

Before You Read

This selection also appears in *Elements of Literature*.

There Will Come Soft Rains

by Ray Bradbury

LITERARY FOCUS: SETTING AS CHARACTER

Usually **setting** is in the background of a story, while characters—people and animals—take care of the action. But what if the setting demands a bigger role? Or even a starring part? In some stories the setting moves out of the background and becomes a character. For example, in a story about a woman lost in the desert, the main **conflict** could be between the person and the setting. The desert may seem to act against the woman like a character—by pounding her with hot sun, threatening her with rattlesnakes, and hiding water from her.

Read on to find out where and when “There Will Come Soft Rains” is set. It’s a setting you probably won’t forget soon.

READING SKILLS: TEXT STRUCTURES (CHRONOLOGY)

Most stories are told in **chronological order**—the events are presented in the order in which they occur. In other words, you learn what happens first, then you learn what happens next, and so on.

In “There Will Come Soft Rains,” the story that follows, the events are told in chronological order. In fact, we learn what happens from one hour to the next.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills

Understand the role of setting.

Reading Skills

Understand chronological order.

Vocabulary Skills

Use context clues.

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

Become familiar with these words before you read “There Will Come Soft Rains.”

paranoia (pəˈrəˌnoɪə) *n.*: mental disorder that causes people to feel unreasonable distrust and suspicion.

The house was so concerned with self-protection that it almost seemed to suffer from paranoia.

cavorting (kəˈvɔrtʰɪŋ) *v.* used as *adj.*: leaping about; frolicking.

Images of panthers could be seen cavorting on the walls of the nursery.

tremulous (tremˈyʊoʊləs) *adj.*: trembling.

The tremulous branches swayed in the night breezes.

oblivious (əˈblɪvʰēəs) *adj.*: unaware.

The mechanical house was oblivious of events in the world outside.

sublime (səˈblɪmʰ) *adj.*: majestic; grand.

The sublime poetry was recited until the very end.

CLARIFYING WORD MEANINGS: WORDS IN CONTEXT

Context refers to the sentence or paragraph in which a word appears. Context clues can help you figure out a word’s meaning. There are different kinds of **context clues**, including definitions, restatements, examples, and contrasts. Here are some examples:

DEFINITION: Something that is **automatic** *works by itself*.

RESTATEMENT: His reflexes were **automatic**. *He didn’t think before acting.*

EXAMPLE: **Automatic** machines have changed the way we live. *Think, for example, of the impact that furnaces, heart-lung machines, and even answering machines have had on our lives.*

CONTRAST: *Unlike regular vacuum cleaners, automatic vacuum cleaners do not need to be pushed or pulled.*

When you come across unfamiliar words in “There Will Come Soft Rains,” look for context clues to help you figure out what those words mean.

There Will Come Soft Rains

Ray Bradbury



Tom Leonard.

INFER

Pause at line 6. Why do you think the house is empty?

IDENTIFY

Circle the details in lines 1–16 that identify the **setting**—the time and place of the story.

7:00

In the living room the voice-clock sang, *Ticktock, 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!*

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

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

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

20 **8:01** *Eight-one, tick-tock, eight-one o’clock, off to school, off to work, run, run, eight-one!* But no doors slammed, no carpets took the soft tread of rubber heels. It was raining outside. The weather box on the front door sang quietly: “Rain, rain, go away; rubbers, raincoats for today . . .” And the rain tapped on the empty house, echoing.

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

30 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.

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

40 Out of warrens¹ 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 moustached 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.

10:00 *Ten o’clock.* The sun came out from behind the rain. The house stood alone in a city of rubble

INFER

What happens—or doesn’t happen—between 8:01 A.M. and 9:15 A.M. that suggests that all is not well with the humans who own this house (lines 19–32)?

INFER

Underline the details in lines 41–45 that tell you how this house is different from the other houses in the neighborhood. What seems to have happened to the city?

1. **warrens** *n.*: small, crowded spaces. The little holes in the ground in which rabbits live are called warrens.

INFER

Write a number, from 1 to 5, over the details describing each of the five silhouettes on the wall of the house. What has caused the five silhouettes to be "burned on wood" (lines 46–60)?

IDENTIFY

Personification is a figure of speech in which an object or animal is spoken of as if it has human qualities. Circle the words and phrases in lines 63–71 that portray the house’s human qualities.

VOCABULARY

paranoia (par’ə-noi’ə) *n.*: mental disorder that causes people to feel unreasonable distrust and suspicion.

INFER

Who are the gods who have gone away (lines 73–75)?

and ashes. This was the one house left standing. At night the ruined city gave off a radioactive glow which could be seen for miles.

Ten-fifteen. The garden sprinklers 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.

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

The gentle sprinkler rain filled the garden with falling light.

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**.

It quivered at each sound, the house did. If a sparrow brushed a window, the shade snapped up. The bird, startled, flew off! No, not even a bird must touch the house!

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.

12:00

Twelve noon.

A dog whined, shivering, on the front porch.

The front door recognized the dog voice and opened.

80 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 whirred angry mice, angry at having to pick up mud, angry at inconvenience.

For not a leaf fragment blew under the door but what the wall panels flipped open and the copper scrap rats flashed swiftly out. The offending dust, hair, or paper, seized in miniature steel jaws, was raced back to the burrows. There, down tubes which fed into the cellar, it was dropped into the sighing vent of an incinerator which sat like evil Baal² in a dark corner.

90 The dog ran upstairs, hysterically yelping to each door, at last realizing, as the house realized, that only silence was here.

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.

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.

100

2:00

Two o'clock, sang a voice.

Delicately sensing decay at last, the regiments of mice hummed out as softly as blown gray leaves in an electrical wind.

Two-fifteen.

The dog was gone.

In the cellar, the incinerator glowed suddenly and a whirl of sparks leaped up the chimney.

VISUALIZE

Re-read lines 77–99. This section is filled with **images**, details that appeal to your senses. Circle three images that appeal to three different senses.

PREDICT

Pause at line 107. Will the house continue to go on doing its work forever? Tell what you think might happen next.

Handwriting lines for prediction.

2. Baal (bā'āl): in the Bible, the god of Canaan, whom the Israelites came to regard as a false god.

IDENTIFY

The children's nursery is vividly described. Underline the details in lines 118–132 that bring that **setting** to life.

VOCABULARY

cavorting (kə-vôrt'īŋ) *v.* used as *adj.*: leaping about; frolicking.

INFER

Flip back through the story, noting the times of day that are called out. Why does Bradbury include the exact times of specific events? How does knowing the exact time increase the **suspense**?

Two thirty-five.

110 Bridge tables sprouted from patio walls. Playing cards fluttered onto pads in a shower of pips.³ Martinis manifested on an oaken bench with egg-salad sandwiches. Music played.

But the tables were silent and the cards untouched.

At four o'clock the tables folded like great butterflies back through the paneled walls.

Four-thirty.

The nursery walls glowed.

120 Animals took shape: yellow giraffes, blue lions, pink antelopes, lilac panthers **cavorting** in crystal substance. The walls were glass. They looked out upon color and fantasy. Hidden films clocked through well-oiled sprockets,⁴ and the walls lived. The nursery floor was woven to resemble a crisp cereal⁵ meadow. Over this ran aluminum roaches and iron crickets, and in the hot, still air butterflies of delicate red tissue wavered among the sharp aromas of animal spoors!⁶ 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 okapi⁷ 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 130 parched weed, mile on mile, and warm endless sky. The animals drew away into thorn brakes⁸ and water holes.

It was the children's hour.



Five o'clock. The bath filled with clear hot water.

- 3. **pips** *n.*: figures on cards.
- 4. **sprockets** *n.*: wheels with points designed to fit into the holes along the edges of a filmstrip.
- 5. **cereal** *n.* used as *adj.*: of grasses that produce grain.
- 6. **spoors** *n.*: animal tracks or droppings.
- 7. **okapi** (ō-kä'pē) *n.*: African animal related to the giraffe but with a much shorter neck.
- 8. **thorn brakes**: clumps of thorns; thickets.

Six, seven, eight o'clock. 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.

140 *Nine o'clock.* The beds warmed their hidden circuits, for nights were cool here.

Nine-five. A voice spoke from the study ceiling:

“Mrs. McClellan, which poem would you like this evening?”

The house was silent.

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. . . .

150 *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;*

160 *And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn
Would scarcely know that we were gone.”*

RETELL

Retell in two or three sentences what is happening in the poem (lines 149–160).

COMPARE & CONTRAST

How is nature in the poem like nature in this story?

VOCABULARY

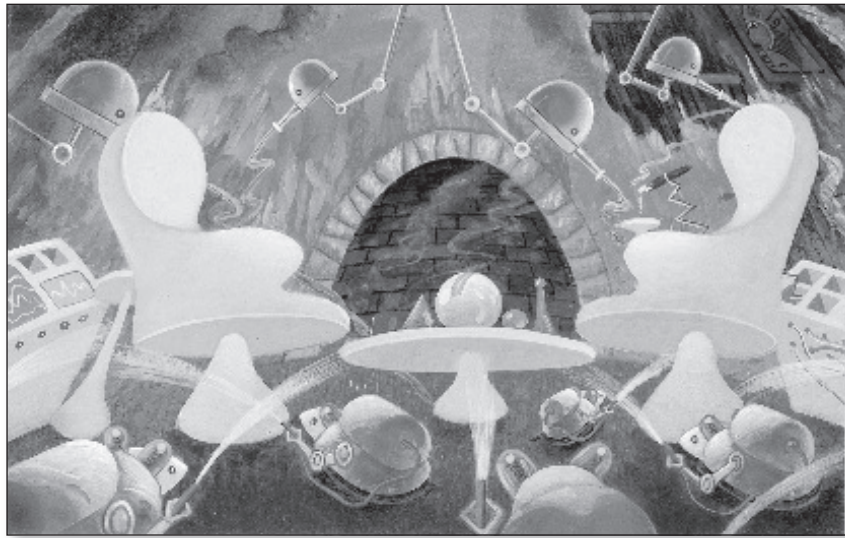
tremulous (trem'yōō-ləs) *adj.*: trembling. *Tremulous* also means “fearful” or “timid.”

PREDICT

Pause at line 165, and tell how you think the house might "die."

INTERPRET

A **conflict** has arisen in the story. On one side of the conflict is the house and all the scientific progress and advanced machinery it stands for. Whom or what is the house battling?



Tom Leonard.

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.

10:00 At ten o'clock the house began to die.

The wind blew. A falling tree bough crashed through the kitchen window. Cleaning solvent,⁹ bottled, shattered over the stove. The room was ablaze in an instant!

"Fire!" screamed a voice. The house lights flashed, 170 water pumps shot water from the ceilings. But the solvent spread on the linoleum, licking, eating, under the kitchen door, while the voices took it up in chorus: "Fire, fire, fire!"

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

The house gave ground as the fire in ten billion angry sparks moved with flaming ease from room to room and then up the stairs. While scurrying water rats squeaked

9. **solvent** *n.*: something that can dissolve something else (here, something that dissolves dirt). *Solvent*, *dissolve*, and *solution* have the same Latin root, *solvere*, which means "to loosen."

180 from the walls, pistoled their water, and ran for more. And the wall sprays let down showers of mechanical rain.

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

The fire crackled up the stairs. It fed upon Picassos and Matisse¹⁰ in the upper halls, like delicacies, baking off the oily flesh, tenderly crisping the canvases into black shavings.

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

190 And then, reinforcements.

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

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

200 But the fire was clever. It had sent flame 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.

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

The house shuddered, oak bone on bone, its bared skeleton cringing from the heat, its wire, its nerves revealed as if a surgeon had torn the skin off to let the red veins and capillaries quiver in the scalded air. Help, help! Fire! Run, run! Heat snapped mirrors like the first brittle winter ice. And the voices wailed, Fire, fire, run, run, like a tragic nursery rhyme, a dozen voices, high, low, like children dying in

10. **Picassos and Matisse**: paintings by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), a famous Spanish painter and sculptor who worked in France, and by Henri Matisse (*än·rē' mä·tēs'*) (1869–1954), a famous French painter.

Notes

IDENTIFY

Underline at least three details in lines 185–202 that **personify** the fire—that make the fire seem human.

FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage aloud at least twice. Read for basic meaning the first time you read. Before you read the passage aloud a second time, mark the lines to show which ones you will read loudly, softly, quickly, or slowly.

VOCABULARY

oblivious (ə·bliv'ē·əs) *adj.*: unaware.

sublime (sə·blīm') *adj.*: majestic; grand.

INFER

Re-read lines 217–228. Why are so many things happening at once in the house?

IDENTIFY

Circle the details in lines 229–240 that describe the final battle between the fire and the house.

210

a forest, alone, alone. And the voices fading as the wires popped their sheathings¹¹ like hot chestnuts. One, two, three, four, five voices died.

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

220

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.

230

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

In the kitchen, an instant before the rain of fire and timber, the stove could be seen making breakfasts at a psychopathic¹² rate, ten dozen eggs, six loaves of toast, twenty dozen bacon strips, which, eaten by fire, started the stove working again, hysterically hissing!

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

240

Smoke and silence. A great quantity of smoke.

11. **sheathings** *n.*: protective coverings.

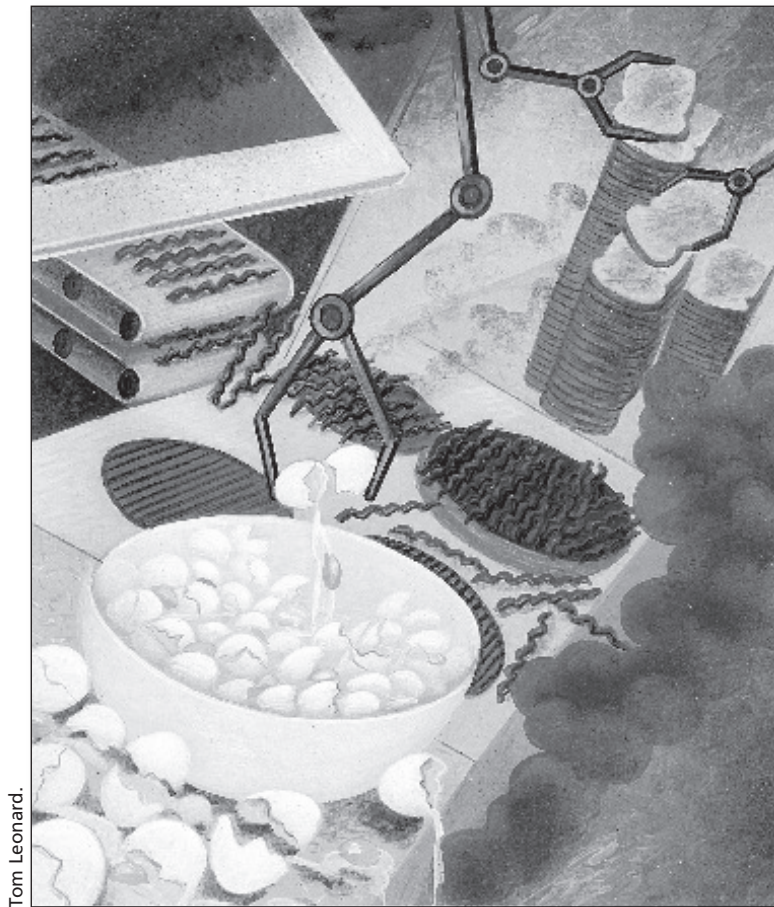
12. **psychopathic** (sī'kō·path'ik) *adj.*: insane.

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:

“Today is August 5, 2026, today is August 5, 2026, today is . . .”

EVALUATE

What idea about scientific advances is Bradbury warning us about? Tell whether or not you agree with his message. Give reasons for your opinion.



Tom Leonard.

There Will Come Soft Rains



Reading Skills
Analyze
chronological
order.

“What’s Really Going On?” Chart In this story, Ray Bradbury describes some hideous events. But as the reader, you have to keep asking yourself the question “What’s *really* going on here?” It is not always clear what is actually happening. For help following the story, use this time chart. Each tinted row contains a time and a main story event that the writer tells us happened at that time. Fill in each untinted box with what you think is *really* happening at that time. The first one is done for you.

Summary of Main Events	What’s Really Going On?
7:00 A clock announces the time. A stove fixes breakfast automatically.	It seems as if the house has been abandoned by people, but it’s still operating as if it’s alive.
8:01 Garage door opens, but no one comes out. House is cleaned by robot mice.	
10:00 House is the only one in the city. Rest of city is in ashes and glows as if from radiation. Images of people are on the wall of the house.	
12:00 A starving dog walks into the house and searches for people. Dog dies in house.	
2:00 Bridge tables pop out from the walls. Nursery walls seem to come alive.	
5:00 Bath fills with water, and dinner dishes are washed. The house prepares for bedtime.	
10:00 House catches fire. Robots try to put out fire. The house burns down.	

Skills Review

There Will Come Soft Rains

VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION

A. Clarifying Meanings: Words in Context Fill in the blanks with the correct Word Bank words. Then, underline the context clues.

1. The _____ music filled our hearts with its greatness.
2. People suffering from _____ tend to look at people with suspicion and distrust.
3. We could see the children jumping around the playground, _____ with their friends.
4. _____, the scared little dog hid behind a chair.
5. The smiling, calm mother seemed _____ to the chaos around her.

Word Bank

paranoia
cavorting
tremulous
oblivious
sublime

B. Reading Comprehension Answer each question below.

1. When and where does this story take place? _____

2. What details tell you the city has been destroyed? _____

3. What happens to the dog? _____

4. At the end of the story, what happens to the house? _____



Vocabulary Skills
Use context clues.