like other hoofs, falling upon the summer-starched grass. Now the walls dissolved into distances of parched weed, mile on mile, and warm endless sky. The animals drew away into thorn brakes and water holes.</p> <p>36 It was the children's hour.</p> <p>37 <i>Five o'clock.</i> The bath filled with clear hot water.</p> <p>38 <i>Six, seven, eight o'clock.</i> The dinner dishes manipulated like magic tricks, and in the study a click. In the metal stand opposite the hearth where a fire now blazed up warmly, a cigar popped out, half an inch of soft gray ash on it, smoking, waiting.</p> <p>39 <i>Nine o'clock.</i> The beds warmed their hidden circuits, for nights were cool here.</p> <p>40 <i>Nine-five.</i> A voice spoke from the study ceiling:</p> <p>41 "Mrs. McClellan, which poem would you like this evening?"</p> <p>42 The house was silent.</p> <p>43 The voice said at last, "Since you express no preference, I shall select a poem at random." Quiet music rose to back the voice. "Sara Teasdale. As I recall, your favorite....</p> <p>44 "There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground, And swallows circling with their shimmering sound; And frogs in the pools singing at night, And wild plum trees in tremulous white; 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."</p>	<p>How does Bradbury utilize "white space" in the story?</p> <p>How does the language begin change here? Note "hot", "fire", "blazed", "ash", "warmed". What is being suggested?</p> <p>Is the poem chosen really "random"?</p> <p>The poem opens the same as the story. Why? What are other similarities between the poem and the story?</p> <p>Describe the language used in first three stanzas. What "divides" the poem—where is the shift?</p> <p>How does the language change in the last three stanzas? Why?</p> <p>What hints have we been given</p>
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<p>45 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.</p> <p>46 At ten o'clock the house began to die.</p> <p>47 The wind blew. A failing tree bough crashed through the kitchen window. Cleaning solvent, bottled, shattered over the stove. The room was ablaze in an instant!</p> <p>48 "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!"</p> <p>49 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.</p> <p>50 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.</p> <p>51 But too late. Somewhere, sighing, a pump shrugged to a stop. The quenching rain ceased. The reserve water supply which had filled baths and washed dishes for many quiet days was gone.</p> <p>52 The fire crackled up the stairs. It fed upon Picassos and Matisse in the upper halls, like delicacies, baking off the oily flesh, tenderly crisping the canvases into black shavings.</p> <p>53 Now the fire lay in beds, stood in windows, changed the colors of drapes!</p> <p>54 And then, reinforcements.</p> <p>55 From attic trapdoors, blind robot faces peered down with faucet mouths gushing green chemical.</p> <p>56 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.</p> <p>57 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 bronze shrapnel on the beams.</p> <p>58 The fire rushed back into every closet and felt of the clothes hung there.</p> <p>59 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!</p>	<p>about the ending of the story?</p> <p>Why drop the use of <i>italics</i> with the times? How has the natural world finally intruded?</p> <p>How does the diction used to describe the fire give it a life of its own?</p> <p>What other natural force assists the fire?</p> <p>What do the verb choices in paragraph 53 suggest? What is the effect of the "reinforcements"?</p> <p>What are the sequence of events in paragraph 57? What has happened to the house?</p> <p>How does Bradbury intensify the personification of the house? What is happening to the house?</p>
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Heat snapped mirrors like the 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.

60 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....

61 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 in the fiery study, until all the film spools burned, until all the wires withered and the circuits cracked.

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

63 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!

64 The crash. The attic smashing into 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.

65 Smoke and silence. A great quantity of smoke.

66 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 heaped rubble and steam:

67 "Today is August 5, 2026, today is August 5, 2026, today is..."

Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1985), 166-172.

How does the syntax change in these paragraphs? What is the effect of phrase after phrase joined together? How is the syntax different from the opening of the story? Why such a change here?

In paragraph 65, why does Bradbury use fragments?

How did the Teasdale poem end? How does the end of the story parallel the poem?

Writing Assignment:

Each assertion you make should be supported by evidence and argumentation. Evidence is either facts you present yourself, or **citations from sources of evidence supporting the assertion**. Argumentation is logical reasoning that supports the more general assertion. Arguments from readings should also be properly cited. The overall thesis of the essay or other piece of work should be supported by the individual paragraphs. **The assertion of each paragraph(s) should be stated at or near the beginning of the paragraph(s), and the rest of the paragraph(s) should provide support for the assertion.**

Major Assertion:

Possible minor assertions:

Decide which ones appear to be worded in the most interesting and precise manner. Which ones could you improve with “minor” changes? Which ones would you completely eliminate. Why? Are you able to add additional minor assertions you think would work?

The fond, protective diction that begins the story contrasts to the brave, hopeless words used toward the end.

Mirroring the house’s slip into decay, the structured diction becomes disorderly and chaotic.

The use of repetition shifts from child-like and youthful to showing the house’s feelings of helplessness at the end.

From beginning to end Bradbury’s use of syntax, especially repetition, demonstrates the house’s denial and determination to not break its routine.

The changes in syntax reveal that the house, although calm and monotonous in the beginning, turns harsh and frantic in the end.

Bradbury’s use of imagery describes the house in detail and then illustrates the house’s gradual demise as it tries to function without humans.

The frequent use of allusion and repetition as tools of language emphasize the scheduled days and “scheduled” destruction of the house.

The author uses syntax to show that even when the house begins to malfunction, the daily routines still continued oblivious to what was really happening.

The gradual shift in the style of the language beginning with the poetic flow to a more chaotic staccato suggests the breakdown of the house.

The changes in the style of the poetic language through the story show the shift of attitude in the house.

The alteration of the diction from structured and organized to chaotic at the end of the piece show the changes that are occurring in the “thoughts” of the house.

INTRODUCTION –

MAJOR ASSERTION - In “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains”, Ray Bradbury uses imagery, syntax, and sound devices to reveal the desperate struggle of the house to maintain normalcy.

MINOR ASSERTION A

EVIDENCE FOR A

APPLICATION OF EVIDENCE FOR A

MINOR ASSERTION B

EVIDENCE FOR B

APPLICATION OF EVIDENCE FOR B

MINOR ASSERTION C

EVIDENCE FOR C

APPLICATION OF EVIDENCE FOR C

CONCLUSION

Literary Analysis in Sentence Outline Form (Thanks to Marcia Hilsabeck)

Write the analysis of There Will Come Soft Rains as a **sentence outline**, using the framework below.

1. Major Assertion (Theme): In There Will Come Soft Rains Ray Bradbury uses imagery, syntax, diction, (sound devices, figurative language) to reveal the desperate struggle of the house to maintain normalcy.

[This statement is true because:]

2. Minor Assertion (Point or Reason): (Note: This should be your statement about the **author's technique - his use** of imagery or another element. It should not be a statement about the characters or story; these are the evidence.)

2. _____

[This reason is valid because of the following evidence or example from the work]

2A. Evidence or Example from Text: (Use a summary or short exemplary quote, with page numbers)

2a. _____ (p. _____)

[The evidence (or example) supports or proves the minor assertion by ...]

2B. Application: Supply a sentence (or two) showing **how** the evidence or example supports the minor assertion and therefore proves the major assertion.

2b. _____

3. Minor Assertion (Point or Reason): (Note: This should be a statement about the author's **technique - his use** of syntax or another element. It should not be a statement about the characters or story; these are the evidence.)

3. _____

[This reason is valid because of the following evidence or example from the work]

3A. Evidence or Example from Text: (Use a summary or short exemplary quote, with page numbers)

3 a. _____ (p. _____)

[The evidence (or example) supports or proves the minor assertion by ...]

3B. Application: Supply a sentence (or two) showing **how** the evidence or example supports the minor assertion and therefore proves the major assertion.

3b. _____

Conclusion: _____

The following short story by Ray Bradbury can either be taught separately or paired with Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Before reading the story, review the "Elements of Fiction" chart. Then as you read the story look for examples of each of the elements. Mark them in the right hand column labeled "My Notes" as you read. Once you have read the story on your own, you will form groups of 2 or 3 to discuss the story and share the examples of the elements you have marked. Make sure you decide on a theme—"What does the author say about life" before you begin filling in the chart.

PLOT/CONFLICT	PLOT is an author's selection and arrangement of incidents in a story to shape the action and give the story a particular focus. Discussions of plot include not just what happens, but also how and why things happen the way they do. [B]
CHARACTER	CHARACTER is established through (1) direct exposition (comment by the author directly to the reader, although this is nearly always filtered through a narrator or other character, whose reliability you must always question), (2) dialogue (what the character says or thinks), and (3) action (what the character actually does). [H]
SETTING	SETTING is "the physical, and sometimes spiritual, background against which the action of a narrative (novel, drama, short story, poem) takes place." It includes (1) geography (country / city/region), (2) time (day/night, season, century/year/era, historical and social conditions and values), and (3) society (class, beliefs, values of the characters). [H]
POINT OF VIEW	POINT OF VIEW refers to who tells us a story and how it is told. The two broad categories are (1) the third-person narrator who tells the story and does not participate in the action and (2) the first-person narrator who is a major or minor participant. [B]
STYLE	STYLE is the distinctive and unique manner in which a writer arranges words to achieve particular effects.
TONE, IMAGERY, AND SYMBOL	TONE is the author's implicit attitude toward the reader or the people, places, and events in a work as revealed by the elements of the author's style. An IMAGE is a word, phrase, or figure of speech that addresses the senses, suggesting mental pictures of sights, sounds, smells tastes, feelings or actions. SYMBOL is (something which is itself and yet stands for or suggests or means something else..., a figure of speech which combines a literal and sensuous quality with an abstract or suggestive aspect." [H]

Definitions are adapted from C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, Indianapolis: The Odyssey Press, 1972, Print. [Those marked "H"] or from Michael Meyer, ed., *The Bedford Introduction to Literature, 8th Edition*, Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. Print. [Those marked [B] Thanks to Skip Nicholson.

Elements of Fiction	
ELEMENT	How does the author use these elements to <u>develop</u> the central idea? Give examples and page numbers to support your assertion. You will be writing about the author's technique and using <u>text</u> to support your assertion.
PLOT/CONFLICT	(example) The author uses plot/conflict to express (convey, articulate, etc.) the theme (<u>state the theme</u>) by (<u>type of technique</u>). This can be seen on page (<u>#</u>), where (<u>example from the text</u>).
CHARACTER	
SETTING	
POINT OF VIEW	
STYLE	
TONE, IMAGERY AND SYMBOL	

THE FRUIT AT THE BOTTOM OF THE BOWL by Ray Bradbury

My Notes

1 William Acton rose to his feet. The clock on the mantel ticked midnight.

2 He looked at his fingers and he looked at the large room around him and he looked at the man lying on the floor. William Acton, whose fingers had stroked typewriter keys and made love and fried ham and eggs for early breakfasts, had now accomplished a murder with those same ten whorled fingers.

3 He had never thought of himself as a sculptor and yet, in this moment, looking down between his hands at the body upon the polished hardwood floor, he realized that by some sculptural clenching and remodeling and twisting of human clay he had taken hold of this man Donald Huxley and changed his physiognomy, the very frame of his body.

4 With a twist of his fingers he had wiped away the exacting glitter of Huxley's grey eyes; replaced it with a blind dullness of eye cold in socket. The lips, always pink and sensuous, were gaped to show the equine teeth, the yellow incisors, the nicotined canines, the gold-inlaid molars. The nose, pink also, was now mottled, pale, discolored¹, as were the ears. Huxley's hands, upon the floor, were open, pleading for the first time in their lives, instead of demanding.

5 Yes, it was an artistic conception. On the whole, the change had done Huxley a share of good. Death made him a handsomer man to deal with. You could talk to him now and he'd have to listen.

6 William Acton looked at his own fingers.

7 It was done. He could not change it back. Had anyone heard? He listened.

8 Outside, the normal late sounds of street traffic continued. There was no banging of the house door, no shoulder wrecking the portal into kindling, no voices demanding entrance. The murder, the sculpturing of clay from warmth to coldness was done, and nobody knew.

9 Now what? The clock ticked midnight. His every impulse exploded him in a hysteria toward the door. Rush, get away, run, never come back, board a train, hail a taxi, get, go, run, walk, saunter, but get the blazes *out* of here!

10 His hands hovered before his eyes, floating, turning.

11 He twisted them in slow deliberation; they felt airy and feather-light. Why was he staring at them this way? he inquired of himself. Was there something in them of immense interest that he should pause now, after a successful throttling, and examine them whorl by whorl?

12 They were ordinary hands. Not thick, not thin, not long, not short, not hairy, not naked, not manicured and yet not dirty, not soft and yet not callused, not wrinkled and yet not smooth; not murdering hands at all – and yet not innocent. He seemed to find them miracles to look upon.

13 It was not the hands as hands he was interested in, nor the fingers as fingers. In the numb timelessness after an accomplished violence he found interest only in the tips of his fingers.

14 The clock ticked upon the mantel.

15 He knelt by Huxley's body, took a handkerchief from Huxley's

pocket, and began methodically to swab Huxley's throat with it. He brushed and massaged the throat and wiped the face and the back of the neck with fierce energy. Then he stood up.

16 He looked at the throat. He looked at the polished floor. He bent slowly and gave the floor a few dabs with the handkerchief, then he scowled and swabbed the floor; first, near the head of the corpse; secondly, near the arms. Then he polished the floor all around the body. He polished the floor one yard from the body on all sides. Then he polished the floor two yards from the body on all sides. Then he polished the floor three yards from the body in all directions. Then he

—

17 He stopped.

18 There was a moment when he saw the entire house, the mirrored halls, the carved doors, the splendid furniture; and, as clearly as if it were being repeated word for word, he heard Huxley talking and himself just the way they had talked only an hour ago.

19 Finger on Huxley's doorbell. Huxley's door opening. "Oh!"

20 Huxley shocked. "It's *you*, Acton."

21 "Where's my wife, Huxley?"

22 "Do you think I'd tell you, really? Don't stand out there, you idiot. If you want to talk business, come in. Through that door. There. Into the library."

23 Acton had *touched* the library door. "Drink?"

24 "I need one. I can't believe Lily is gone, that she —"

25 "There's a bottle of burgundy, Acton. Mind fetching it from that cabinet?" Yes, fetch it. *Handle* it. *Touch* it. He did.

26 "Some interesting first editions there, Acton. Feel this binding. *Feel* of it."

27 "I didn't come to see books, I —"

28 He had *touched* the books and the library table and *touched* the burgundy bottle and burgundy glasses.

29 Now, squatting on the floor beside Huxley's cold body with the polishing handkerchief in his fingers, motionless, he stared at the house, the walls, the furniture about him, his eyes widening, his mouth dropping, stunned by what he realized and what he saw. He shut his eyes, dropped his head, crushed the handkerchief between his hands, wadding it, biting his lips with his teeth, pulling in on himself.

30 The fingerprints were everywhere, *everywhere*!

31 "Mind getting the burgundy, Acton, eh? The burgundy bottle, eh? With your fingers, eh? I'm terribly tired. You understand?"

32 A pair of gloves.

33 Before he did one more thing, before he polished another area, he must have a pair of gloves, or he might unintentionally, after cleaning a surface, redistribute his identity.

34 He put his hands in his pockets. He walked through the house to the hall umbrella stand, the hat-rack. Huxley's overcoat. He pulled out the overcoat pockets.

35 No gloves.

36 His hands in his pockets again, he walked upstairs, moving with a controlled swiftness, allowing himself nothing frantic, nothing wild. He had made the initial error of not wearing gloves (but, after all, he

hadn't *planned* a murder, and his subconscious, which may have known of the crime before its commitment, had not even hinted he might need gloves before the night was finished), so now he had to sweat for his sin of omission. Somewhere in the house there must be at least one pair of gloves. He would have to hurry; there was every chance that someone might visit Huxley, even at this hour. Rich friends drinking themselves in and out the door, laughing, shouting, coming and going without so much as a hello- goodbye. He would have until six in the morning, at the outside, when Huxley's friends were to pick Huxley up for the trip to the airport and Mexico City ...

37 Acton hurried about upstairs opening drawers, using the handkerchief as blotter. He untidied seventy or eighty drawers in six rooms, left them with their tongues, so to speak, hanging out, ran on to new ones. He felt naked, unable to do anything until he found gloves. He might scour the entire house with the handkerchief, buffing every possible surface where fingerprints might lie, then accidentally bump a wall here or there, thus sealing his own fate with one microscopic, whorling symbol! It would be putting his stamp of approval on the murder, that's what it would be! Like those waxen seals in the old days when they rattled papyrus, flourished ink, dusted all with sand to dry the ink, and pressed their signet rings in hot crimson tallow at the bottom. So it would be if he left one, mind you, *one* fingerprint upon the scene! His approval of the murder did not extend as far as affixing said seal.

38 More drawers! Be quiet, be curious, be careful, he told himself. At the bottom of the eighty-fifth drawer he found gloves.

39 "Oh, my Lord, my Lord!" He slumped against the bureau, sighing. He tried the gloves on, held them up, proudly flexed them, buttoned them. They were soft, grey, thick, impregnable. He could do all sorts of tricks with hands now and leave no trace. He thumbed his nose in the bedroom mirror, sucking his teeth.

40 "NO!" cried Huxley.

41 What a wicked plan it had been.

42 Huxley had fallen to the floor, *purposely*! Oh, what a wickedly clever man!

43 Down onto the hardwood floor had dropped Huxley, with Acton after him. They had rolled and tussled and clawed at the floor, printing and printing it with their frantic fingertips! Huxley had slipped away a few feet, Acton crawling after to lay hands on his neck and squeeze until the life came out like paste from a tube!

44 Gloved, William Acton returned to the room and knelt down upon the floor and laboriously began the task of swabbing every wildly infested inch of it. Inch by inch, inch by inch, he polished and polished until he could almost see his intent, sweating face in it. Then he came to a table and polished the leg of it, on up its solid body and along the knobs and over the top. He came to a bowl of wax fruit and wiped them clean, leaving the fruit at the bottom unpolished.

45 "I'm *sure* I didn't touch *them*," he said.

46 After rubbing the table, he came to a picture frame hung over it. "I'm *certain* I didn't touch *that*," he said.

47 He stood looking at it.

48 He glanced at all the doors in the room. Which doors had he used

tonight? He couldn't remember. Polish all of them, then. He started on the doorknobs, shined them all up, and then he curried the doors from head to foot, taking no chances. Then he went to all the furniture in the room and wiped the chair arms.

49 "That chair you're sitting in, Acton, is an old Louis XIV piece. *Feel* that material," said Huxley.

50 "I didn't come to talk furniture, Huxley! I came about Lily."

51 "Oh, come off it, you're not that serious about her. She doesn't love you, you know. She's told me she'll go with me to Mexico City tomorrow."

52 "You and your money and your damned furniture!"

53 "It's nice furniture, Acton; be a good guest and feel of it."
Fingerprints can be found on fabric.

54 "Huxley!" William Acton stared at the body. "Did you guess I was going to kill you? Did your subconscious suspect, just as my subconscious suspected? And did your subconscious tell you to make me run about the house handling, touching, *fondling* books, dishes, doors, chairs? Were you *that* clever and *that* mean?"

55 He washed the chairs dryly with the clenched handkerchief. Then he remembered the body – he hadn't dry-washed *it*. He went to it and turned it now this way, now that, and burnished every surface of it. He even shined the shoes, charging nothing.

56 While shining the shoes his face took on a little tremor of worry, and after a moment he got up and walked over to that table.

57 He took out and polished the wax fruit at the bottom of the bowl.

58 "Better," he whispered, and went back to the body.

59 But as he crouched over the body his eyelids twitched and his jaw moved from side to side and he debated, then he got up and walked once more to the table.

60 He polished the picture frame.

61 While polishing the picture frame he discovered – The wall.

62 "That," he said, "is *silly*."

63 "Oh!" cried Huxley, fending him off. He gave Acton a shove as they struggled. Acton fell, got up, *touching* the wall, and ran toward Huxley again. He strangled Huxley. Huxley died.

64 Acton turned steadfastly from the wall, with equilibrium and decision. The harsh words and the action faded in his mind; he hid them away. He glanced at the four walls.

65 "Ridiculous!" he said.

66 From the corners of his eyes he saw something on one wall. "I refuse to pay attention," he said to distract himself. "The next room, now! I'll be methodical. Let's see – altogether we were in the hall, the library, *this* room, and the dining room and the kitchen."

67 There was a spot on the wall behind him. Well, *wasn't* there?

68 He turned angrily. "All right, all right, just to be *sure*," and he went over and couldn't find any spot. Oh, a *little* one, yes, right – *there*. He dabbed it. It wasn't a fingerprint anyhow. He finished with it, and his gloved hand leaned against the wall and he looked at the wall and the way it went over to his right and over to his left and how it went down to his feet and up over his head and he said softly, "No." He looked up and down and over and across and he said quietly, "That would be too much." How many square feet? "I don't give a good damn," he said. But unknown to his eyes, his gloved fingers moved in

a little rubbing rhythm on the wall.

69 He peered at his hand and the wallpaper. He looked over his shoulder at the other room. "I must go in there and polish the essentials," he told himself, but his hand remained, as if to hold the wall, or himself, up. His face hardened.

70 Without a word he began to scrub the wall, up and down, back and forth, up and down, as high as he could stretch and as low as he could bend.

71 "Ridiculous, oh my Lord, ridiculous!"

72 But you must be certain, his thought said to him. "Yes, one *must* be certain," he replied.

73 He got one wall finished, and then ... He came to another wall.

74 "What time is it?"

75 He looked at the mantel clock. An hour gone. It was five after one. The doorbell rang.

76 Acton froze, staring at the door, the clock, the door, the clock. Someone rapped loudly.

77 A long moment passed. Acton did not breathe. Without new air in his body he began to fail away, to sway; his head roared a silence of cold waves thundering onto heavy rocks.

78 "Hey, in there!" cried a drunken voice. "I know you're in there, Huxley! Open up, dammit! This is Billy-boy, drunk as an owl, Huxley, old pal, drunker than *two* owls."

79 "Go away," whispered Acton soundlessly, crushed against the wall. "Huxley, you're in there, I hear you *breathing!*" cried the drunken voice.

80 "Yes, I'm in here," whispered Acton, feeling long and sprawled and clumsy on the floor, clumsy and cold and silent. "Yes."

81 "Hell!" said the voice, fading away into mist. The footsteps shuffled off. "Hell ..."

82 Acton stood a long time feeling the red heart beat inside his shut eyes, within his head. When at last he opened his eyes he looked at the new fresh wall straight ahead of him and finally got courage to speak. "Silly," he said. "This wall's flawless. I won't touch it. Got to hurry. Got to hurry. Time, time. Only a few hours before those damn-fool friends blunder in!" He turned away.

83 From the corners of his eyes he saw the little webs. When his back was turned the little spiders came out of the woodwork and delicately spun their fragile little half-invisible webs. Not upon the wall at his left, which was already washed fresh, but upon the three walls as yet untouched. Each time he stared directly at them the spiders dropped back into the woodwork, only to spindle out as he retreated. "Those walls are all right," he insisted in a half shout. "I won't *touch* them!"

84 He went to a writing desk at which Huxley had been seated earlier. He opened a drawer and took out what he was looking for. A little magnifying glass Huxley sometimes used for reading. He took the magnifier and approached the wall uneasily.

85 Fingerprints.

86 "But those aren't mine!" He laughed unsteadily. "I *didn't* put them there! I'm *sure* I didn't! A servant, a butler, or a maid perhaps!"

87 The wall was full of them.

88 "Look at this one here," he said. "Long and tapered, a woman's, I'd bet money on it."

89 "Would you?"
90 "I would!"
91 "Are you certain?"
92 "Yes!"
93 "Positive?"
94 "Well – yes."
95 "Absolutely?"
96 "Yes, damn it, yes!"
97 "Wipe it out, anyway, why don't you?"
98 "There, by God!"
99 "Out damned spot, eh, Acton?"
100 "And this one, over here," scoffed Acton. "That's the print of a fat man."
101 "Are you sure?"
102 "Don't start *that* again!" he snapped, and rubbed it out. He pulled off a glove and held his hand up, trembling, in the glary light.
103 "Look at it, you idiot! See how the whorls go? See?"
104 "That proves nothing!"
105 "Oh, all right!" Raging, he swept the wall up and down, back and forth, with gloved hands, sweating, grunting, swearing, bending, rising, and getting redder of face.
106 He took off his coat, put it on a chair.
107 "Two o'clock," he said, finishing the wall, glaring at the clock.
108 He walked over to the bowl and took out the wax fruit and polished the ones at the bottom and put them back, and polished the picture frame.
109 He gazed up at the chandelier.
110 His fingers twitched at his sides.
111 His mouth slipped open and the tongue moved along his lips and he looked at the chandelier and looked away and looked back at the chandelier and looked at Huxley's body and then at the crystal chandelier with its long pearls of rainbow glass.
112 He got a chair and brought it over under the chandelier and put one foot up on it and took it down and threw the chair, violently, laughing, into a corner. Then he ran out of the room, leaving one wall as yet unwashed.
113 In the dining room he came to a table.
114 "I want to show you my Gregorian cutlery, Acton," Huxley had said. Oh, that casual, that *hypnotic* voice!
115 "I haven't time," Acton said. "I've got to see Lily –" 116 "Nonsense, look at this silver, this exquisite craftsmanship."
117 Acton paused over the table where the boxes of cutlery were laid out, hearing once more Huxley's voice, remembering all the touchings and gesturings.
118 Now Acton wiped the forks and spoons and took down all the plaques and special ceramic dishes from the wall itself ...
119 "Here's a lovely bit of ceramics by Gertrude and Otto Natzler, Acton. Are you familiar with their work?"
120 "It is lovely."
121 "Pick it up. Turn it over. See the fine thinness of the bowl, hand-thrown on a turntable, thin as eggshell, incredible. And the amazing volcanic glaze. Handle it, go ahead. I don't mind."
122 HANDLE IT. GO AHEAD. PICK IT UP!

123Acton sobbed unevenly. He hurled the pottery against the wall. It shattered and spread, flaking wildly, upon the floor.

124An instant later he was on his knees. Every piece, every shard of it, must be found. Fool, fool, fool! he cried to himself, shaking his head and shutting and opening his eyes and bending under the table. Find every piece, idiot, not one fragment of it must be left behind. Fool, fool! He gathered them. Are they all here? He looked at them on the table before him. He looked under the table again and under the chairs and the service bureaux and found one more piece by match light and started to polish each little fragment as if it were a precious stone. He laid them all out neatly upon the shining polished table.

125“A lovely bit of ceramics, Acton. Go ahead – *handle* it.”

126He took out the linen and wiped it and wiped the chairs and tables and doorknobs and windowpanes and ledges and drapes and wiped the floor and found the kitchen, panting, breathing violently, and took off his vest and adjusted his gloves and wiped the glittering chromium ... “I want to show you my house, Acton,” said Huxley. “Come along ...” And he wiped all the utensils and the silver faucets and the mixing bowls, for now he had forgotten what he had touched and what he had not. Huxley and he had lingered here, in the kitchen, Huxley prideful of its array, covering his nervousness at the presence of a potential killer, perhaps wanting to be near the knives if they were needed. They had idled, touched this, that, something else – there was no remembering what or how much or how many – and he finished the kitchen and came through the hall into the room where Huxley lay.

127He cried out.

128He had forgotten to wash the fourth wall of the room! And while he was gone the little spiders had popped from the fourth unwashed wall and swarmed over the already clean walls, dirtying them again! On the ceilings, from the chandelier, in the corners, on the floor, a million little whorled webs hung billowing at his scream! Tiny, tiny little webs, no bigger than, ironically, your – finger!

129As he watched, the webs were woven over the picture frame, the fruit bowl, the body, the floor. Prints wielded the paper knife, pulled out drawers, touched the table top, touched, touched, touched everything everywhere.

130He polished the floor wildly, wildly. He rolled the body over and cried on it while he washed it, and got up and walked over and polished the fruit at the bottom of the bowl. Then he put a chair under the chandelier and got up and polished each little hanging fire of it, shaking it like a crystal tambourine until it tilted bell wise in the air. Then he leaped off the chair and gripped the doorknobs and got up on other chairs and swabbed the walls higher and higher and ran to the kitchen and got a broom and wiped the webs down from the ceiling and polished the bottom fruit of the bowl and washed the body and doorknobs and silverware and found the hall banister and followed the banister upstairs.

131Three o’clock! Everywhere, with a fierce, mechanical intensity, clocks ticked! There were twelve rooms downstairs and eight above. He figured the yards and yards of space and time needed. One hundred chairs, six sofas, twenty-seven tables, six radios. And under and on top and behind. He yanked furniture out away from walls and,

sobbing, wiped them clean of years-old dust, and staggered and followed the banister up, up the stairs, handling, erasing, rubbing, polishing, because if he left one little print it would reproduce and make a million more! – and the job would have to be done all over again and now it was four o'clock! – and his arms ached and his eyes were swollen and staring and he moved sluggishly about, on strange legs, his head down, his arms moving, swabbing and rubbing, bedroom by bedroom, closet by closet ...

132 They found him at six-thirty that morning.

133 In the attic.

134 The entire house was polished to a brilliance. Vases shone like glass stars. Chairs were burnished. Bronzes, brasses, and coppers were all a glint. Floors sparkled. Banisters gleamed.

135 Everything glittered. Everything shone, everything was bright!

136 They found him in the attic, polishing the old trunks and the old frames and the old chairs and the old carriages and toys and music boxes and vases and cutlery and rocking horses and dusty Civil War coins. He was half through the attic when the police officer walked up behind him with a gun.

137 "Done!"

138 On the way out of the house, Acton polished the front doorknob with his handkerchief and slammed it in triumph!