



“All we know is here we are”: Gothic Aspects of Ray  
Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*

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*Abstract:* The article discusses implications of the way Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) blends elements of the gothic with more traditional Golden Age science-fiction traditions. I argue that Bradbury’s use of the gothic highlights the fundamental conflicts between approaches to the genre that are, on the one hand, more formulaic, optimistic, extrapolatory, or fantasy-oriented SF, and, on the other, those that which addresses fundamental questions of the human experience. I conclude that his work’s ability to meaningfully juxtapose elements of SF and the gothic allowed it to transcend simplistic genre conventions and become a meaningful addition to the body of important American literature.

*Keywords:* Science fiction, Gothic, Ray Bradbury, Mars

## **Introduction: Ray Bradbury’s Gothic Science Fiction**

It is a bit of a cliché to point out that although Ray Bradbury was prolific and his sales remain strong, more highbrow literary criticism tends to ignore him. The traditional explanation for this is that Bradbury’s work contains something special that allows it to surpass the basic contours of science fiction, and that this complexity left publishers and critics a little confused about how to handle his work. “I don’t exist,” Bradbury told Jeffrey A. Frank in 1989, listing the more serious publications that had ignored him since his breakout success in the 1950s; “They don’t know where my handle is, they don’t know how to pick me up,” he concluded (Frank). Maybe it’s true that Bradbury deserved more critical attention from the *New York Review* or *Harper’s*, but his positive review from Christopher Isherwood concludes with unambiguous praise, telling readers, “the sheer lift and power of a truly original imagination exhilarates you, almost in spite of yourself. So, I urge even the squeamish to try Mr. Bradbury. His is a

very great and unusual talent" (58). It's certain that Bradbury owns an important plank in the history of SF, and what makes him so essential to the genre, ironically, is the same thing that made it hard for establishment literary critics to find his handle – that is, the way his work integrates gothic elements that expand his fiction beyond formulaic Golden Age conventions and, in the process, extend his vision beyond the immature, extrapolatory pulp that defined much of the genre, which allows him to address much more fundamentally complex questions of the human experience.

Of course, readers widely acknowledge the link between Bradbury and the gothic. Critics have long understood books such as *Dark Carnival* (1947) or *Something Wicked this Way Comes* (1962) to be examples of American gothic with roots reaching back to Hawthorne and Poe.<sup>1</sup> Further, more than a few critics recognise gothic horror as Bradbury's chief mode. Robin Anne Reid, for instance, writes in *Ray Bradbury: A Critical Companion* that the "overall plot device of the everyday world being affected by a dark supernatural force is common in gothic novels and a favorite convention of Bradbury's" (83). Another important feature of the more general nature of gothic literatures, and one Bradbury's best work features, however, is that they express a basic fear that the subconscious will stop functioning as a repository of repressed knowledge and the horrors we've locked away will return to haunt us. Valdine Clemens argues that the gothic largely revolves around something "held at bay because it threatens the established order of things" (4). This concern takes on special significance in Golden Age SF, which largely organised itself around the optimistic faith that humanity could leave its worst aspects behind and travel to the stars unencumbered, as it were, by sin; what this essay ultimately purposes to illustrate is that focusing on Bradbury's use of gothic conventions in *The Martian Chronicles* can reveal the ways he interrogates that optimism in order to offer readers a more realistic and sophisticated sense of how exploring outer space might influence our sense of what J. G. Ballard has famously labeled "inner space" (2).<sup>2</sup> In particular, Bradbury seems to have been interested in the ways gothic might allow his work to probe the sometimes disturbingly disconnected relationship between objective and subjective senses of reality. Indeed, one of the key gothic features in American literature is that it allows a story to consciously examine the often subconscious struggle (and almost as often failure) to adequately reconcile the different ways people understand the universe and their place in it. All of the narratives that make up *The Martian Chronicles* contain gothic elements; however, this paper will primarily focus on those stories that use them specifically to caution against unwarranted confidence by showing that the boundary between subjective and objective understandings of the world(s) around us is a lot more fragile than most people usually like to admit.

## **"The Earth Men": Gothic Sensibility and the Problem of Objective Reality**

"The Earth Men", the fourth chapter of *The Martian Chronicles*, in which the eponymous protagonists are mistaken for deranged Martians, shows this with special

<sup>1</sup> For example, Burton Pollin makes an interesting case for the ways Poe influenced Bradbury, and Steven E. Kagle also connects Bradbury to the American Romantic period more generally.

<sup>2</sup> While Ballard's 1962 argument certainly receives more attention, J. B. Priestley appears to have first coined the phrase in his 1957 essay "They Come from Inner Space", published in *Thoughts in the Wilderness*.

clarity. It depicts what Geoffrey Whitehall describes – although he is writing about SF much more broadly – as “an epistemological and ontological crisis whereby contemporary events are exceeding the conventional categories of understanding” (169). For all the conventional categories of understanding things – genre, logic, or scientific positivism, for instance – Bradbury’s approach to the human (and sometimes Martian) experience of his characters is to reveal the intrinsic contradictions that cause those so-called discrete categories to cross lines, overlap, and double back into each other. Facing this reality this forces characters, as well as readers, to consider the somewhat terrifying possibility that they can’t simply filter their complex, sometimes irrational experiences through some supposedly proper epistemological framework and expect to reach a satisfying understanding.

When the Earth Men – a name they give themselves – arrive on Mars, they are struck by the natives’ failure to recognise the extent of their accomplishment. In fact, the first Martian they encounter scolds them for getting dirt on her clean floor. “This,” Captain Williams of New York City shouts, “is no time for trivialities ... we should be celebrating” (32). The Martian housewife, however, remains unimpressed and sends the men of the second Mars expedition to see another Martian who, she says, might be interested.

They shuffle from house to house, until finally they meet a group of Martians who respond appropriately to their news. Upon announcing that they are from Earth:

The rafters trembled with shouts and cries. The people, rushing forward, waved and shrieked happily, knocking down tables, swarming, rollicking, seizing the four Earth Men, lifting them swiftly to their shoulders ...

The Earth Men were so stunned that they rode the toppling shoulders for a full minute before they began to laugh and shout at each other:

“Hey! This is more like it!”

“This is the life! Boy! Yay! Yow! Whoopee!” (39)

Their colonising discourse is finally affirmed and the captain, the narrator tells us, is almost moved to tears, but their enthusiasm is dampened considerably when one of the Martians announces, “It’s good to see another man from Earth. I am from Earth also” (40). As it turns out, they are in an asylum for Martians who suffer under the delusion that they are Earth Men. All Martians are telepaths and some of the more susceptible Martians had lost the ability to distinguish their own realities from the realities they telepathically received from the spacemen of the first Earth expedition years before.

This failure to maintain strict boundaries between reality and imagination is one of the most fundamentally gothic qualities of Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*. Discussing the same aspect of Walpole’s gothic mainstay *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), George Haggerty writes, “In turning from the objective world as represented in the works of contemporary novelists toward a vision of reality less obviously empirical, Walpole was participating in a shift of sensibilities” (380). The gothic, Haggerty submits, is primarily focused on the discomfiting “paradox between private fantasy and public fact” to the extent that “Gothic writers seemed caught between proving the reality of their fantasy and making that fantasy powerful” (381). Similarly, Bradbury’s characters often find themselves brought short by their inability to confirm reality even to themselves. This, of course, is closely connected to Freud’s idea of the uncanny, “which is terrifying,” David Morris explains, “precisely because it cannot be accurately explained” (300). When Bradbury’s work recognises this, it transcends the simpler

matters of terrestrial or alien geographies and attempts to chart the more complex landscapes of human perception and understanding. Doing so, Bradbury anticipates the somewhat provocative argument that J. G. Ballard will make a decade later in *New Worlds Science Fiction*, first lamenting that one outcome of the US/USSR space race was “likely to be an even closer identification, in the mind of the general public, of SF with the rocket ships and ray guns of Buck Rogers”, and going on to contend that, unless “the medium drastically re-energizes itself in the near future”, the entire genre “will be relegated to the same anemic limbo occupied by other withering literary forms such as ghost and detective stories” (2–3). Ballard holds up *The Martian Chronicles* as an example of the proper course for SF in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, declaring that “Ray Bradbury can accept the current magazine conventions and transform even so hackneyed a subject as Mars into an enthralling private world” (3). While perhaps highlighting an overlap between Walpole’s gothic and Ballard’s futurism, either (or both) of these approaches emphasise the value of reading Bradbury’s work with an eye toward the ways it exceeds the more prosaic conventions of SF by exploring the mysterious interiority to which the gothic gives it access.

Of course, it can still be tempting to read *The Martian Chronicles* as simple, romantic SF – practically propaganda for an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century brand of optimism and positivism that imagined that human technological progress was both limitless and always for the good. Bradbury’s characters do go to Mars, after all. But a darker strain of doubt also threads its way through the book. The most obvious shadow cast by this technological abundance is, of course, the nearly constant threat of nuclear holocaust back on Earth. And, while the stories handle it with more grace than a simple morality play, the balance of technological marvels such as space travel against technological horrors like the atom bomb set the stage for a story arc that is still much more concerned with inner states than outer space. Along these lines, and also considering questions about innovations that don’t traditionally fit into what many readers might think of as technology, William F. Touponce sees Bradbury’s work as questioning perhaps even the basic fabric of 20<sup>th</sup>-century life, attempting to “use the tropes of fantastic fiction to get at the heart of the matter: the condition of being modern”; he even argues that Bradbury “devised stories in which the experience of the supernatural is linked in complex ways to the experience of society under capitalism [and to the ways] industrial (and later consumer capitalism) was undermining the very possibility of extended and integrated experience” (8, 9). Similarly, Kevin Hoskinson, alluding to McCarthy’s Red Scare and Stalin’s Iron Curtain, points out that, even as Bradbury was working on these stories, “events transformed the character of America from a supremely confident, Nazi-demolishing world power to a country with deep insecurities” (346). In short, in *The Martian Chronicles* Bradbury works to combine gothic and Golden Age SF sensibilities, which might seem to be irreconcilable opposites, because he understands that trying to fit these two world views together is one of the ways to wrestle with the similarly paradoxical experience of a 20<sup>th</sup> century in which technology and progress represent both the salvation and the destruction of humanity.

Approaching *Chronicles* in this fashion makes it clear that one of the private fantasies that the novel addresses most directly is the technological positivism that understood that scientific advancement was invariably for the good of humanity. Although the longing and nostalgia in parts of this book are equal to anything in the work of Sherwood Anderson, for instance, other parts seem to offer something more like Walt Disney’s futurist vision of the space age. In a sense, Bradbury’s story seems

to be providing two very different perspectives: one in which human technological progress allows humanity to embark on revolutionary and outward-looking journeys of discovery, and another that blinds us to an inward, more retrospective set of values that maintain traditional, community-oriented ideals and is suspicious of the rapid change that the rocket age threatens. *Chronicles* reveals the height of its power, however, when it seems to acknowledge that neither of these approaches is more likely than the other to lead to anything we might call the real truth. In *Return of the Repressed*, Valdine Clemens argues that gothic fiction “provides an antidote for the excessively cerebral” and, thus, the value of the gothic in a text, according to Clemens, is its ability to “stress the fragility of civilized constructs ... and demonstrate that the world is much older and less anthropocentric than we would like to think” (4). Using this approach, allows for the argument that Bradbury’s gothic SF is a response to hubris – that it attempts to put us back in our place when we become tempted to think that we have figured everything out.

*Chronicles* does this by undermining both knee-jerk optimism regarding the relationship between technology and human progress and confidence in older truths – in this case, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century technology of psychology. Bradbury deflates his explorers’ confidence in their triumph by having the Martians see them as just another collection of delusional paranoids. But the narrative likewise serves Dr. Xxx, who runs the Martian lunatic ward, a bit of gothic comeuppance. Since Martians are telepathic, they can share each other’s hallucinations, which one might imagine severely tests one’s ability to distinguish truth from fantasy. Writing off every bit of proof that the Earth Men are what they say, the doctor remains steadfastly convinced that his new patients are simply sick Martians. When Captain Williams shows him the rocket ship they used to travel to Mars, the Doctor responds, “You have done a most complete job! The task of projecting your psychotic image life into the mind of another via telepathy and keeping the hallucinations from becoming sensually weaker is almost impossible ... Your insanity is beautifully complete!” (44–45). Unfortunately for the Earth Men, there is no cure for this sort of illness on Mars, and thus the doctor produces a small pistol and kills them, saving them, he thinks, from further misery. When the ship remains, the doctor, who can’t conceive the possibility that it’s real, draws the only conclusion available to him, that he has been infected by this incurable madness, and so kills himself as well.

Like many of the great examples of gothic literature, Bradbury’s story is a cautionary tale. It reminds readers of the things they don’t know, and emphasises that humanity’s arrogance can be as monstrous as anything lurking beyond the pale circle of light cast by its tiny fire. The lesson here is all the more clear for being told against the backdrop of a second and considerably more powerful generation of American nuclear weapons coming out of Operation Sandstone in the Pacific Proving Grounds; overconfidence in any one particular truth, Bradbury’s story warns, is suicide.

“The Earth Men” uses the standard gothic device of emphasising the difficulty people often have (although rarely admit) distinguishing between objective and subjective realities. The world of the gothic is one without orderly, rational truths. Rather, it expresses reality in subjective and disorganised ways that thwart the essential epistemologies that underpin 20<sup>th</sup>-century social and technological positivism. The vignette builds around a frame of overturned expectations, which reveals the folly of all the characters’ confidence in their understanding of the world around them. In its ability to force them all to confront a radically difficult perspective, one totally incompatible with the “facts” that serve as the foundation of their sense of

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what reality is, "The Earth Men" reveals what is most essentially gothic in Bradbury's collection.

### **"The Third Expedition": Our Gothic Selves**

The echoes of imperial discourse that reverberate throughout the stories that make up *The Martian Chronicles* add a crucial element to understanding the way the book operates within a gothic sensibility. On the surface, the text seems to emphasise the romance of a (space) age of discovery. The rockets are powerful and the explorers who ride in them brave and wholesome men – the best Earth has to offer. Launching the rocket to Mars is similarly evocative of adventure and romance. "The crowd at the Ohio field had shouted and waved their hands up into the sunlight," the narrator says at the beginning of "The Third Expedition"; the rocket "was a thing of beauty and strength" (49). Yet Bradbury's explorers don't discover strange landscapes or alien cultures so much as they find an increasingly familiar world. "We came sixty million miles," the third expedition's captain complains to an unimpressed Martian (49). What these bold explorers don't realise is that their journeys are more and more obviously inward. This is something that "The Third Expedition" emphasises in an especially interesting way. First published in *Planet Stories* as "Mars is Heaven!" in 1948, the sixth story in *The Martian Chronicles*, now called "The Third Expedition", is set in April 2000. After an arduous trip, during which the Earth rocket "moved in the midnight waves of space like a pale sea leviathan; it had passed the ancient moon and thrown itself onward into one nothingness after another", the men of the third expedition land on Mars (49). The narrator's description of the journey clearly suggests a 19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic conception of exploration: that brave travelers leave their familiar homes, trek through empty wilderness, and find a strange land on the other side. What the men of the third expedition find on Mars, however, is a quaint mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century American town.

Hinkston, one of the three crew who leave the ship to investigate, develops a wild theory that the town is made up of "people in the year 1905 who hated war and got together with scientists in secret and built a rocket" (54). As the situation unfolds, however, it seems to become even more improbable than Hinkston's fantasy. Knocking on the door of the closest house, the three scouts meet "a kind-faced lady ... dressed in the sort of dress you might expect in the year 1909", who somewhat impatiently explains to the men that they are in the town of Green Bluff, Illinois – the captain's home town. (55). Unwilling to believe, Captain Black begins to take Hinkston's theory more seriously, imagining that had anti-war refugees landed on Mars, they might have, over the years, fallen prey to a mass hysteria that led them to believe they were still on Earth. Black's logical explanation, however, falls apart only a moment later when Lustig, the third member of the scouting party, rushes off toward what he recognises as his grandparents' house from back on Earth. The grandparents are home, of course, and invite all three men in for iced tea. Black's attempts to develop a logical approach to this Martian experience takes another blow when Lustig's grandmother declares that they have been on Mars since they died back on Earth. "All we know is here we are, alive again and no questions asked," she declares, strongly implying that logic isn't what the Captain needs – that the situation won't improve with explanation. Hinkston takes the bait, asking the obvious question, "Is this heaven?" (59). Abandoning material-rational theories and groping for a spiritual context with which to frame the

experience, Hinkston seems to be signaling his willingness to accept that his Martian experience is not one that he's going to understand through pure reason.

The captain, who earlier claimed to be “infinitely more suspicious” than the younger men in the expedition, doesn't seem quite ready to give up on reason (52). But his guard drops entirely when he sees his brother, who died in 1939. Overtaken by his desire to return to the simpler past when his family remained whole, the captain seems entirely to lose his sense of command. Introducing his brother to the others, he increasingly less rationally “appealed now to Lustig and Hinkston, holding the stranger's hand. ‘This is my brother Edward ... My brother!’” (60). When Edward tells him that their parents are alive on Mars, Captain Black feels “as if he had been hit by a mighty weapon” and, abandoning his command altogether, races home with his long-dead brother (61). The details here are especially significant. In exactly the same moment the captain discovers the truth and loses the power to see it – that the Martians (and the narrative itself, to some degree) are using the emotional uncertainty of nostalgia to derail the third expedition and its attempts to discover the real Mars. It would be easy to think of untangling the confusion between subjective and objective as the point of the third expedition's experience on the Red Planet, but the message is also perhaps more subtle than that. At what appears to be his dead parents' house, Black finds something of a Norman Rockwell fantasy in the making: “There was a big turkey dinner,” the narrator begins, but then goes on in slightly different direction, finishing with, “and time flowing on” (62). It's this second bit of description that stands out, suggesting that central aspect of the idyllic pleasure of the scene is an impossible combination of time simultaneously stopping and flowing.

The echoes of age-of-discovery discourse that reverberate throughout the stories in *The Martian Chronicles* add another crucial element to understanding the way this novel makes use of the gothic. The second expedition reveals this when the captain's main concern upon arrival on Mars is that he receives proper recognition. The narrator's handling of the third expedition's journey similarly evokes a kind of adventure and romance, as the crowds watching “shouted and waved their hands up into the sunlight” as they watched the rocket, “a thing a beauty and strength”, take off for Mars (49). The men of the third expedition, however, find not strange landscapes and alien cultures, but a strangely familiar scene. “We came sixty million miles,” Captain Williams of the second expedition complains to the Martians, who don't seem to recognise the magnificence of his achievement; the men of the third expedition also find the romance of their adventure undercut. The uncanny, David Morris explains, “derives its terror not from something externally alien or unknown – on the contrary – from something strangely familiar that defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it” (307). This kind of strange familiarity must be exactly what the men of the third expedition experience when they land on Mars only to find that it's just like home. As other scholars have pointed out, however, in “The Third Expedition”, the uncanny experience is one that the humans and Martians share. The explorers from Earth – Captain Black in particular – can't shake the strangeness of encountering a perfect American town peopled with their dead friends and relatives, but the Martians, too, seem to feel a sort of strange dread at the events in the story. If Black's suspicions are correct and the Martians were only using the simulation of an Earth town to lull the explorers into dropping their defenses, the alien Martians maintain their disguise for a curiously long time.

The morning after murdering all 16 men of the third expedition, the Martians (still in human form) hold a mass funeral. Everyone forms a tearful line and the mayor “makes a sad speech”, the narrator explains, observing that his face was “sometimes

looking like the mayor, sometimes looking like something else" (66). Similarly, the people in the crowd seem to be melting away, "their faces shifting like wax, shimmering as all things shimmer on a hot day" (66). Speaking to one of the more palpably gothic elements of this scene, Eric Rabkin argues that throughout the book, when a human expedition arrives on Mars, "science is left behind; the imagination wins", but this isn't an argument for reading *The Martian Chronicles* as only a simplistic comparison of dream and reality (98). Looking at the funeral at the end of "The Third Expedition" through Rabkin's lens shows that the Martians themselves are also caught up in the imaginary. They continue to simulate human beings long after there is a practical reason to do so, and even seem to feel genuine grief over the men's death. The performance of that feeling, however, is noticeably off key. "The brass band" that the narrator tells us is part of the funeral procession "marched and slammed back into town" (66).

The emotional flat note upon which the story ends suggests that, as much as the astronauts were taken in by the telepathic illusions, the Martians have perhaps also lost some part of their ability to distinguish their real selves from the fake identities they donned to defend themselves from human incursion. As "Ylla", the second story in the collection, seems to predict, the earthlings' desires – conscious, subconscious or otherwise – contaminate the Martian sense of reality to such an extent that the Martians can't hold on to their own identities. The men of the third expedition cross the vast emptiness of space to find something familiar, but impossible to understand. Likewise, their encounter with the expedition seems to have left the Martians of Green Bluff, Illinois no longer capable of fully mapping the borders of their own sense of identity and reality. Considering the gothic resonance on both sides of this encounter, the text complicates an already very complex subtext concerning the rebalancing of spiritual and material concerns and reminds the reader of the most fundamental aspect of gothic literature: that the repressed will return.

### **"There Will Come Soft Rain": The Gothic in the Machine**

Critics like to discuss the homage to Poe in "Usher II", but "There Will Come Soft Rains", the penultimate story of *The Martian Chronicles*, is maybe the most profoundly gothic in the collection. Absent any live humans, the empty house becomes the main character, something the narrative emphasises with descriptions full of the language of affect – tempting the readers to empathize with the automata that are the house's sole occupants. There is a chorus of voices and a lively flourish of activity; the clock sings a jingle when it's time to get up, but is "afraid that nobody would" (200). Another voice in the living room announces the date and adds reminders about birthdays and bills. In the kitchen, the stove produces toast, eggs, and bacon with a "hissing sigh" and the weatherbox "sang quietly 'Rain, rain, go away'" (205). Readers will realise later the reason there are no people, but before getting to that it's worth pointing out that these devices are oddly conflicted; they sing, but are afraid; they hiss and sigh; they speak, but are also quiet. This ambivalence is the first clue that something has gone wrong.

When the story's attention moves outside, the problem reveals itself. The narrative gaze follows the house as it runs through its daily routines and when the sprinklers "whirled up in golden fountains, filling the soft morning air with scatterings of brightness", there is a much less delightful scene in the background. The burned face



of the west wall is evenly blackened except for a gruesome mural of silhouettes: “a man mowing a lawn ... a woman bent to pick a flower ... a small boy, hands flung into the air ... and opposite him a girl, hands raised to catch a ball which never came down” (206). This tableau of wholesome, suburban family life works to illustrate an American dream that Bradbury’s nuclear war of 2005 brought to a horrifyingly sudden end. “The house stood alone in a city of rubble,” the narrator goes on to explain, “At night the ruined city gave off a radioactive glow which could be seen for miles” and both the city and the house serve as monuments to similar strains of the high-tech hubris that led to the total destruction of the Earth (206).

Edward J. Gallagher reads “Soft Rains” sardonically as a “a fitting climax to the stories of humanity’s technological achievement”, suggesting that in its fevered rush to use state-of-the-art gadgets to solve every little problem of living, humanity ensured that it could not go on living at all (79). Ironically, while arguing against the legitimacy of gothic SF as a genre, Roger Luckhurst articulates a similar point. Science fiction, he argues, “projects the future by the rational extrapolation of the present”, while the “Gothic has the present irrationally dominated by the resurgence of the past” (21).<sup>3</sup> While Luckhurst’s two definitions are clear and sensible, it isn’t out of the question, given that the present is also the past’s future, that the wasteland earth has become in the present of “Soft Rains” is dominated by a past whose irrational technological optimism put the world on course for Armageddon. Gallagher and Luckhurst’s arguments are certainly concerned with different aspects of SF, but their ideas converge at an interesting detail. Luckhurst’s approach – while certainly focused on the way SF and the gothic diverge – also concentrates on the way SF forces readers through “strong special zones, weird topologies that produce anomalies, destroy category, and dissolve or reconstitute identity” (23). His aim is to demonstrate how SF can be a useful way to explore complex and deep interconnectivity that emphasises “not just a conjunction of spaces, but a temporal pile-up, where different times coexist or slice through each other”, but his description has a certain parallel to the gothic as well (31). Although perhaps not entirely in line with Luckhurst’s aims, one of the benefits of such a vision is that it allows the reader to abandon the misapprehension that science and rational cognition are always the superior framework for understanding the world. Gallagher’s argument, on the other hand, is much more specifically focused on what he identifies as Bradbury’s “hellfire and brimstone sermon” (82). The nuclear wasteland in the background is certainly cautionary, but the image of suburban domesticity burned into the exterior of the house is an even more important warning that a culture built around ever increasing technological mastery of the world will inexorably steer a course toward some sort of techno-apocalypse. The seeds of humanity’s own destruction, Gallagher argues, are visible in the seemingly banal conveniences that turn the home into a utopian island separated from anything so awkward as community, or the natural rhythms of life. Both readings underscore the way *The Martian Chronicles* challenges the assumption that science and technology represent the best routes to domestic comfort, an idea that seems to be at the forefront of much of the more hackneyed pulp-era SF that preceded Bradbury’s work.

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<sup>3</sup> Ursula K. LeGuin casts serious doubt on the notion of SF creating value for itself by projecting realistic visions of the future, writing that the methods such fiction use “resemble those of a scientist who feeds large doses of a purified and concentrated food additive to mice, in order to predict what may happen to people who eat it in small quantities for a long time. The outcome seems almost inevitably to be cancer. So does the outcome of extrapolation ... Almost anything carried to its logical extreme becomes depressing, if not carcinogenic” (LeGuin xxiii).

The images of the family rendered on the wall seem to preserve the achievements of rational, technological, 21<sup>st</sup>-century progress, but they also thoroughly locate the family in the wasteland that the entire Earth has become, forcing readers to recognise that the idealised suburban arcadia and the radioactive ruins are aspects of the same reality. The horrors we try to repress in order to maintain our sense of stability and improvement, this scene seems to suggest, can't be buried or forgotten. The story keenly drives this point home when, later in the day, the automated systems begin to break down. When a tree falls through a window and shatters a bottle of solvent near the automatic stove, the whole house catches fire. Mechanised systems leap into action to save the house: "water pumps shot water from the ceiling," the narrator breathlessly relates; "scurrying water rats squeaked from the walls, pistoled their water, and ran for more. And the wall sprays let down showers of mechanical rain" (210). The next morning the house continues, as best it can, the ritual from the beginning of the story, but the fire has damaged the mechanism so that it's stuck repeating "Today is August 5, 2026, today is August 5, 2026, today is ..." (211). Gallagher points out that this final image illustrates the way that the house is "destined to become further and further out of sync with nature ... there can be no hope of life here. Mechanical time stands still while the external rhythms of nature move on" (80). Distinguishing between mechanical and natural time, Gallagher's argument suddenly lines up with Luckhurst's broader concerns about taxonomy and hybrid space. Although taking two very different positions, both critics seem to be arguing for an approach to writing like Bradbury's that emphasises not so much its allegiance to objective, scientific models, but something broader, with room for more complex and organic models that might allow for multiple, even conflicting, perspectives.

Although it might not seem extraordinarily important, the Sarah Teasdale poem that gives the story its title is an interesting allusion, reinforcing the idea that humanity must move forward with heart as well as brains, and also stressing the story's connection to a more explicitly gothic tradition. "There Will Come Soft Rains", which the house's system identifies as long-dead Mrs. McClellan's favorite, begins with images of birds and frogs and wild plums, but by the fourth couplet, which proclaims, "And not one will know of the war, not one/Will care at last when it is done", the poem's thematic emphasis clearly shifts (209).<sup>4</sup> But Teasdale's poem isn't a simple fantasy of natural peace. The definite article in the first half of the fourth couplet is the first hint that this world is not free from war at all, and the second half of the couplet takes advantage of its enjambment to transform innocent-seeming images of the first three stanzas into something else. Rather than a naïve fantasy of a world without war, the poem, in fact, imagines instead a world without human beings – a darker (although perhaps more realistic) vision that seems to argue that so long as humans inhabit the Earth there will be war. Returning to Bradbury's narrative, the silhouettes of Mrs. McClellan and her family burned into the wall by the nuclear blasts that have extinguished all human life on Earth seem to bear mute testimony to Teasdale's vision; however, in Bradbury's version no life at all remains. Rather than the poem's admittedly grim image of a natural world capable of repairing itself only after human violence has rid the world of them, Bradbury can only offer a sterile, radioactive heap, haunted by the broken-down remnants of the techno-consumerist human ways of life that made war inevitable in the first place. The world the McClellan family inhabited

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<sup>4</sup> A response to the American entry into WWI, Teasdale's poem was first published in *Harper's* in 1918, and then again in the collection *Flame and Shadow* in 1920.

was one that looked forward so vigorously that it couldn't hold on to those valuable aspects of the past that might have steered it in a better direction. For most of the book, Bradbury's Mars is equally haunted by the millennia-old ruins of Martian cities and by an imperialist urge to recreate Earth on top of them. If the McClellans and their ilk repressed their consciousness of the self-destructiveness implicit in racing toward a technologically superior future that can only improve if people continuously devalue the past, the human settlers on Mars are also repressing the way their stubborn attempt to force Mars into becoming a new Earth, rather than adopt a Martian way of life, only increases the danger of duplicating past blunders.

Although the book seems to end on something more like an optimistic note, even then Bradbury's gothic sensibilities stand out in the way "The Million Year Picnic" balances the haunting memory of a devastated Earth with a pioneer's optimistic vision of Mars. Part of a small contingent of refugees who launched personal rockets at the start of the war, the unnamed family's arrival on a now twice-emptied Mars signals a genuine attempt not to colonise the planet with external values, but actually start over altogether. A focus on the perspective of Timothy, the oldest child, allows the narrative to begin in memory. Although the family has already arrived on Mars, the narrator tells us that Timothy "remembered the night before they left Earth, the hustling and hurrying ... the talk of vacation" (212). Although the nuclear war has already consigned the planet to memory, it belongs to a past that isn't quite yet in the past, and thus exerts an uncanny influence on the present. It could be that this is an effort to achieve the sort of detachment necessary to consider something as horrible as planetary-level destruction, but it seems more likely that this strategy highlights a past-in-present sensibility that many scholars have argued is a central aspect of gothic literature. In other words, opening the story with Timothy's memory of Earth suggests that even though Dad's plan is to bring family to Mars to "turn away from all that back on Earth and strike out on a new line", they inevitably bring a bit of Earth with them (221). Furthermore, that Timothy understood Dad's talk of picnics and fishing as cover for the truth, but "said nothing because of his younger brothers" (212), suggests a dizzying moment of meta-narrative in which Timothy understands that his father is creating a story that not only protects the younger children from the gothic truth they're trying to escape but, also, attempts to shape a vision of the future that corrects the errors that have made the past so menacing.

From the moment they arrive, the children clamour to see Martians, and Dad patiently replies, "You'll know them when you see them" (214). After the family settles into one of the cities abandoned by settlers who had returned to Earth to fight in the war, Dad begins burning great stacks of papers. "I'm burning a way of life," he explains, hinting at what might be the text's elusive but primary theme when he goes on, "Life on Earth never settled down to doing anything good. Science ran too far ahead of us too quickly" (220). This is a common theme in dystopian SF, and one Patrick Brantlinger connects to gothic romance. Invoking the famous Goya etching (while arguing with its conclusion), he argues that both genres rely on the notion that reason taken to its extremes "produces monsters", but points out that in gothic-tinged SF, modern technology becomes the monster and the "imagery of lunacy and nightmare becomes the imagery of the external world of machines and mass society" (31). Returning to the story, Dad makes it clear that he feels the same way, explaining that he blew up the family's rocket as part of an attempt to escape the old nightmare in which "people got lost in a mechanical wilderness, like children making over pretty things, gadgets, helicopters, rockets: emphasizing the wrong items, emphasizing

machines instead of how to run the machines" (220). Dad takes on the mantle of something like an Ahab figure – violently pursuing a course of action in the (perhaps vain) hope of righting the past. In this vein, Steven E. Kagle argues that Bradbury will assume his proper place in the American canon once readers recognize that his work is “closer to that of Herman Melville and other nineteenth-century writers of prose romance than it is to twentieth-century writers of science fiction” (Kagle 19). It’s true that elements of “The Million-Year Picnic” do take on a prose style as well as an ideological approach very much like those in *Moby-Dick*, and much of that similarity comes from this use of gothic elements to consider the human conception of the world. An especially lyrical example of this is the passage that describes Mother sitting at the bow of the boat they use to navigate the Martian canals:<sup>5</sup>

She kept looking ahead to see what was there, and, not being able to see it clearly enough, she looked backward toward her husband, and through his eyes, reflected then, she saw what was ahead; and since he added part of himself to this reflection, a determined firmness, her face relaxed and she accepted it and she turned back, knowing suddenly what to look for. (215)

The complex multiplication of reflections here points to an eerie sort of certainty and leaves it unclear whether Mother actually sees the true way forward or if she has become excessively influenced by the strength of Dad’s vision of a future completely freed from history. Having burned the typescript of Earth’s failed experiment, he simultaneously burns with hope for the new Mars. Dad, like an Old Testament prophet, dispenses with the old world and announces: “Now I’m going to show you the Martians” (220). They walk quietly to a nearby canal where Dad points to their reflections in the water. Going back briefly to Kagle’s point, one can’t help but think of Melville’s Ishmael, who spends a significant portion of the “Loomings” chapter meditating on the special nature of water.<sup>6</sup> He concludes that people are drawn to it because of the way they see themselves in it, but he is also careful to make clear that what they see is “the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (Melville 5). Melville’s and Bradbury’s lesson here is as simple as it is essential: to escape the gothic crisis that plagued the human expeditions on Mars for a quarter century, Timothy’s family would have to let the planet change them.

## Conclusion: Bradbury’s Gothic Future

Ultimately, the value of approaching *The Martian Chronicles* through a gothic lens is that such a reading reveals that while Bradbury organises the novel around the often simplistic conventions of genre fiction (Golden Age SF and gothic romance in this case), his complex layering of those conventions allows his fiction to transcend their

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<sup>5</sup> The idea that a network of canals crisscrossed the surface of Mars was introduced by Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli in 1878 and taken up by American Percival Lowell, who used his detailed map of Martian canal systems to support the argument – which he presented in *Scientific American* and *The Atlantic Monthly* – that Mars was inhabited by an advanced civilisation. This initial version of life on Mars shaped many of the fictional accounts of Martian life, including Edgar Rice Burroughs’s influential Barsoom novels.

<sup>6</sup> As Kagle and others have pointed out, Bradbury’s career encountered the white whale in even more explicit ways. He wrote the screenplay for John Huston’s cinematic *Moby-Dick*, which came out in 1956, and wrote a radio-play adaption of the book called “Leviathan” in 1968. He also published, as Kagle puts it, “poems of some length about the creation of *Moby-Dick*” (19).

formulaic limitations. Furthermore, there's something uniquely compelling about the way Bradbury's invocation of a murky gothic undermines the innocent optimism of the SF – setting the story up to be in conflict with itself at the most profound levels.

It might not be too much to suggest that Bradbury is trying to point the way toward the kind of SF (and maybe the kind of readers of SF) that the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would need. The families starting over on Mars in “The Million Year Picnic” must renegotiate their relationship with the past and truly forget the arrogant materialism and narcissistic imperialism that drove early explorers and steered the Earth onto such a disastrous course. The narrator's final observation that “the Martians stared up at them for a long, long silent time from the rippling water” drives home the essential point that the family can only hope to move forward if they embrace a more gothic perspective and acknowledge that the human capacity to control the world is strictly limited (222).

Precisely because of the way it profligately blends types, *The Martian Chronicles* not only asks readers to reject the naïve optimism of the post-war boom and instead approach the world through a more complex and flexible perspective, but it also begins to teach them how. However, understanding this position relies on the reader's willingness to recognise Bradbury's masterful use of the gothic throughout *The Martian Chronicles*. Like the characters in the novel, only by recognising the complexity of our relationship between past and present and accepting a more fluid, less certain sense of the future can we – Bradbury's 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers – hope to escape the fantasy of complete mastery that cultivates the seeds of our self-destruction.

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