LITERATURE RESOURCE GUIDE
An Introduction to the Literature of the Cold War
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Critical reading is a familiar exercise to students, an exercise that many of them have been engaged in since the first grade. Critical reading forms a significant part of the PSAT, the SAT, the ACT, and both Advanced Placement Tests in English. It is the portion of any test for which students can do the least direct preparation, and it is also the portion that will reward students who have been lifelong readers. Unlike other parts of the United States Academic Decathlon® Test in Literature, where the questions will be based on specific works of literature that the students have been studying diligently, the critical reading passage in the test, as a previously unseen passage, will have an element of surprise. In fact, the test writers usually go out of their way to choose passages from works not previously encountered in high school so as to avoid making the critical reading items a mere test of recall. From one point of view, not having to rely on memory actually makes questions on critical reading easier than the other questions because the answer must always be somewhere in the passage, stated either directly or indirectly, and careful reading will deliver the answer.

Since students can feel much more confident with some background information and some knowledge of the types of questions likely to be asked, the first order of business is for the student to contextualize the passage by asking some key questions. Who wrote it? When was it written? In what social, historical, or literary environment was it written?

In each passage used on a test, the writer’s name is provided, followed by the work from which the passage was excerpted or the date it was published or the dates of the author’s life. If the author is well known to high school students (e.g., Charles Dickens, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jane Austen), no dates will be provided, but the work or the occasion will be cited. For writers less familiar to high school students, dates will be provided. Using this information, students can begin to place the passage into context. As they start to read, students will want to focus on what they know about that writer, his or her typical style and concerns, or that time period, its values and its limitations. A selection from Thomas Paine in the eighteenth century is written against a different background and has different concerns from a selection written by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Toni Morrison writes against a different background from that of Charles Dickens.

Passages are chosen from many different kinds of texts—fiction, biography, letters, speeches, essays, newspaper columns, and magazine articles—and may come from a diverse group of writers, varying in gender, race, location, and time period. A likely question is one that asks readers to speculate on what literary form the passage is excerpted from. The passage itself will offer plenty of clues as to its genre, and the name of the writer often offers clues as well. Excerpts from fiction contain the elements one might expect to find in fiction—descriptions of setting, character, or action. Letters have a sense of sharing thoughts with a particular person. Speeches have a wider audience and a keen awareness of that audience; speeches also have some particular rhetorical devices peculiar to the genre. Essays and magazine articles are usually focused on one topic of contemporary, local, or universal interest.

Other critical reading questions can be divided into two major types: reading for meaning and reading for analysis. The questions on reading for meaning are based solely on understanding what the passage is saying, and the questions on analysis are based on how the writer says what he or she says.

In reading for meaning, the most frequently asked question is one that inquires about the passage’s main idea since distinguishing a main idea from
a supporting idea is an important reading skill. A question on main ideas is sometimes disguised as a question asking for an appropriate title for the passage. Most students will not select as the main idea a choice that is neither directly stated nor indirectly implied in the passage, but harder questions will present choices that do appear in the passage but are not main ideas. Remember that an answer choice may be a true statement but not the right answer to the question.

Closely related to a question on the main idea of a passage is a question about the writer’s purpose. If the passage is fiction, the purpose, unless it is a digression—and even digressions are purposeful in the hands of good writers—will in some way serve the elements of fiction. The passage will develop a character, describe a setting, or advance the plot. If the passage is non-fiction, the writer’s purpose might be purely to inform; it might be to persuade; it might be to entertain; or it might be any combination of all three of these. Students may also be questioned about the writer’s audience. Is the passage intended for a specific group, or is it aimed at a larger audience?

The easy part of the Critical Reading section is that the answer to the question is always in the passage, and for most of the questions, students do not need to bring previous knowledge of the subject to the task. However, for some questions, students are expected to have some previous knowledge of the vocabulary, terms, allusions, and stylistic techniques usually acquired in an English class. Such knowledge could include, but is not limited to, knowing vocabulary, recognizing an allusion, and identifying literary and rhetorical devices.

In addition to recognizing the main idea of a passage, students will be required to demonstrate a more specific understanding. Questions measuring this might restate information from the passage and ask students to recognize the most exact restatement. For such questions, students will have to demonstrate their clear understanding of a specific passage or sentence. A deeper level of understanding may be examined by asking students to make inferences on the basis of the passage or to draw conclusions from evidence in the passage. In some cases, students may be asked to extend these conclusions by applying information in the passage to other situations not mentioned in the passage.

In reading for analysis, students are asked to recognize some aspects of the writer’s craft. One of these aspects may be organization. How has the writer chosen to organize his or her material? Is it a chronological narrative? Does it describe a place using spatial organization? Is it an argument with points clearly organized in order of importance? Is it set up as a comparison and contrast? Does it offer an analogy or a series of examples? If there is more than one paragraph in the excerpt, what is the relationship between the paragraphs? What transition does the writer make from one paragraph to the next?

Other questions could be based on the writer’s attitude toward the subject, the appropriate tone he or she assumes, and the way language is used to achieve that tone. Of course, the tone will vary according to the passage. In informational nonfiction, the tone will be detached and matter-of-fact, except when the writer is particularly enthusiastic about the subject or has some other kind of emotional involvement such as anger, disappointment, sorrow, or nostalgia. He or she may even assume an ironic tone that takes the form of exaggerating or understating a situation or describing it as the opposite of what it is. With each of these methods of irony, two levels of meaning are present—what is said and what is implied. An ironic tone is usually used to criticize or to mock.

A writer of fiction uses tone differently, depending on what point of view he or she assumes. If the author chooses a first-person point of view and becomes one of the characters, he or she has to assume a persona and develop a character through that character’s thoughts, actions, and speeches. This character is not necessarily sympathetic and is sometimes even a villain, as in some of the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Readers have to pick up this tone from the first few sentences. If the author is writing a third-person narrative, the tone will vary in accordance with how intrusive the narrator appears to be. Some narrators are almost invisible while others are more intrusive, pausing to editorialize, digress, or, in some cases, address the reader directly.

Language is the tool the author uses to reveal attitude and point of view. A discussion of language includes the writer’s syntax and diction. Are the sentences long or short? Is the length varied—is there an occasional short sentence among longer ones? Does the writer use parallelism and balanced sentence structure? Are the

(continued on page 9)
“We will each write a ghost story,” said Lord Byron, and his proposition was acceded to. There were four of us. The noble author began a tale, a fragment of which he printed at the end of his poem of Mazeppa. Shelley, more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery and in the music of the most melodious verse that adorns our language than to invent the machinery of a story, commenced one founded on the experiences of his early life. Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady who was so punished for peeping through a key-hole—what to see I forget: something very shocking and wrong of course; but when she was reduced to a worse condition than the renowned Tom of Coventry, he did not know what to do with her and was obliged to dispatch her to the tomb of the Capulets, the only place for which she was fitted. The illustrious poets also, annoyed by the platitude of prose, speedily relinquished their ungenial task.

I busied myself to think of a story—a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost story would be unworthy of its name. I thought and pondered—vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations. “Have you thought of a story?” I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative.

Mary Shelley

Introduction to Frankenstein (1831)

1. Tom of Coventry—Peeping Tom who was struck blind for looking as Lady Godiva passed by.
3. The author’s descriptions of Shelley’s talents might be considered all of the following EXCEPT
   a. accurate
   b. prejudiced
   c. appreciative
   d. detached
   e. exaggerated

4. The author’s attitude toward Polidori is
   a. amused
   b. sincere
   c. derisive
   d. ironic
   e. matter-of-fact

5. The author’s approach to the task differs from that of the others in that she begins by thinking of
   a. her own early experiences
   b. poetic terms and expressions
   c. the desired effect on her readers
   d. outperforming her male companions
   e. praying for inspiration

6. At the end of the excerpt the author feels
   a. determined
   b. despondent
   c. confident
   d. relieved
   e. resigned

7. “Noble” (line 2) can be BEST understood to mean
   a. principled
   b. aristocratic
   c. audacious
   d. arrogant
   e. eminent

8. All of the following constructions, likely to be questioned by a strict grammarian or a computer grammar check, are included in the passage EXCEPT
   a. a shift in voice
   b. unconventional punctuation
   c. sentence fragments
   d. run-on sentences
   e. a sentence ending with a preposition

9. In context “platitude” (line 11) can be BEST understood to mean
   a. intellectual value
   b. philosophical aspect
   c. commonplace quality
   d. heightened emotion
   e. demanding point of view

10. “The tomb of the Capulets” (line 10) is an allusion to
    a. Shakespeare
    b. Edgar Allan Poe
    c. English history
    d. Greek mythology
    e. the legends of King Arthur

**ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS OF ANSWERS**

1. (e) This type of question appears in most sets of critical reading questions. (a) might appear to be a possible answer, but the passage does not come across as very analytical, nor does it seem like a discussion of the creative process but rather is more a description of a game played by four writers to while away the time. (b) and (c) seem unlikely answers. Mary Shelley’s account here sounds as if she is conscious of inferiority in such illustrious company rather than superiority. She has no need to name-drop, as she married one of the illustrious poets and at that time was the guest of the other. She narrates the problems she had in coming up with a story, but since the passage tells us that she is the author of *Frankenstein*, we know that she did come up with a story. The answer is (e).

2. (b) This type of question asks readers to recognize a restatement of ideas found in the passage. The sentence under examination is found in lines 3–6, and students are asked to recognize that “diction and sound patterns” refers to “radiance of brilliant imagery” and “music of the most melodious verse.” (a) would not be possible because even his adoring wife finds him not inventive. “Thought and feeling,” (c), appear as “ideas and sentiments” (line 3), which according to the passage are merely the vehicles to exhibit Shelley’s talents. Answer (d), incorporating “brightness,” might refer to “brilliant” in line 4, but “ornamentation” is too artificial.
a word for the author to use in reference to her talented husband. (e) is incorrect, as insight and analysis are not alluded to in the passage.

3. (d) This question is related to Question 2 in that it discusses Shelley’s talents and the author’s opinion of them. The writer is obviously not “detached” in her description of her very talented husband. She is obviously “prejudiced” and “appreciative.” She may even exaggerate, but history has shown her to be accurate in her opinion.

4. (a) This is another question about the writer’s attitude. Some of the adjectives can be immediately dismissed. She is not ironic—she means what she says. She is not an unkind writer, and she does not use a derisive tone. However, there is too much humor in her tone for it to be sincere or matter-of-fact. The correct answer is that she is amused.

5. (c) This question deals with the second paragraph and how the author set about writing a story. Choices (a), (b), (d), and (e) may seem appropriate beginnings for a writer, but they are not mentioned in the passage. What she does focus on is the desired effect on her readers, (c), as outlined in detail in lines 13–16.

6. (b) This question asks for an adjective to describe the author’s feeling at the end of the excerpt. The expressions “blank incapability” (line 17) and “mortifying negative” (line 20) suggest that “despondent” is the most appropriate answer.

7. (b) This question deals with vocabulary in context. The noble author is Lord Byron, a hereditary peer of the realm, and the word in this context of describing him means “aristocratic.” “Principled,” (a), and “eminent,” (e), are also possible synonyms for “noble” but not in this context. Byron in his private life was eminently unprincipled (nicknamed “the bad Lord Byron”) and lived overseas to avoid public enmity. (c) and (d) are not synonyms for “noble.”

8. (d) This is a type of question that appears occasionally in a set of questions on critical reading. Such questions require the student to examine the sentence structure of professional writers and to be aware that these writers sometimes take liberties in order to make a more effective statement.

They know the rules, and, therefore, they may break them! An additional difficulty is that the question is framed as a negative, so students may find it a time-consuming question as they mentally check off which constructions Shelley does employ so that by a process of elimination they may arrive at which construction is not included. The first sentence contains both choices (a) and (e), a shift in voice and a sentence ending in a preposition. Neither of these constructions is a grammatical error, but computer programs point them out. The conventional advice is that both should be used sparingly, and they should be used when avoiding them becomes more cumbersome than using them. The sentence beginning in line 14 is a sentence fragment (c), but an effective one. Choice (b) corresponds to the sentence beginning in line 6 and finishing in line 11, which contains a colon, semicolon, and a dash (somewhat unconventional) without the author’s ever losing control. This sentence is not a run-on even though many students may think it is! The answer to the question then is (d).

9. (c) Here is another vocabulary in context question. Knowing the poets involved and their tastes, students will probably recognize that it is (c), the commonplace quality of prose, that turns the poets away and not one of the loftier explanations provided in the other distracters.

10. (a) The allusion to “the tomb of the Capulets” in line 10 is an example of a situation where a student is expected to have some outside knowledge, and this will be a very easy question for students. Romeo and Juliet is fair game for American high school students. Notice that the other allusion is footnoted, as this is a more obscure allusion for American high school students, although well known to every English schoolboy and schoolgirl.
sentences predominantly simple, complex, compound, or compound-complex? How does the writer use tense? Does he or she vary the mood of the verb from indicative to interrogative to imperative? Does the writer shift between active and passive voice? If so, why? How do these choices influence the tone?

Occasionally, a set of questions may include a grammar question. For example, an item might require students to identify what part of speech a particular word is being used as, what the antecedent of a pronoun is, or what a modifier modifies. Being able to answer demonstrates that the student understands the sentence structure and the writer’s meaning in a difficult or sometimes purposefully ambiguous sentence.

With diction, or word choice, one must also consider whether the words are learned and ornate or simple and colloquial. Does the writer use slang or jargon? Does he or she use sensual language? Does the writer use figurative language or classical allusions? Is the writer’s meaning clearer because an abstract idea is associated with a concrete image? Does the reader have instant recognition of a universal symbol? If the writer does any of the above, what tone is achieved through the various possibilities of language? Is the writing formal or informal? Does the writer approve of or disapprove of or ridicule his or her subject? Does he or she use connotative rather than denotative words to convey these emotions? Do you recognize a pattern of images or words throughout the passage?

Some questions on vocabulary in context deal with a single word. The word is not usually an unfamiliar word, but it is often a word with multiple meanings, depending on the context or the date of the passage, as some words have altered in meaning over the years.

The set of ten questions on pages 6–7 is very typical—one on purpose, a couple on restatement of supporting ideas, some on tone and style, two on vocabulary in context, and one on an allusion. Students should learn how to use the process of elimination when the answer is not immediately obvious. The organization of the questions is also typical of the usual arrangement of Critical Reading questions. Questions on the content of the passage, the main idea, and supporting ideas generally appear first and are in the order they are found in the passage. They are followed by questions applying to the whole passage, including general questions about the writer’s tone and style. Students should be able to work their way through the passage, finding the answers as they go.

Additional questions on an autobiographical selection like this passage might ask what is revealed about the biographer herself or which statements in the passage associate the author with Romanticism.

Since passages for critical reading come in a wide variety of genres, students should keep in mind that other types of questions could be asked on other types of passages. For instance, passages from fiction can generate questions about point of view, about characters and how these characters are presented, or about setting, either outdoor or indoor, and the role it is likely to play in a novel or short story.

Speeches generate some different kinds of questions because of the oratorical devices a speaker might use—repetition, anaphora, or appeals to various emotions. Questions could be asked about the use of metaphors, the use of connotative words, and the use of patterns of words or images.

The suggestions made in this section of the resource guide should provide a useful background for critical reading. Questions are likely to follow similar patterns, and knowing what to expect boosts confidence when dealing with unfamiliar material.
Section II
A Historical Overview of the Cold War

INTRODUCTION
The British author George Orwell used the term “Cold War” in a 1945 essay to describe the state of post-World War II global politics, but it only entered mainstream usage two years later after being used in both a speech by the prominent American statesman Bernard Baruch and a book by the American journalist Walter Lippmann. Their shared terminology came to describe a state of relatively abstract hostility that occasionally lapsed over into actual combat, usually between so-called client states of the two superpowers—the United States (U.S.) and the Soviet Union (U.S.S.R.)—that lasted until the collapse of the communist governments in Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. effectively ended the conflict.

Because of the unprecedented existence of nuclear weapons, the stakes of the Cold War were not limited to political or economic “spheres of influence” but also involved the survival of the entire human race. This resulted in a paradoxical situation. The argument that communism and capitalism could not coexist guaranteed a diametrical opposition—that is, an “us-versus-them” scenario—as the two sides vied for power around the globe. The unquestionably dire consequences of a nuclear confrontation, though, meant that the two sides needed to avoid attacking one another directly. As a result, the Cold War became a decades-long test of wills, with both sides aggressively fostering their respective ideologies at home and abroad, while also protecting themselves against the influence of their sworn enemy.

In recent years, the prevailing view of the Cold War among scholars and historians has widened to examine how the political, military, and economic rivalry between the two superpowers affected the remainder of the world. Such a perspective was not, however, especially common during the four-plus decades of the conflict itself. For much of the Cold War, the globe was ostensibly divided into a First World (the U.S. and its allies in North America and Europe), a Second World (the U.S.S.R. and its allies in Eastern and Central Europe), and the Third World (nearly every other nation, particularly those just emerging from colonial rule). In this conception of global politics, the latter category existed mainly as a space for the first two to compete for ideological and/or economic influence. Starting as early as the mid-1950s, though, the development of the Non-Aligned Movement and the ascent of such countries as China, India, and Saudi Arabia complicated this conception of a fundamentally two-sided (or “binary”) struggle for global dominance. Whether it originated from one of the Cold War’s two main combatants or from the parts of the world that were indirectly affected by it, much of the creative literature from the period takes issue with the premise that the Cold War was inherently an “us-vs.-them” battle for moral supremacy.

NOTE TO STUDENTS: You will notice as you read through the resource guide that some key terms and phrases are boldfaced. While many of these terms are defined and/or explained in the text of the guide, you can also find explanations of these terms in the Glossary at the end of the resource guide.
THE ORIGINS OF THE COLD WAR

The starting-point of the Cold War is a matter of some disagreement. Unlike the previous two global conflicts earlier in the century, there was no single event, like the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand in 1914 or the invasion of Poland in 1939, that clearly marked the onset of hostilities. Nevertheless, most historians identify the period from late 1943 through early 1946 as the timeframe in which the divisions that defined the Cold War emerged.

With the forces of the Axis powers increasingly on the defensive in the final years of World War II, the soon-to-be-victorious Allies gradually reasserted the ideological differences among themselves. A conference held at Tehran, Iran, in late 1943 was the first in a series of meetings among the leaders of the three great Allied powers—the U.S., Great Britain, and the U.S.S.R. Initially, these meetings were intended to coordinate the Allies’ collective strategy for finishing off the Axis powers, but the leaders also began articulating their differing visions for the postwar world. At Tehran, Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, and Franklin D. Roosevelt abstractly debated the degree of influence countries should have in the territories eventually liberated from Axis control. By the February 1945 conference in the Soviet city of Yalta, the Allied leaders—with Harry Truman having replaced the deceased Roosevelt—were formulating more concrete plans for the mutual postwar occupation of Germany. All parties publicly affirmed that all the territories that they occupied after the war, except for Germany, should be allowed to form their own elected governments as soon as possible. In practice, though, the spheres of influence outlined at Yalta would eventually harden into the so-called Iron Curtain that separated Europe for decades.

The Allied leaders met for a third time in late July and early August of 1945, a few months after the end of war in Europe. The division of Europe envisioned at Yalta was made into official policy at this conference in the small city of Potsdam in eastern Germany. Although the notion of self-determination was still theoretically the guiding principle, the vagueness of the Potsdam agreements allowed both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. to create Eastern and Western “blocs” of countries that were beholden to the military, political, and/or economic power of the U.S.S.R. and U.S., respectively. The three major Allied conferences set the stage for the Cold War by ideologically splitting Europe in two.

THE ATOMIC BOMB

Another topic of the Yalta discussions was already irrelevant by the Potsdam Conference. At Yalta, Stalin committed Soviet troops to the war in the Pacific once the war in Europe had ended. On July 16, 1945, though, the scientists of the U.S.’s highly classified Manhattan Project successfully tested an atomic bomb, and Truman issued an ultimatum to Japan on July 26 demanding unconditional surrender. The ominous reference to “prompt and utter destruction” that concluded this “Potsdam Declaration” hinted that Truman’s ultimatum was backed by the long-rumored atomic bomb instead of the threat of Soviet participation in an invasion of Japan.

U.S. attitudes toward Soviet participation in the conclusion of the war in the Pacific had changed substantially by the time of the Potsdam meeting, both because of the successful atomic bomb test and because Truman was more suspicious of the Soviets than Roosevelt had been. With the bomb in his pocket, Truman felt little obligation to offer the Soviets even a symbolic share in the victory over Japan, a part of the war in which they had previously played almost no role.

Many historians have argued that Truman’s decision to use the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki
in early August of 1945 was intended both to force Japan’s surrender and to deter the U.S.S.R. from opposing the U.S.’s postwar plans. Truman’s domestic and foreign critics accused him of engaging in “nuclear diplomacy” by threatening to drop atomic bombs on a number of occasions, whereas others believed that “Truman simply absorbed nuclear energy into a pre-existing pattern of thought that housed both idealistic and realistic elements—if international co-operation could not harness the danger and promise of nuclear energy, the United States would have to rely on nuclear superiority to deter aggression or to prevail in war should deterrence fail.”2 Whatever the case, the Soviets successfully tested their own atomic bomb on August 29, 1949, marking the start of the nuclear arms race that became one of the Cold War’s defining characteristics.

KENNAN’S “LONG TELEGRAM” AND THE TRUMAN DOCTRINE

Despite its deterioration, the relationship between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. was still not irreparable as of early 1946. Developments over the next two years, though, all but assured hostility between the two dominant postwar nations. Not only was Truman inclined to heed his more fervently anticommunist advisors, but the actions of Stalin and his government seemingly validated those American voices who argued against peaceful coexistence with the Soviets.

In February 1946, George Kennan sent what came to be known as the “Long Telegram” back to Washington from Moscow, where he was stationed as a diplomat. Recounting his up-close observations of the Soviet government in great detail, Kennan concluded that the U.S.S.R. was basing its postwar policies on a sense of “antagonistic ‘capitalist encirclement’ with which in the long run there can be no permanent peaceful coexistence,” adding that the “[p]roblem of how to deal with this force is undoubtedly the greatest our diplomacy has ever faced and probably the greatest it will ever have to face.”3

Guided partly by Kennan’s advice, Truman resolved to avoid direct confrontation with the U.S.S.R. At the same time, he also initiated what would become the policy of containment by vowing to oppose the Soviets wherever and whenever they sought to expand their influence. Truman not only pressured Stalin to allow free elections in the countries of Eastern Europe that remained under Soviet control, but he also objected to perceived efforts at Soviet expansion in Southeast Asia, Greece, Turkey, and Iran.

The Soviet leadership was simultaneously concerned with limiting the postwar reach of the U.S. Six months
after Kennan sent his telegram to Truman, a Soviet diplomat in Washington, named Nikolai Novikov, wrote back to Stalin that recent developments in the U.S. government and its policies all pointed toward an “America bent on ‘world domination.’” Public expressions of anticommunist sentiment, such as Churchill’s February 1946 “Iron Curtain” speech, and the ouster of comparatively sympathetic politicians from Truman’s administration seemed to confirm the sense of inevitable conflict conveyed by Novikov’s allegations that an insatiable spirit of imperialism dominated the capitalist West. The governments of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. each became increasingly convinced that their opponent was attacking—literally and symbolically—their values and way of life.

Truman left little doubt of his opposition to communist expansion when he told Congress on March 12, 1947, that “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” Echoing the Monroe Doctrine, a nineteenth-century warning against European interference in the Western Hemisphere, this position soon became known as the Truman Doctrine. It was transformed into actual policy over the course of the next three years, perhaps most significantly in the National Security Council Resolution 68 (NSC-68) of 1950. This policy proposed a massive military buildup as a deterrent against Soviet aggression and bolstered Truman’s claims concerning the U.S.’s moral obligation to oppose communism. The institution of the Marshall Plan in 1948 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 provided economic aid and military protection, respectively, to the nations of Europe on the Western side of the Iron Curtain.

Correspondingly, the Soviets consolidated their power in Eastern European countries by installing or supporting ideologically sympathetic governments. They also established communist parallels to the Marshall Plan and NATO in the form of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) in 1949 and the Warsaw Pact in 1955.

The first decade of the Cold War ratcheted up both the real and the perceived opposition between the superpowers:

> The conflict between East and West was no longer understood simply as a power-political struggle for spheres of influence and security requirements, but increasingly in terms of a battle for survival between two opposing social orders and life-styles. Each crisis of mutual relations...led to an intensification of this polarization.

The challenge of maintaining the delicate balance brought about by this division was complicated by the steady increase in both countries’ nuclear stockpiles. In order to justify the vast expenditures on weaponry, foreign aid, and global propaganda, both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. needed to maintain the belief that they were protecting themselves and their national values. However, each nation also understood the inherent danger of letting such a defense develop into direct
confrontation. They therefore engaged in a number of indirect and/or covert forms of fighting that were intended to weaken the enemy without the outbreak of a “hot” war.

**CONFRONTATIONS IN GERMANY AND KOREA**

Tensions in East-Central Europe and Southeast Asia provided early tests of the new balance of power of the Cold War world. As of mid-1948, Great Britain, France, and the U.S. had begun preparations to combine their occupied German territories into a new semi-independent state. The U.S.S.R. opposed these plans vehemently, blocking all transportation routes into and out of the portion of Germany that they occupied, including the city of Berlin. This blockade left more than two million people facing shortages of food, fuel, and other necessitates.

Stalin hoped to coerce the Western allies into abandoning their designs on a new West German state altogether and hoped they would abandon the portions of Berlin that they occupied (and which were now isolated and encircled). Doing so would allow the U.S.S.R. to create an East German client state completely under its control. While diplomats worked behind the scenes to find a settlement, public figures on each side used the occasion to condemn their enemy’s expansionist intentions. The U.S. and British militaries also airlifted supplies into Berlin, a gesture with obvious practical value for Berliners that also paid massive dividends as propaganda. Film footage of German children waving at American and British planes dropping food parcels provided an image of heroism and goodwill that could easily be contrasted with Truman’s claims about the Soviets’ inhumanity.

Despite the heated words and the provocative violation of Soviet-controlled airspace, neither the U.S. nor the U.S.S.R. were inclined to shoot at each other over the fate of postwar Germany:

> Stalin was not prepared...to risk a war that would be bound to end with the destruction of the Soviet Union.... [Berlin’s American governor, Lucius] Clay...repeatedly urged breaking through the blockade of the motorways with tanks, but was repeatedly rebuffed by his government out of fear of an armed conflict. Hardly anyone wanted war on account of Berlin: not in the USA and definitely not in Europe.

The Soviets finally lifted the blockade in May 1949, and two separate German states—one capitalist, one communist—were established soon thereafter. The economic realities of both states, still decimated and depopulated by World War II, were far more complex than these two terms can describe. Nevertheless, when East Germany and West Germany became independent nations by the mid-1950s, they came to symbolize the wider two-sided division of Europe, particularly after the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Correspondingly, Germany’s reunification in 1990 was one of the clearest signs that the Cold War was finally coming to an end.

Much like Germany, the Korean peninsula had been divided into Soviet and American spheres of influence after being liberated from Japanese occupation in September 1945. By 1948, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. had each overseen and supported the establishment of rival Korean client states on either side of the 38th parallel of northern latitude. Kim il-Sung became premier of the People’s Democratic Republic of Korea north of this line and openly spoke of his intentions to reunite the entire peninsula under communist rule. On the other hand, Syngman Rhee was installed as president of the Republic of Korea south of the line, largely because his fervent anticommunism mirrored that of General Douglas MacArthur, the military commander of U.S. forces in the region.
In late 1949, the People’s Republic of China was created after the victory of Mao Zedong’s communists in the protracted civil war that followed World War II. This development further stoked fears of a series of countries in the region falling under communist control. President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously compared such a scenario to falling dominoes in April 1954, thereby giving a name—“the domino theory”—to one of the central concepts of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. Both the U.S. and the two major communist allies, China and the U.S.S.R., were inclined to commit more resources toward Korea than they had previously been willing to commit in Germany, suggesting that China’s emergence as an international power “altered the orientation of the Cold War by shifting its actual focal point from Europe to East Asia.”

Some historians have asserted that although this geographical shift still led to a series of protracted wars, it also helped avert escalation to a more destructive nuclear war:

“Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, East Asia continued to be a main focus of the Cold War... [The] strategic attention of the United States, following the assumption that China was a more daring enemy than the Soviet Union, became increasingly fixed on East Asia. Ironically, though, the active role China played in East Asia turned this main Cold War battlefield into a strange “buffer” between Washington and Moscow: with China and East Asia in the middle, it was less likely that the United States and the Soviet Union would become involved in a direct military confrontation.”

There had been skirmishes along the shared border between the two Koreas before 1950, but North Korea’s invasion of South Korea on June 25, 1950, marked the start of the Cold War’s first large-scale proxy war. North Korea received a substantial amount of economic and military support from China (as well as a lesser contribution from the U.S.S.R.) while South Korea received aid from the United States indirectly through the United Nations. Of the nearly 600,000 UN troops initially sent to Korea in 1950, nearly ninety percent were from the U.S.

A significant proportion of the combatants on both sides of the war were not Korean. China committed a sizable force in late 1950, when UN troops had pushed the North Korean military to the banks of the Yalu River that separates China from North Korea. Millions of foreign troops ultimately served in Korea, expanding what began as a regional civil war into a far larger battle in which smaller countries served as ideological stand-ins for the two superpowers. After several major advances by both sides, the war eventually reached a stalemate, and an armistice was signed in July 1953. The two Koreas have remained separated ever since by a narrow demilitarized zone, known simply as the DMZ. The war fought between them has never been formally ended, making it one of the legacies of the Cold War that still profoundly influences twenty-first-century international relations.

THE TURBULENT FIFTIES

Not long after being inaugurated as president in January 1953, Eisenhower was faced with upheaval within the U.S.S.R. Stalin died somewhat unexpectedly on March 5, 1953, and Nikita Khrushchev eventually succeeded him in the wake of a brief power struggle. Although Khrushchev could be unpredictable and misleading, he was far less paranoid about the West than his predecessor and tried to distance the U.S.S.R. from its Stalinist past. In a speech at the Twentieth Communist Party Congress in 1956, Khrushchev euphemistically denounced both the “excesses” of the previous three decades and Stalin himself, marking an extraordinary taste for (limited) self-critique among the Soviet leadership. This shift made little impression on the majority of Americans, though, and the opportunity for improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations that followed Stalin’s death was mostly lost. The
American public was distracted both by the “shelter craze,” a governmental effort at reassuring citizens that nuclear war was survivable through such efficient advance planning as private fallout shelters, and by the highly publicized anticommunist crusade led by Senator Joseph McCarthy.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) had already been conducting high-profile investigations of suspected communists in Hollywood and in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) since the late 1940s. These inquiries led to dozens of writers, actors, and directors being effectively banned from working in the motion-picture industry—a practice known as “blacklisting.” The panic over the possibility of a hidden communist presence—sometimes called a “fifth column”—in American society intensified with the discovery between 1947 and 1950 of a series of Soviet collaborators, including Alger Hiss, Klaus Fuchs, Julius Rosenberg, and Ethel Rosenberg, within both the U.S. government and the atomic bomb program. These revelations seemed to justify the red scare touched off in February 1950 by McCarthy’s ultimately unproven claim that he had a list of over two hundred names of communists working in the State Department.

For several years, McCarthy used his position in the Senate—along with the willing assistance of J. Edgar Hoover, the longstanding Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI)—to level accusations at and compel testimony from hundreds of individuals. As McCarthy widened his scope to incriminate suspected communists in the military, though, he came under greater criticism for both his bullying tactics and his frequent lack of evidence to support his accusations. Arthur Miller, who had himself been targeted by McCarthy’s anticommmunist HUAC colleagues, wrote a play in 1953 called The Crucible that symbolically compared the contemporary red scare with the infamous witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts, in the late seventeenth century. McCarthy was largely discredited after 1954, when a witness named Joseph Welch shamed him during televised hearings on the supposed presence of communists in the U.S. Army, but McCarthy’s fall from grace did little to alter the fundamental dynamics of the Cold War.

The development of more potent nuclear weapons, along with the rapid growth of nuclear stockpiles, doubtlessly contributed heavily to maintaining the world’s high level of anxiety. The U.S. tested the world’s first thermonuclear hydrogen bomb at Enewetak in the South Pacific on November 1, 1952, while the Soviets tested their first such device in August 1953. These weapons were considerably more destructive than the existing types of atomic bombs. As was generally true throughout the nuclear arms race, each side justified its own production of more potent weapons by citing the other side’s developments. By the late 1950s, both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. had enough nuclear weapons to render the planet uninhabitable.

As nuclear arsenals expanded throughout the 1950s and 1960s, their strategic value began to diminish (since their use by either side would almost certainly result in the complete annihilation of humankind) and the formal strategy of deterrence began to take shape. In particular, the doctrine of mutually assured destruction began to guide nuclear politics. By this logic, each side needed to have enough nuclear
weapons to guarantee that it could destroy the other
if attacked first, thus removing any incentive for a
preemptive strike.

As Khrushchev solidified his hold on power in the
U.S.S.R. during the late 1950s, his fickle nature made
it difficult for U.S. leaders to determine their policy
toward him and his country:

An advocate of “peaceful coexistence,”
he also made dramatic and bellicose
pronouncements about the irreconcilable
nature of the conflict between East and
West and took pride in parading Soviet
achievements...which seemed to suggest that
the Soviet Union was capable of beating
the West at its own game. Moreover, while
Khrushchev announced...in 1956 that Stalin
had committed grave errors and that much of
his legacy must be repudiated, later the same
year, he ordered Soviet troops into Hungary
to suppress an uprising which was fueled by
his own de-Stalinization speech.11

At best, Khrushchev was like Truman in the late
1940s, trying to balance an idealistic worldview with
the reality of needing to appease hardliners within his
own party to stay in power. At worst, his rosy public
statements about cooperation and peace were only a
cover for the U.S.S.R.’s active support of communist
insurrections throughout the decolonizing “Third
World.” No matter which version is more accurate,
Khrushchev soon became intertwined forever with
John F. Kennedy as one of the two men holding the
fate of the entire world in their hands.

KHRUSHCHEV AND KENNEDY
The relationship between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.
was already tense as Kennedy came to power in 1961.
Fidel Castro had led a successful revolution in Cuba
two years earlier and wasted no time in allying himself
with the Soviets, thereby placing the U.S.’s ideological
discomforting ninety miles or so off the
enemy a discomforting ninety miles or so off the
southern tip of Florida. Even as Khrushchev and vice-
president Richard M. Nixon had exchanged official
diplomatic visits in 1959, proxy armies trained, armed,
and financially bolstered by each of their countries
fought one another throughout Southeast Asia, Latin
America, and Africa.

From its outset, the 1960 presidential campaign
between Nixon and Kennedy was a competition to
see which candidate could be more anticomunist.
This only intensified after the revelation on May 7,
1960, that the Soviets had shot down an American
U-2 spy plane over their territory and captured its
pilot, Francis Gary Powers. The timing of the incident
was exceptionally damaging, given that it caused
Eisenhower and Khrushchev to postpone a scheduled
meeting about a treaty banning atmospheric testing
of nuclear weapons. Both presidential candidates
chastised Eisenhower for negotiating with the Soviets,
and Kennedy began repeatedly mentioning the
“missile gap,” a supposed Soviet superiority in missiles
with nuclear warheads that could threaten the United
States. Although this disparity actually favored the
U.S., Kennedy still used it effectively to sway voters
unnerved by the Soviets’ launch of their Sputnik
satellite in 1957. Khrushchev’s public (and vastly
overstated) boasts that the U.S.S.R. was “turning
out missiles like sausages”12 ratcheted up American
anxiety even further.

In April 1961, Kennedy further inflamed tensions
between the superpowers by sponsoring an attempted coup in Cuba by a makeshift army of U.S.-trained Cuban exiles. Named for the Bay of Pigs where it took place, the invasion failed largely due to the would-be liberators’ ineptitude. This failure not only helped Castro remain a thorn in the side of the U.S. for more than half a century, but also hardened the Soviet leadership’s distrust of the new American president. Later that same year, the lingering issue of the divided city of Berlin once again became a flashpoint when Khrushchev ordered a dividing wall built to keep citizens of East Berlin from fleeing to the West. Kennedy’s opposition to the Berlin Wall consisted mostly of words (most famously, perhaps, a 1963 speech in which he declared himself a Berliner in solidarity), leading Khrushchev to believe that Kennedy’s anticommunism was mostly bluster.

This perception emboldened Khrushchev to take further risks, including sending a fleet of ships transporting missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads to Cuba in October 1962. His ostensible reasoning was to help repel another potential invasion like the Bay of Pigs. In response, Kennedy ordered a total naval blockade of Cuba, setting up a rare direct showdown between the superpowers that could potentially escalate to a full-scale nuclear war. After several tense days, Khrushchev agreed to withdraw the missiles from Cuba. Years later, some of the principal figures on both sides of the standoff maintained that actual nuclear combat was never seriously considered; nevertheless, the leaders and the citizenry of both nations had now experienced extreme brinksmanship, and the Cuban Missile Crisis helped bring the dangerous reality of such behavior into clear focus for all parties. As a result, it indirectly motivated more than a decade of relatively improved relations between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

**TREATIES AND TROUBLES**

Signs that both Kennedy and Khrushchev were sobered by the showdown soon began appearing. Many historians refer to the period from 1946 to 1963 as the First Cold War, thereby accentuating the thaw in superpower relations that lasted until the late 1970s, when the Second Cold War began. The U.S. and U.S.S.R. both signed the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in August 1963, and even though the immensity of both countries’ arsenals meant that the treaty’s pledge to cease above-ground nuclear testing was a largely symbolic gesture, it was nevertheless one of the first attempts to slow down the runaway arms race. Although both leaders had paid lip-service to disarmament in the past, such efforts now began to be both more frequent and more fruitful, resulting in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968, the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) in 1972, and an expansion of the SALT agreement in 1979. Despite the assassination of Kennedy in November 1963 and the removal of Khrushchev as Soviet Premier the following year, the ten years after the Cuban Missile Crisis featured a remarkable degree of cooperation between the superpowers.

Two developments in Asia, though, threatened to diminish these baby steps toward peaceful coexistence. The relationship between the U.S.S.R. and the Peoples’ Republic of China had soured so severely by the
time Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin seized power from Khrushchev in 1964 that a war between the former allies became conceivable. The already overly simplistic conception of the Cold War as a fight between a communist East and a capitalist West was further complicated by this new hostility between the two communist powers. In the late 1960s, Mao Zedong instituted a sweeping, often brutal set of reforms known as the Cultural Revolution that intended to reaffirm the country’s communist principles in contrast to the Soviets’ seeming willingness to cooperate with the West.

The intensification of the ongoing civil war in Vietnam also created new problems. After France’s colonial domination of the region ended in a humbling military defeat in 1954, Vietnam had been divided into a communist north and a nominally democratic south. Military and economic aid soon flowed into both of these new client states, from China and the U.S.S.R. for North Vietnam and from the United States for South Vietnam. The domino theory was once again invoked to justify President Lyndon B. Johnson’s aggressive policy toward Southeast Asia, while Maoist China sought to fill the vacuum of power created by France’s departure. A similar process was ongoing in the Middle East, where the U.S.’s support of Israel upon its establishment in 1948 was counterbalanced by the U.S.S.R.’s support for many of the Arab nations that surrounded it, most notably Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. Three wars of varying length and intensity were fought among these combatants between 1967 and 1973, each of which involved considerable intervention—open and covert—by the superpowers.

In August 1964, Johnson requested a substantial increase in the U.S. military presence in Vietnam. The rationale for this buildup was an attack by the North Vietnamese on a U.S. surveillance vessel in the Gulf of Tonkin, though there is considerable skepticism among historians that this incident actually occurred. The Congressional resolution that granted Johnson’s request was not a formal declaration of war, but it authorized him to deploy troops to the region almost at will. By 1967, more than half a million U.S. soldiers were stationed in Vietnam alongside the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). They were fighting both against the heavily Chinese-backed North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the communist insurrectionist force known colloquially as the Việt Cộng. The war lasted until 1975, when the U.S. removed its remaining troops, diplomats, and advisors. Soon thereafter, in a partial validation of the domino theory, communist governments were established in Vietnam as well as the neighboring states of Laos and Cambodia, where a covert war had also been fought for years.

DÉTENTE

Unlike the tense years during which the Korean War was fought, the period of the Vietnam War (as well as numerous other proxy wars in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America) was ironically one of the most outwardly peaceful periods in terms of international relations among many of the Cold War’s major players. The general state of détente that existed between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. from the late 1960s through the late 1970s encouraged extraordinary levels of
international trade as well as the aforementioned disarmament talks. Even the relationship between the United States and the People’s Republic of China improved, particularly after President Richard M. Nixon made a trip to China in 1972, the same year in which East Germany and West Germany established formal diplomatic relations for the first time. Much of the logic behind détente, though, was practical rather than ethical. The raw monetary cost of the nuclear arms race was crippling the Soviet economy by the early 1960s. Likewise, a substantial proportion of the federal budget in the U.S. shifted funding away from social programs and education toward the military. The opportunities for international trade resulting from warmer relations with the West were absolutely necessary for the U.S.S.R.’s economic survival. U.S. farmers and manufacturers were similarly eager to sell their goods in the massive untapped markets of the communist bloc. On a global scale, ideological purity made room for economic pragmatism during détente.

Still, the superpowers’ jockeying for influence throughout the world remained undiminished. The ongoing desire to protect political interests abroad was demonstrated by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 after the success of a reform movement known as the Prague Spring. The U.S. also interfered in the internal politics of a foreign country, albeit more covertly, by helping to depose Chile’s Marxist president Salvador Allende in 1973. Both actions mirrored similar episodes from the peak years of the First Cold War, specifically the Soviets’ military suppression of an uprising in Hungary in 1956 and the U.S.’s secretive role in removing Iran’s prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, from office in 1953.

THE SECOND COLD WAR
These contradictory impulses eventually assured that détente was only a temporary pause in the Cold War’s overall antagonism. During the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter was pressured by such domestic political adversaries as the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) to toughen his policies toward the U.S.S.R. A series of high-profile Soviet political and military interventions eventually forced Carter to abandon détente or risk political suicide by being perceived as soft on communism. He strenuously opposed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, going so far as to fund and train guerrilla fighters known as mujahideen who fought the larger and better-equipped Red Army to a stalemate for a decade. Carter also withdrew U.S. athletes from the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow—and encouraged more than sixty other nations to do likewise—as a protest against the invasion, thereby symbolically ending détente.

Ronald Reagan succeeded Carter as president in 1981. Having established his anticommunist credentials through his testimony during HUAC’s investigations of Hollywood in the late 1940s, Reagan left no doubt about his attitude toward the U.S.S.R.:

Unlike his immediate predecessors, who had viewed the U.S.S.R. as a permanent presence in international affairs and an unavoidable if difficult partner, Reagan viewed the Soviet Union as an incorrigible adversary that he was determined to vanquish. Taking
aim at the 1968 Brezhnev doctrine (that the establishment of a communist regime was irreversible), the Reagan doctrine led to a substantial increase of U.S. aid to anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan and also to the opponents of Marxist regimes in Africa, Asia, and Central America. The U.S. president even contested Soviet rule in Eastern Europe. In addition, Reagan directed the largest expansion and diversification of America’s military and nuclear forces since the late 1940s in order to establish U.S. predominance and force concessions on the U.S.S.R. 14

Although the tens of thousands of nuclear warheads in the Soviet arsenal were undoubtedly a very real threat, the U.S.S.R. was in a far weaker position in 1980 than in 1950. Both the arms race and the enormous spending in support of communist governments throughout the world were bankrupting the U.S.S.R. The Western media eagerly passed along reports of long lines for food and other basic staples in major Soviet cities. The lengthy quagmire in Afghanistan both eroded popular support for the Soviet regime—the leadership of which changed three times in rapid succession from 1982 to 1985—and diverted increasingly scarce monetary resources from the national economy. The American public’s perception of the U.S.S.R.’s might had diminished considerably by the middle of the 1980s, eventually undermining Reagan’s claims about the gravity of the Soviet threat. Reagan gradually toned down his belligerent rhetoric by the mid-1980s, setting the stage for the Cold War’s somewhat anticlimactic ending.

THE END OF THE COLD WAR
Mikhail Gorbachev brought an alternative political vision to the office of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. in 1985. He was the first Soviet leader who came from the new generation of scientists, engineers, technicians, administrators, diplomats, intelligence analysts, lawyers, and teachers, all of whom had benefited from the heavy investment the Kremlin had made, during the 1950s and 1960s, in mass higher education. The purpose had been to strengthen the Soviet system in its competition with capitalism…. It is difficult to educate, however, without provoking curiosity. That quality, in turn, produces questioning, which leads to criticism, which if unanswered invites dissatisfaction with the status quo. 15

Although Gorbachev was a committed communist, he also recognized that the U.S.S.R.’s political and economic policies were unsustainable. Not long after coming to power, he proposed a pair of sweeping reforms designed to revive Soviet society. Whereas perestroika (“restructuring”) opened unparalleled avenues for foreign, especially Western, investment in the U.S.S.R., glasnost (“openness”) encouraged greater individual and social freedoms for Soviet citizens. Gorbachev also encouraged the governments of communist states in Eastern Europe to follow suit.

Even though his policies clearly shifted away from the hardline attitudes of his predecessors (and many of his contemporaries), Gorbachev’s goal was neither to destroy the U.S.S.R. from within nor even to end the Cold War. A series of summits between Reagan and Gorbachev from 1985 through 1988 revealed that his relatively enlightened policy changes did not automatically create trust and goodwill from the U.S., which still recalled Khrushchev’s mixed signals. Gorbachev took further steps, though, to demonstrate his sincere wish for improved relations, such as initiating the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and signing the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which mandated the dismantling of nearly four times more missiles by the U.S.S.R. than by the U.S.
His reforms and his overtures toward disarmament made Gorbachev far more popular on the international stage than in the U.S.S.R. itself. Despite his notable efforts, the societal and economic damage of the previous seven decades ultimately proved impossible for Gorbachev to reverse. During the summer of 1989, the governments of the U.S.S.R.’s Eastern European satellites began collapsing one after another. Unlike Khrushchev in 1956 or Brezhnev in 1968, Gorbachev refused to suppress the uprisings that were toppling the old regimes in Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. This reticence intensified the opposition he faced from the substantial faction of hardliners remaining in the U.S.S.R. Not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Gorbachev and U.S. president George H. W. Bush met in December 1989 to declare that the Cold War was officially over.

Their mutual assertion was not, however, universally accepted, and the U.S.S.R. went through two years of turbulence—including a failed coup by the “old guard” faction that opposed Gorbachev’s reforms—before ceasing to exist altogether. The U.S.S.R. was officially dissolved on December 26, 1991. With the country that had played the role of the U.S.’s archenemy officially dissolved, the Cold War was truly over, replaced by what President Bush had been calling “the New World Order” since 1990.

THE COLD WAR’S LEGACY

Many retrospective observers have asserted that there were actually few, if any, moments during the Cold War at which global destruction was even a remote possibility:

The nuclear arsenals symbolized the long Soviet-American rivalry, but they never reflected any clash of interests whose resolution demanded a resort to such levels of violence. No issue that divided the two superpowers was worth an hour of nuclear war, even of conventional war. Through forty years of recurrent high tension and mutual recrimination, the United States and the Soviet Union, inhibited by fears of mutual destruction as well as the limited nature of the issues that divided them, did not approach a decision for war.16

Others point to such moments as the Cuban Missile Crisis or the war scare during NATO’s Able Archer military exercises in 1983 as instances in which the “world’s rival superpowers found themselves blindly edging toward the brink of nuclear war through suspicion, belligerent posturing and blind miscalculation.”17 Whether by design or by luck, nuclear war ultimately was averted, meaning that the discussion of the Cold War’s legacy also must transcend the weapons that were developed and built, but importantly not used, during that time.

Historians have increasingly turned to examine the ways in which the ideological fight against an ostensibly incompatible and even monstrous enemy led to the oppression of certain groups within the U.S., particularly women, non-heterosexuals, and ethnic minorities. Each of these groups were organizing movements demanding equal rights in American society at the same time that the nation’s government sought to downplay their grievances to reduce the influence of its chief international rival:

According to the cold war ethos..., conflict within the United States would harm our image abroad, strengthen the Soviet Union, and weaken the nation, making it vulnerable to communism.... Although strategists and foreign policy experts feared that the Soviet Union might gain the military might and territorial expansion to achieve world domination, many leaders, pundits, and observers worried that the real dangers to America were internal ones: racial strife, emancipated women, class conflict, and familial disruption.18
As a result of this perception of dangers lurking at home, the “rhetoric of the Cold War has often been a touchstone in domestic affairs that seem, at least at first glance, quite remote from the zones of tension between the superpowers. The civil rights movement in this country, for example, was haunted by charges of ‘Communist influence’ or ‘giving comfort to the Communists.” 19

Originally designed exclusively to strengthen national security by keeping tabs on communists within the United States, the FBI eventually used COINTELPRO, its covert (and frequently illegal) domestic surveillance program, to gather intelligence on and to intimidate such crusaders for equal rights as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin, as well as the leaders of the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, and the Women’s Liberation Movement. Any actual links within these groups to the U.S.S.R. were either nonexistent or irrelevant to their stated goals. A 1975 investigation led by Senator Frank Church concluded that COINTELPRO and a number of other governmental intelligence-gathering activities had violated both U.S. citizens’ rights and international law in the name of protecting national interests.

Not all of the cultural effects of the Cold War were as formalized as COINTELPRO, though. Many simply represented shifts in the predominant attitudes toward particular issues within the culture. For example, the massive removal of men from American society to fight overseas during World War II necessitated a brief loosening in national gender roles, as is perhaps best symbolized by the famous image of “Rosie the Riveter.” Soon after the war’s end, however, there was a backlash against anything that might threaten to the traditional American “nuclear family”20 structure. From the late 1940s onward, the growing fear that any disruption of American society would result in a vulnerability that the Soviets would exploit testified to the powerful symbolic force of gender and sexuality in the cold war ideology and culture. It was not just nuclear energy that had to be contained, but the social and sexual fallout of the atomic age itself. Many... believed that the Russians could destroy the United States not only by atomic attack but through internal subversion. In either case, the nation had to be on moral alert.

American propaganda emphasized such internal repression in the U.S.S.R., but not only did the Soviets return the favor by highlighting social unrest in the U.S. in their own domestic propaganda, they also employed it in their battle to “win hearts and minds” (a phrase associated with President Johnson’s strategy toward Vietnam) in the decolonizing countries of the Third World. By presenting compelling images of sexism and racism in the U.S., the Soviets hoped to undermine the claims of freedom and openness on which American attempts to win influence in the same countries and regions were based. In the end, neither the U.S.S.R. nor the U.S. could truthfully claim that they had consistently demonstrated the national values they so tenaciously defended during the Cold War. A sizable majority of historians now views the conflict as a time of paranoia, secrecy, and militarism that harmfully diverted the world’s political attention, natural resources, and economic power in ways that are still being profoundly felt more than thirty years later.

Writing less than a year after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., George Kennan summed up his feelings about the end of the conflict that his 1946 “Long Telegram” had helped shape:
Nobody—no country, no party, no person—“won” the Cold War. It was a long and costly political rivalry, fueled on both sides by unreal and exaggerated estimates of the intentions and strength of the other party. It greatly overstrained the economic resources of both countries, leaving both, by the end of the 1980s, confronted with heavy financial, social and, in the case of the Russians, political problems that neither had anticipated and for which neither was fully prepared.

The fact that in Russia’s case these changes were long desired on principle by most of us does not alter the fact that they came—far too precipitately—upon a population little prepared for them, thus creating new problems of the greatest seriousness for Russia, its neighbors and the rest of us, problems to which, as yet, none of us have found effective answers.

All these developments should be seen as part of the price we are paying for the Cold War. As in most great international conflicts, it is a price to be paid by both sides. That the conflict should now be formally ended is a fit occasion for satisfaction but also for sober re-examination of the part we took in its origin and long continuation. It is not a fit occasion for pretending that the end of it was a great triumph for anyone[...].22
INTRODUCTION

Kurt Vonnegut’s fourth novel, *Cat’s Cradle*, was published only a few months after the Cuban Missile Crisis, a confrontation that sharply focused the world’s attention on the possibility of global destruction through a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although Vonnegut’s novel was neither a direct response to the showdown in Cuba, nor the first work of fiction to imagine the end of human civilization, the novel is nevertheless notable for its satirical criticism of the simplistic self-interest that Vonnegut perceived as the root cause of humanity’s precarious situation at the height of the Cold War.

The title of Vonnegut’s novel—which refers to a game played by looping string around one’s fingers—establishes the author’s satirical perspective by contrasting the seriousness of the book’s subject matter with a child’s game. Furthermore, when the game itself is referenced within the book, it is in the context of an attempt at parental love by Felix Hoenikker, the man whose invention ultimately brings about the world’s destruction: “He must have surprised himself when he made a cat’s cradle out of the string, and maybe it reminded him of his own childhood. He all of a sudden came out of his study and did something he’d never done before. He tried to play with me. Not only had he never played with me before; he had hardly ever spoken to me before.”

When this attempt at connecting with his son Newt only ends up frightening the boy to the point of running “out of the house as fast as [he] could go,” it establishes the sense of both nonsense and delusion that remains throughout the rest of the book. As Newt later says, “No wonder kids grow up crazy. A cat’s cradle is nothing but a bunch of X’s between somebody’s hands, and little kids look and look and look at all those X’s.... No damn cat, and no damn cradle.”

The complete separation between the game’s name and the “bunch of X’s” that Newt saw as a toddler alludes to the more serious delusions that Vonnegut, in the voice of his fictional prophet Bokonon, calls *granfaloon*. Vonnegut’s narrator quotes two lines of a song by Bokonon that expose the falsehood of such concepts: “If you wish to study a *granfalloon*,/Just remove the skin of a toy balloon.”

The list of examples of *granfaloons* not only includes many concepts—for example, “the Communist party”—that were deemed worthy of protection by massive nuclear arsenals, but also explicitly mentions a company (General Electric).
that helped manufacture such weapons.\textsuperscript{27}

Along with such works as Joseph Heller’s 1961 novel \textit{Catch-22} and Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 film \textit{Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb}, Vonnegut’s novel responds to the grave existential threat posed by nuclear war by using a darkly humorous and ironic tone that is often identified as “\textbf{black humor}.” Peter L. Berger explicitly named black humor as a form of comic artistic expression that performs a “defensive function” intended to “contain terror deriving from events that are threatening.”\textsuperscript{28} Berger notes that such humor “has been deliberately used as a therapeutic tool, especially by psychotherapists. This may involve various forms of kidding, but also irony and \textbf{satire}. The latter…can be conducive to insight; the patient laughs and [thereby] gains new insight into his condition.”\textsuperscript{29} Through its use of satire and black humor, \textit{Cat’s Cradle} tries to burst some of the ideological balloons that kept the Cold War afloat, in the process revealing their fundamental emptiness. Although Vonnegut is not a psychotherapist, his novel absolutely intends to provide its readers with both comic relief and new insights into what he sees as the absurd and dangerous beliefs—including an excessive trust that religion, science, or politics can provide access to truth—that have pushed humanity to the brink of self-destruction.

\textbf{THEMES}

As you read through the overview of the characters and plot of Vonnegut’s novel that follows, consider the recurrence of the following five themes in the book.

\textbf{Criticism of Amoral Science and Scientists}

As John/Jonah, the protagonist/narrator of \textit{Cat’s Cradle}, is riding in a car through Ilium, New York, in the early stages of the novel, he hears the story of an unrepentant murderer who terrorized the city during the eighteenth century. Asa Breed, an administrator in Ilium’s scientific research laboratory with whom Jonah is seeking an interview, exclaims at the end of this story, “Think of it!... Twenty-six people he had on his conscience.”\textsuperscript{30} This comment sets the ironic tone for Vonnegut’s depiction of Breed and his longtime employee, Felix Hoenikker, who is introduced to the reader as “one of the so-called ‘Fathers’ of the first atomic bomb.”\textsuperscript{31} As it turns out, Hoenikker’s most significant contribution is a substance called \textit{ice-nine} that causes the near-complete destruction of the world.

Whereas the murderer in Breed’s story is responsible for twenty-six deaths, Breed and Hoenikker eventually play a major role in the demise of the entire planet.
Like the infamous inventor whose name provides the title of Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1823), both Breed and Hoenikker embody the “lack of human and moral concerns in the scientific and technological worldview” of the Cold War. Newton Hoenikker sums up the damaging effect of this worldview by noting that his father “just wasn’t interested in people.” The dreadful consequences of Felix Hoenikker’s inventions prove this point beyond a shadow of a doubt.

**Cold War Attitudes toward the “Third World”**
The fictional Caribbean island nation of San Lorenzo is where most of the action of the novel takes place. Perhaps most importantly, it is also where the apocalypse that wipes out the planet originates, although the weapon that causes it is imported to the island from the United States. Poor and perpetually dominated by outsiders looking to profit from its labor and resources, San Lorenzo becomes a symbol for the superpowers’ manipulation and exploitation of the so-called “Third World” during the Cold War.

**Ice-Nine and Nuclear Weapons**
Although it is the fictional water molecule of *ice-nine* that causes the destruction of the world in *Cat’s Cradle*, the novel “is really a cautionary tale about the madness and instability of a world full of nuclear weapons.” Felix Hoenikker’s association with the Manhattan Project and the development of the first atomic bomb provides a linkage to the actual technological threat facing the world of the early 1960s. Furthermore, the title (*The Day the World Ended*) and subject (the atomic bombing of Hiroshima) of the book that John/Jonah is researching at the start of *Cat’s Cradle* also strongly associate the novel’s apocalyptic climax with nuclear weapons.

**Bokononism, Truth, and Lies**
Max F. Schulz argues that “*Cat’s Cradle* is a novel about the varieties of truth available to [humanity].” Unlike most religions, Bokononism makes no claims to any kind of either literal or mystical truth; in fact, Bokonon repeatedly stresses the fact that all of his words are lies, albeit harmless ones, and openly suggests that no one should follow his instructions. The fact that everyone on San Lorenzo still does, including in their final act of mass suicide, raises questions about the role of belief in an age in which ideologies (another variety of truth) are defended with threats of nuclear destruction.

**Damaged Parent-Child Relationships**
*Cat’s Cradle* is filled with flawed relationships between parents—particularly, but not exclusively, fathers—and their children. Whether such relationships are literal (as with Felix Hoenikker and his three children) or figurative (as with “Papa” Monzano, the dictator of San Lorenzo), they are consistent with Vonnegut’s career-long depiction of “fathers [who]…are all distant and uninvolved with their children’s lives.” Although, many critics have attributed this feature of Vonnegut’s writing to his difficult relationship with his own father, the warped parents in *Cat’s Cradle* take on an additional meaning in the historical context of the Cold War. The metaphorical paternalism (that is, the authoritarian attitudes traditionally associated with fathers) of the Cold War superpowers toward the other nations of the world transforms these broken parent-child relationships into a commentary on the psychological damage that the age is inflicting on humanity in general.
CHARACTERS

John/Jonah
The narrator and, to some extent, the protagonist of the novel, John/Jonah is something of a pitiful figure. He introduces himself—“Call me Jonah. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John” —in an imitation of the famous opening line of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale* (1851). He starts the novel by addressing his readers directly, informing them/us that the events he is going to narrate involve his efforts to write a book about “what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan.” He goes on to indicate that this book was never finished, an observation that becomes highly ironic, since the world essentially does end by the time he is done telling his story.

For much of the book, Jonah is simply collecting other characters’ stories in chasing down research leads for his book. However, through a series of unlikely circumstances, he ends up being named the successor to “Papa” Monzano, the dictator of a small island nation called San Lorenzo, where he indirectly contributes to the accident that brings about a cataclysmic disaster involving a secret weapon called *ice-nine* near the end of the novel. Like the scriptural figure of Jonah whose name he adopts, Vonnegut’s narrator is an outcast. He is seemingly one of the last people alive on earth at the end of the book, leading to another level of irony regarding who the audience might be to whom he could possibly be addressing the book that he is narrating.

Whereas the original Jonah spends his time inside the whale’s belly acknowledging the wrongness of his disobedience before returning to his work as a foreteller of divine punishment, Vonnegut’s Jonah will find no meaningful audience for his retrospective thoughts on the end of the world. Within the destroyed world of *Cat’s Cradle*, Jonah’s cautionary tale arrives too late to make a difference. However, the prophetic echoes of Jonah’s chosen name suggest that Vonnegut’s own real-life readers might be able to learn something from his words and thereby avert a similar disaster.

Lionel Boyd Johnson/Bokonon
In many ways, this character is the philosophical center of the novel, a fact that contributes mightily to the novel’s dark humor since the religion that he founds is essentially based on the fact that it acknowledges its own untruths, contradictions, and fabrications. Bokonon’s is actually the first voice to appear in the book, as the epigraph consists of an ostensible quote from his *The Books of Bokonon*, advising the reader to “Live by the *foma* [harmless untruths] that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy.”

Johnson was born on the Caribbean island of Tobago. He studied political science in London and fought in Europe for England in World War I before arriving back in the Caribbean through a series of mishaps and
coincidences. He and an American military deserter named Earl McCabe wash up on San Lorenzo, where they eventually found a curious new social order. Johnson changed his name to Bokonon and became a kind of mystical holy man who supposedly opposed McCabe’s will (and, later, that of his successor, Monzano) as the island’s ruler.

The balance between their roles was intended to offset the fact that their original idealistic plans for improving San Lorenzo’s dire economic and social situation quickly proved impractical. Instead, the theatrical antagonism that they played out in their roles—and the religion that Bokonon founded—offered the otherwise downtrodden people of San Lorenzo “better and better lies.” Although Bokonon’s religion is officially outlawed, it gradually becomes clear that everyone in San Lorenzo, including McCabe and Monzano, are devout Bokononists. Jonah, the book’s narrator, eventually becomes one as well, which helps explain the book’s other epigraph: “Nothing in this book is true.” Although dozens of quotes from his Books are interspersed throughout the novel, Bokonon himself only appears in person in the final chapter to deliver one last message to Jonah.

**Felix Hoenikker**

This supremely unemotional scientist helps bring about both his own death and that of the entire planet by secretly developing a new form of ice—called ice-nine—that is distinct from normal water by its melting point of 114.4 degrees Fahrenheit. Felix worked as a research scientist for General Forge and Foundry in Ilium, New York, a fictionalization of Vonnegut’s own work experience at General Electric in Schenectady, New York. Hoenikker’s characterization contains parodic echoes of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the real-life director of the Manhattan Project, which developed the first functional atomic bomb in 1945. Whereas Oppenheimer famously responded to the sight of the first bomb exploding with a poignant quote from Hindu scripture, Hoenikker supposedly responds to the same sight by responding to a fellow scientist’s declaration that “Science has now known sin” simply by saying “What is sin?”

Hoenikker dies of a sudden heart attack while on Cape Cod with his three children not long after having concocted ice-nine on his own as a matter of pure curiosity. His offspring divide the substance among themselves after his death and in the process bring about the end of the world through sheer foolishness and accident rather than military strategy or political design. Marvin Breed criticizes the inhumanity of his moral indifference by asking the largely rhetorical question, “I know how harmless and gentle and dreamy he was supposed to be…but how the hell innocent is a man who helps make a thing like an atomic bomb?”

**Emily Hoenikker**

Once reputed to be the most beautiful and desirable woman in Ilium, New York, Emily later became Felix Hoenikker’s wife and the mother of Angela, Franklin, and Newton Hoenikker. She died soon after giving birth to Newt, and Marvin Breed uses Felix’s neglect of her as an example of Felix’s lack of empathy.

**Angela Hoenikker Conners**

The eldest daughter of Felix and Emily Hoenikker, Angela largely raised Frank and Newt after her mother’s death, which happened when Angela was
a sophomore in high school. Although physically awkward and unattractive, she marries a wealthy businessman named Harrison Conners, a match that seems inexplicable until Jonah discovers that she offered Conners the chip of *ice-nine* that she secretly inherited from her father in exchange for marriage.

**Franklin “Frank” Hoenikker**
The middle son of Felix and Emily Hoenikker, Frank spent most of his free time during adolescence building elaborate model trains in the basement of a hobby shop in Ilium. He disappears immediately after his father’s funeral, though Jonah spots him in a newspaper advertisement attempting to lure American businesses to San Lorenzo. At twenty-six, Frank is a major general and the second-in-command in San Lorenzo, having (as Jonah later discovers) acquired his position, title, and engagement to the beautiful Mona Aamons Monzano by offering his chip of *ice-nine* to San Lorenzo’s power-hungry dictator, “Papa” Monzano. When “Papa” is on his deathbed, he appoints Frank as his successor, but Frank is not interested in the additional responsibilities this entails and passes both the position and his engagement to Mona on to Jonah.

**Newton “Newt” Hoenikker**
The youngest son of Felix and Emily Hoenikker, Newt is in the process of flunking out of Cornell University, which Jonah and several other characters in the novel attended (as did Vonnegut himself). Whereas his sister Angela is unusually tall, Newt is exceptionally short and is mocked for this trait by various people with whom Jonah speaks while researching Newt’s father. Newt and Jonah trade letters in the opening pages of the book and later meet while on a flight to San Lorenzo. Like his siblings, it turns out that Newt has also bartered (though perhaps unknowingly) his chip of *ice-nine* for a relationship with a Ukrainian dancer named Zinka who is rumored to be a Soviet spy. When Newt was a child, his father occasionally tried to play with him by holding up string in a pattern called a “cat’s cradle,” though Newt repeatedly asserts that he saw neither a cat nor a cradle in the crossed strings.

**Asa Breed**
Asa Breed is the director of the research laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry and, as such, Felix’s ostensible boss. When Jonah interviews Breed in his office in Ilium in the early stages of the novel, Breed both praises Hoenikker’s ability to “increase knowledge, to work toward no end but that” and hints at the existence of *ice-nine* by telling Jonah about a general who wanted Hoenikker to find a way to prevent his Marines from having to fight in mud.

Because of his fervent belief in “pure research,” Breed seems wholly unaware that Hoenikker both pursued and succeeded in finding a solution to this problem. Jonah and, by extension, Vonnegut mock Breed’s insistence that the “more truth we have to work with, the richer we become.” In another of the many instances of difficult father-son relationships in the novel, Jonah hears from a local bartender that Breed’s own son had been a research scientist at the laboratory but quit on the day the atomic bomb that Hoenikker helped build was dropped on Japan, lamenting that “anything a scientist worked on was sure to wind up as a weapon, one way or another.”

**Marvin Breed**
A tombstone salesman in Ilium, Marvin Breed provides additional context to Jonah about the Hoenikker family after Jonah’s superficial interview with Marvin’s brother Asa. Whereas Asa uncritically praises Felix’s intellectual contributions to science and business, Marvin relentlessly criticizes his lack of care for his wife, his children, his community, and humanity as a whole. One of his conjectures while talking with Jonah provides not only foreshadowing of the ending of the novel, but also a succinct summary of one of the novel’s major themes: “Sometimes I think that’s the trouble with the world: too many people in high places who are stone-cold dead.”

**Earl McCabe**
An American who deserted from the Marines in 1922, McCabe went on to become the co-founder of the modern island nation of San Lorenzo along with Lionel Boyd Johnson. Johnson and McCabe were shipwrecked on San Lorenzo while sailing from Haiti to Miami and soon thereafter took over political control of the island from the Castle Sugar company, the most recent in a series of colonial rulers. When McCabe and Johnson realize the island cannot support their visions for a prosperous and just society, they set up a system in which McCabe (as President) and Johnson (as a holy man named Bokonon) seem to oppose one another perpetually, an inherently dramatic situation that at least provides distracting amusement for the people of the island.
“Papa” Monzano
McCabe’s former major-domo and the present-day dictatorial president of San Lorenzo, “Papa” Monzano is a dying old man when most of the novel’s major characters arrive at the island near the middle of the book. In combining blatantly pro-American political rhetoric with authoritarian power, “Papa” is a parody of such Cold War-era rulers as Carlos Castillo Armas of Guatemala and Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua. However, it also seems that the main impulse behind his political positions is to encourage hyper-patriotic businessmen like H. Lowe Crosby to relocate their businesses to San Lorenzo. His beautiful adopted daughter, Mona Aamons Monzano, is the island’s most desirable commodity, though, and he both shows her off and uses her as a currency with which to purchase both the service of Frank Hoenikker as his minister of science and Frank’s chip of ice-nine, which “Papa” eventually uses to commit suicide after falling gravely ill.

It is “Papa” Monzano’s frozen corpse falling into the sea after an accidental plane crash during a jingoistic ceremony that causes the apocalypse near the end of the novel. Although “Papa” Monzano proclaims his violent hostility toward Bokononism while alive—including threatening to publicly execute anyone revealed to be a Bokononist by hanging them from a hook in a public square—Jonah is shocked to discover that “Papa” asks for Bokononist last rites.

Mona Aamons Monzano
“Papa” Monzano’s beautiful adopted daughter is the object of the desires of Jonah and several of the book’s other male characters. She is prominently featured in the advertisement in which Jonah first spots Frank Hoenikker, and he becomes madly infatuated almost immediately. However, he is saddened to find out upon arriving in San Lorenzo that she is betrothed to Frank, a seeming echo of Felix’s unjust (in the eyes of Martin Breed) marriage to Emily. Jonah agrees to take on Frank’s burden of succeeding “Papa” as president largely because Frank tells him that marrying Mona also comes along with agreeing to the deal. Although Mona is fine with this arrangement, her beliefs about non-monogamy and sexuality differ substantially from Jonah’s, causing him to grudgingly begin sharing her Bokononist belief in order to win her over. Mona survives the initial apocalypse but chooses to commit suicide by touching ice-nine to her lips just as Jonah is berating Bokonon for having advised a large group of other survivors to do so.

Julian Castle
Formerly a wealthy playboy and the head of a sugar company bearing his family’s name, Julian Castle becomes a philanthropist who founds an institution called the House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle. His character is based on a pair of historical models, the first being the European “sugar barons” who established massive sugar-cane plantations in the Caribbean during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and imported countless African slaves to work on them. The second model is the French/German humanitarian Albert Schweitzer, who received the Nobel Peace Prize ten years before the publication of Cat’s Cradle, in large part for operating a hospital in what is now the African nation of Gabon. Schweitzer frequently stated that he considered his humanitarianism a form of atonement for the abusive history of European colonialism in Africa. The Nigerian writer/scholar Chinua Achebe was

Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza (center), photographed with Argentinian President Juan Perón in 1953. The character of “Papa” Monzano in Cat’s Cradle is a parody of Cold War-era dictators such as Somoza.
among many who nevertheless sensed an underlying paternalism that allowed Schweitzer to carry on his philanthropy while also “sidestep[ping] the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people.” This ambivalent ethical legacy plays a major part in Vonnegut’s depiction of Julian Castle.

Jonah’s ostensible reason for traveling to San Lorenzo in the first place is that he has been commissioned by a magazine to write an article about Castle, one of many European and North American characters in the novel whose presence on San Lorenzo reflects a dramatic shift and/or conflict in values: “He had been absolutely unselfish for twenty years. In his selfish years, he had been as familiar to tabloid readers as Tommy Manville, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Barbara Hutton…. He had had a dazzling talent for spending millions without increasing mankind’s store of anything but chagrin.” Somewhat akin to the Kardashians or Jenner families of today, Manville and Hutton were wildly famous in the first half of the twentieth century largely due to their inherited wealth and their flamboyant social lives. Comparing their celebrity—and Castle’s—to that of such tyrants as Hitler and Mussolini suggests a kind of shared responsibility for moving the world toward disaster.

**Philip Castle**

The cynical son of Julian Castle, Philip Castle grew up on San Lorenzo alongside Mona Aamons Monzano as the personal pupils of Bokonon. He is also the author of an unpublished book entitled *San Lorenzo: The Land, the History, the People*, a copy of which is lent to Jonah during his flight to San Lorenzo by Horlick Minton, the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to the island. The younger Castle is also a talented visual artist and the owner/proprietor of San Lorenzo’s only hotel, the Casa Mona. His lack of courtesy upon meeting H. Lowe Crosby causes the latter to angrily storm out of the hotel and refer to it as the “Pissant Hilton.” Like Jonah, he attended Cornell University, and like seemingly everyone else on San Lorenzo, he is a Bokononist.

**Dr. Schlichter von Koenigswald**

Formerly a member of the infamous SS and a doctor at the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, von Koenigswald is now on the staff of Julian Castle’s philanthropic hospital and is “Papa” Monzano’s personal physician. Castle wryly observes about von Koenigswald’s efforts at penance, “If he keeps going at his present rate, working night and day, the number of people he’s saved will equal the number of people he let die—in the year 3010.”

The French/German humanitarian Albert Schweitzer was one of Vonnegut’s historical models for the character of Julian Castle in *Cat’s Cradle*. Defendants during the Doctors’ Trial at Nuremberg, 1946–47, during which German doctors were tried for war crimes. In *Cat’s Cradle*, the character of Dr. Schlichter von Koenigswald had been a member of the SS and a doctor at Auschwitz.
**Nestor Aamons**
A Finnish architect who suffered repeated capture and forced labor by forces on all sides of World War II, Nestor Aamons is described briefly in a few pages of Philip Castle’s book on San Lorenzo. His importance to both the story of San Lorenzo and to Vonnegut’s novel is limited to his role as the designer of Julian Castle’s hospital and as the father of Mona Aamons Monzano.

**H. Lowe Crosby**
A bicycle manufacturer from Illinois, H. Lowe Crosby is looking to relocate his factory to San Lorenzo because he believes the people there “don’t have the government encouraging everybody to be some kind of original pissant nobody ever heard of before.” Despite his constant patriotic exclamations, he also complains incessantly about his inability to exploit his workers in the U.S. as he would be able to do in a Third World country like San Lorenzo: “Nobody can get fired, no matter what, and if somebody does accidentally make a bicycle, the union accuses us of cruel and inhuman practices and the government confiscates the bicycle for back taxes and gives it to a blind man in Afghanistan.” Both he and his wife are among the few remaining survivors at the end of the book.

**Hazel Crosby**
The wife of H. Lowe Crosby, Hazel Crosby believes that the fact that both she and Jonah (like Vonnegut) originally come from Indiana is extremely significant. For this reason, she insists that he call her “Mom” after they meet during the flight to San Lorenzo. Her obsession with this association exemplifies Bokonon’s concept of a *granfalloon*, which Jonah describes as “a seeming team that was meaningless in terms of the way God gets things done,” other examples of which were “the Communist party, the daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company [for which Vonnegut worked in the early 1950s], the International Order of Odd Fellows—and any nation, anytime, anywhere.” This concept is contrasted with Bokonon’s idea of the *karass*, which Jonah claims early on in the book “ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries,” a notion that would be potentially threatening to the status quo in a polarized environment like that of the Cold War.

**Horlick Minton**
A “white-haired, gentle, and frail” career diplomat who never seems to speak his mind straightforwardly, Horlick Minton is the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to San Lorenzo. Jonah meets him on the flight to San Lorenzo along with his wife, with whom he forms what Bokonon calls a *duprass*, “a karass composed of only two people...[that] can’t be invaded, not even by children born of such a union.” This reference links Minton with Felix Hoenikker and Julian Castle as fathers whose life’s work seems to have made them unable or unwilling to have loving relationships with their own offspring. Although Jonah takes to the somewhat standoffish Mintons far more readily than the gregarious Crosbys, they remain largely ineffectual critical observers until the end of the world, when they essentially commit suicide together by refusing to step to safety from a collapsing ledge. Minton also loans Jonah a copy of Philip Castle’s book, which provides Jonah with most of what he knows about San Lorenzo prior to his arrival there.

**Claire Minton**
Claire Minton, Horlick Minton’s wife, works as a professional indexer of books and analyzes Philip Castle’s personality during the flight to San Lorenzo based solely on the way he has indexed his own manuscript. She also wrote a letter to *The New York Times* from Pakistan, where the Crosbys were stationed at the time, that got her husband “fired by the State Department for his softness toward Communism,” as the Crosbys tell Jonah. Although Horlick Minton insists that he “was fired for pessimism” rather than Communism, the reaction to his wife’s letter exemplifies the paranoid patriotism of McCarthyism. The sentence from her letter that “they kept coming back to again and again in the loyalty hearing” reads...
“Americans…are forever searching for love in forms it never takes, in places it can never be.”

Sandra
Sandra is a prostitute whom Jonah meets in a bar while spending a night in Ilium early in the novel, and she is also a former high school classmate of Frank Hoenikker. She offers Jonah some insight into the Hoenikker family’s unhappiness, particularly Frank’s dull teenage existence: “He never got on any committee, never played any game, never took any girl out. I don’t think he ever even talked to a girl. We used to call him Secret Agent X-9…. [H]e was always acting like he was on his way between two secret places.” Although Sandra laughingly dismisses the notion that Frank actually has a secret life below this inconspicuous surface, the fact that he provides “Papa” Monzano with the unknown chip of ice-nine that eventually causes the novel’s global apocalypse adds terrible irony to her words.

Miss Pefko
Miss Pefko is a young secretary working for one of the research scientists at General Forge and Foundry, though she professes to barely comprehend any of the work going on there. Her character is one of many minor female characters who demonstrate the era’s false presumptions about the comparative abilities of men and women. During the tour he receives from Asa Breed, Jonah asks Miss Pefko her opinion of what goes on around her, and his description of her reaction is telling: “Her smile was glassy, and she was ransacking her mind for something to say, finding nothing in it but used Kleenex and costume jewelry…. ‘You scientists think too much.’”

Although Vonnegut’s unkind characterization of Miss Pefko and other women in the novel does not exempt him from accusations of sexism, it should also be noted that the powerful men he includes in the book are repeatedly mocked for their selfishness, a suggestion that they would not feel much impetus to act contrary to the longstanding gender roles of American society. Breed sums up this dismissive attitude when he attempts to praise the secretaries by saying, “The girls belong to anyone with access to a dictaphone…. They serve science, too…even though they may not understand a word of it.”

Miss Faust
An older secretary at General Forge and Foundry, Miss Faust gives Jonah some additional perspective on Felix Hoenikker as she leads him out of the building following his interview with Asa Breed. As they leave the building, she takes Jonah to Hoenikker’s former office, which contains a memorial plaque whose last sentence proves terribly prescient, given the way in which his invention contributes to the end of the world at the novel’s conclusion: “THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS ONE MAN IN THE HISTORY OF MANKIND IS INCALCULABLE.” Miss Faust also shares her impression of Felix Hoenikker as a man out of step with his own time: “Maybe in a million years everybody will be as smart as he was and see things the way he did. But, compared with the average person of today, he was as different as a man from Mars.”

Lyman Enders Knowles
Knowles is an eccentric, older African-American man who works as an elevator operator at General Forge and Foundry. He appears only in chapter 28 of the novel as Jonah is leaving his interview with Asa Breed. His comments about Felix Hoenikker that walk a fine line between cleverness and madness prefigure the later appearance of Bokonon.

Jack
The owner of the hobby shop in Ilium where Frank Hoenikker spent most of his time as an adolescent, either as a customer or an employee, Jack makes nothing but sympathetic comments to Jonah about Frank’s underappreciated intelligence. When Frank later tells Jonah that he had also been sleeping with Jack’s wife nearly the entire time he was frequenting the store, it serves as yet another example of a potentially compassionate relationship being
undermined by self-interest.

**PLOT SUMMARY**
Vonnegut breaks his relatively short novel up into 127 chapters, some of which are barely more than a couple of lines in length. Moreover, he also intersperses chapters in which Jonah explains a concept from Bokononism with the general development of the story from beginning to end. Therefore, a chapter-by-chapter summary of the book makes little sense. Instead, what follows is a summary of twelve sections of the book, each of which is generally focused on a particular plot development and Jonah’s authorial commentary on it.

**Chapters 1–4: Jonah’s Introduction**
In these opening chapters, a world-weary writer named Jonah (born as John) introduces both himself and his onetime intention of writing a book—entitled *The Day the World Ended*—about the day on which the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Continuing a process that began when he “was a younger man—two wives ago, 250,000 cigarettes ago, 3,000 quarts of booze ago,” he is still conducting research for this book as the plot of *Cat’s Cradle* begins halfway through chapter 4. He also begins to relate his conversion from Christianity to the invented religion of Bokononism. He introduces and defines the concept of a Bokononist karass as “teams that do God’s will without ever discovering what they are doing” and suggests that the book he is now writing (and which we are now reading) will “include as many members of my karass as possible...[in order to] examine all strong hints as to what on Earth we, collectively, have been up to” even as he acknowledges that Bokonon “observes that such investigations are bound to be incomplete.” In what amounts to a restatement of the novel’s epigraph, he also warns the reader that “All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies” and that “[a]nyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either.”

**Chapters 5–8: Correspondence with Newt**
Having already included the text of a letter of inquiry he wrote to Felix Hoenikker’s youngest son at the end of chapter 4, Jonah includes Newt Hoenikker’s response in the next three chapters. Newt’s letter describes his gradual academic failure as a pre-med major at Cornell University and his dim memories of his father’s behavior on the day that the atomic bomb was first used, when Newt was six years old. He particularly recalls his father taking a piece of string from around an unread book manuscript (significantly, a science-fiction novel about mad scientists destroying the world) and making a “cat’s cradle” out of it in an attempt to entertain him. He also tells Jonah about his older brother and sister, thereby introducing them and their messy family dynamic to the reader. Newt’s letter is followed by a chapter about a Ukrainian dancer named Zinka who defected both from and back to the U.S.S.R. and with whom Newt has an intense week-long relationship during her time in the U.S.

**Chapters 9–24: General Forge and Foundry**
This portion of the book focuses largely on the figure of Felix Hoenikker, initially identified by Jonah in chapter 4 as “one of the so-called ‘Fathers’ of the first atomic bomb.” A year after receiving the letter from Newt, Jonah is working on an entirely unrelated story when he decides to stop off in Ilium, New York, where Hoenikker lived and worked as a research scientist for the General Forge and Foundry company. Before interviewing Hoenikker’s longtime supervisor, Jonah
spends a night in the bar of his hotel talking with several locals who knew Hoenikker and his family.

The next morning, Jonah interviews Asa Breed, who distrustfully responds to most of his questions by defending science and scientists in general and Hoenikker against what he presumes is Jonah’s intent of “getting [him] to admit that scientists are heartless, conscienceless, narrow boobies, indifferent to the fate of the rest of the human race, or maybe not really members of the human race at all.”68 As they drive to the laboratory, Breed tells Jonah a story about how Hoenikker indirectly contributed to his wife’s death by absentmindedly abandoning his car in traffic, leaving his wife to pick it up from the police. Unfamiliar with driving his fancy car, she got in an accident on the way home, and the injury she sustained ultimately led to her death while giving birth to Newton, her third child.

Breed also tells Jonah a story of how Hoenikker had been asked by a Marine general to come up with a solution for the problem of having to fight in mud and lays out the theory about a form of ice with a higher freezing point that Hoenikker put forth as a possible answer. However, Breed insists angrily that even though the existence of such a substance would present a grave threat to the world, Hoenikker never followed up on this request. Although he does not know it at the time of his interview, Jonah contradicts Breed’s convictions about ice-nine’s nonexistence in the very next chapter, foreshadowing the role that it will play as the Bokononist wampeter of both Vonnegut’s novel and Jonah’s karass. Jonah says that “[a]nything can be a wampeter: a tree, a rock, an animal, an idea, a melody, the Holy Grail. Whatever it is, the members of its karass revolve about it in the majestic chaos of a spiral nebula.”69

Chapters 25–36: Other Perspectives on the Hoenikkers
After the conclusion of his “unpleasant interview”70 with Asa Breed, Jonah has a series of encounters, first with other employees at General Forge and Foundry and then with other residents of Ilium, each of which provides him with further insight into various members of the Hoenikker family. Breed’s longtime secretary, Miss Faust (whose last name alludes to an old German story about a scholar who makes a deal with the devil), takes Jonah to Felix Hoenikker’s former office, which has been turned into something of a shrine to his intellectual achievements. His desk remains as he left it upon his death, covered in a series of objects that all attest to the nature of his mind and personality: a series of “cheap toys […] from ten-cent stories,”71 a pile of unanswered letters, and a photograph of cannonballs stacked on a courthouse lawn (the apparent inspiration for the molecular structure of ice-nine). Amidst this scene, Miss Faust’s comment that “some of his most famous experiments were performed with equipment that cost less than a dollar”72 seems intended as praise, but ends up working as an indictment of the low value of human life, given that the remarkable discovery of ice-nine is counterbalanced by the threat of complete planetary extinction.

Jonah also meets an African-American elevator operator named Lyman Ender Knowles, whose curious behavior—which Jonah presumes to be the result of insanity—belies the ethical wisdom of his questions about the work being done at General Forge.
and Foundry: “This here’s a re-search laboratory. Re-search means look again, don’t it? Means they’re looking for something they found once and it got away somehow, and now they got to re-search for it. How come they got to build a building like this… and fill it with all these crazy people? What is it they’re trying to find again?” His brief appearance in the novel is one of many echoes of Bokonon’s unusual philosophy, which ultimately gets the last word in the novel.

After leaving General Forge and Foundry, Jonah decides he wants to get a photo of Hoenikker’s tombstone in the sleet (a symbolic foreshadowing of the deadly ice that encases the earth later on). He believes he has found it when he arrives at “an alabaster phallus twenty feet high and three feet thick” and exclaims sarcastically, “how’s that for a suitable memorial to a father of the atomic bomb?” His rhetorical question is ironically undermined when he discovers that this is actually his wife Emily’s monument, which a tombstone salesman named Marvin Breed tells Jonah was purchased by the couple’s three children a year after her death because Felix “never got around to putting any kind of marker on her grave.”

Marvin Breed is Asa’s brother, and he almost completely inverts the praise that his brother heaped on Felix. Marvin reveals that he was in love with Emily as they were growing up in Ilium together but that she chose to marry Felix because, as she said, “his mind was tuned to the biggest music there was, the music of the stars.” Marvin bitterly recounts his recollections of the entire Hoenikker family, implying strongly that Felix neglected them all in the way Marvin believes he mistreated Emily. He is especially harsh toward Felix’s treatment of his oldest daughter, Angela: “And, in that same miserable family, there’s that great big, gawky girl, over six feet tall. That man, who’s so famous for having a great mind, pulled that girl out of high school in her sophomore year so he could go on having some woman take care of him.”

Jonah’s final encounter in Ilium is with the proprietor of the hobby shop in which Franklin Hoenikker, Felix and Emily’s middle child, spent most of his time. Jack’s attitude toward Frank, as he calls him, echoes Asa Breed’s attitude toward Felix, claiming that the intricately detailed model train display that Frank built in the shop’s basement qualified as evidence of his genius. Like Marvin Breed, Jack assumes that Frank’s disappearance after Felix’s funeral has resulted in his death (a presumption Jonah soon discovers to be untrue) and mourns the loss of a person who, like his father, could “see things you and I wouldn’t see.”

**Chapters 37–60: Traveling to San Lorenzo**

Not long after returning home from Ilium, Jonah sees a newspaper advertisement for San Lorenzo that describes a “healthy, happy, progressive freedom-loving beautiful nation [that] makes itself extremely attractive to American investors and tourists alike.” The ad’s language about beauty and attractiveness is embodied almost entirely in a photo of Mona Aamons Monzano, with whom Jonah is instantly smitten, identifying her both as “the adopted daughter of the dictator of the island” and a “sublime mongrel Madonna” whose beauty contrasts with “Papa” Monzano, a “gorilla in his late seventies.”

As Jonah looks more closely at the advertisement, he also sees a photo of twenty-six-year-old Franklin Hoenikker wearing a military uniform and identified as “Minister of Science and Progress in the Republic of San Lorenzo.” Jonah presumes from the article’s repeated mention of Frank’s familial relationship to Felix Hoenikker that “Papa’ plainly felt that Frank was a chunk of the old man’s magic meat.” This phrase foreshadows the revelation of the disastrous chip of ice-nine Frank brought with him to San Lorenzo when his sinking boat washed up on the shores of San Lorenzo (as Bokonon and Earl McCabe previously had, though neither Jonah nor the reader knows this yet).

Having previously been assigned to write a magazine article about a philanthropic hospital in the jungles of San Lorenzo, Jonah is drawn both by this responsibility and his infatuation with Mona to board a flight for the island. While in flight, he meets a series of people, including the other two Hoenikker children, the newly appointed American ambassador, and a vociferous man named H. Lowe Crosby who is looking to relocate his bicycle factory to San Lorenzo. The ambassador, Horlick Minton, and his wife are both politely distant toward Jonah, but Minton also loans Jonah a copy of “the only scholarly book ever written about San Lorenzo.” The author of this book turns out to be Philip Castle, the son of Julian Castle, who founded the hospital about which Jonah is supposedly writing. Jonah reads the book voraciously throughout the remainder of the flight and in the process provides
the reader with an exposition about the island and its most important residents, especially Lionel Boyd Johnson, a.k.a. Bokonon, and his collaborator Earl McCabe.

The Crosbys live in the Chicago suburb of Evanston, Illinois, but Hazel Crosby latches onto Jonah when she discovers that, like her, he grew up in Indiana. Her unshakeable belief that “We Hoosiers got to stick together” makes her insist that Jonah call her “Mom,” yet another occurrence of the theme of flawed parental relationships (or at least ones that bear a parental name) in the novel. Also, both Crosbys claim to be patriotic Americans—which they demonstrate by accusing Minton of being a communist sympathizer—the main reason Mr. Crosby wants to relocate his bicycle factory to San Lorenzo is because “dictatorships were often very good things” for removing such barriers to profit as unfair labor laws and personal freedom. Moreover, Mrs. Crosby firmly (and wrongly) believes that San Lorenzans “all speak English and they’re all Christians,” linking her with a particularly xenophobic Cold War brand of Americanism that cannot attribute value to people unlike herself. Jonah links both of them to the concept of the *granfalloon*, an artificial notion of shared identity that Bokonon juxtaposes against the concept of the *karass* that is introduced in the book’s opening chapters.

Mrs. Crosby introduces Jonah to Angela Hoenikker Conners and Newt Hoenikker, who boarded the plane during a brief stopover in Puerto Rico. Mrs. Crosby is particularly keen to inform Jonah that the Hoenikker siblings live in Indianapolis and are thus also Hoosiers. During their brief conversation, Angela shows Jonah a number of family photographs, including one that reveals Mona Aamons Monzano to be engaged to Frank Hoenikker, much to Jonah’s chagrin.

**Chapters 61–66: Arrival in San Lorenzo**

Upon landing, all of the passengers are herded through a customs shed covered in signs that all vehemently (and falsely, as is later revealed) profess the outlawed status of Bokonon and his religion on San Lorenzo. As Jonah, the Mintons, the Crosbys, and the two Hoenikker siblings emerge from customs, they see nearly the entire population of the island standing before them, and the picture is dramatically different from the rosy description of the island in the newspaper ad. Jonah saw that, “There wasn’t a fat person to be seen. Every person had teeth missing. Many legs were bowed or swollen. Not one pair of eyes were clear.” This scene leads Hazel Crosby to fall back on her preconceived notion for reassurance: “I’m sure glad it’s a Christian country…or I’d be a little scared.”

The remainder of the arrival scene is taken up with the pomp and circumstance of the ceremony officially welcoming the new American ambassador. Jonah sees the six ragged planes of the San Lorenzan air force (one of which later plays a major role in bringing about the apocalypse), “Papa” Monzano, Frank Hoenikker, and Mona, who enraptures Jonah further with her physical beauty and her musical performance on the xylophone. “Papa” strides forward to greet the new ambassador, but mistakenly addresses Crosby, not Minton, with his declaration of San Lorenzo’s political devotion: “Welcome…You are coming to the best friend America ever had. America is misunderstood many places, but not here, Mr. Ambassador.” His subsequent assurance to Minton that there are “No communists here…They fear the hook too much,” identifies him as being akin to the Third World dictators in charge of U.S. client states during the Cold War.

Having already winced in pain throughout the
ceremony, “Papa” collapses after introducing Frank and Mona to the assembled crowd as the future of San Lorenzo: “What children these two will have… What blood! What beauty!” As “Papa” briefly emerges from his swoon, he anoints Frank as his successor because of his knowledge of science. At the same time, Jonah observes Mona rubbing her foot against a soldier’s boot but does not yet understand this act as the Bokononist ritual of boko-maru.

**Chapters 67–72: Boko-Maru at the “Pissant Hilton”**

After “Papa” is whisked away in an ambulance, the island’s sole taxi takes Jonah and the Crosbys to its only hotel. Both the cab and the hotel are owned by Philip Castle, who also wrote the book Jonah read on the plane and who is constructing a mosaic portrait of Mona in the entryway of his hotel when the new guests arrive. Jonah engages him in conversation about his father, a former sugar magnate who two decades earlier rededicated his life and fortune to taking care of San Lorenzo’s destitute citizens. He also tells Jonah that he and Mona were Bokonon’s pupils when they were children. This fact enrages Crosby, who only knows that Bokononism is officially outlawed by the dictator he esteems so highly. When Crosby discovers that the younger Castle owns the hotel, he declares it to be the “Pissant Hilton” and refuses to remain there, leaving Jonah as its only guest.

As Jonah wanders the halls in search of a maid, he comes across two painters touching the soles of their feet together. The two men leap up in fear at Jonah’s intrusion, but rather than fearing (as he assumes) his outing of them as homosexuals, it turns out that they, like Mona and the pilot earlier, are engaging in boko-maru, a Bokononist communion ritual described as follows: “We Bokononists believe that it is impossible to be sole-to-sole with another person without loving the person, provided the feet of both persons are clean and nicely tended.” Despite the pun replacing the connection of souls with that of soles, this ritual demonstrates the degree of human compassion inherent in Bokononism, a stark contrast to science, politics, business, or any of the other belief systems presented in the book.

**Chapters 73–90: Waiting for Frank**

While speaking with Philip Castle about his father’s philanthropic work, Jonah receives a phone call from Frank summoning him to a meeting at his house. Philip concludes his grisly story about an outbreak of bubonic plague at Julian Castle’s hospital by remembering a comment—“someday this will all be yours”—that the elder Castle made to his son at the sight of endless corpses in his hospital’s beds. Whether this bit of gallows humor arises from grief or insensitivity remains unclear, but it complicates the air of saintliness of Julian Castle’s good works later in life, which have largely obscured his earlier carelessness.

Jonah takes the cab to Frank’s house, but he only finds Newt there, painting a picture that he says depicts the cat’s cradle game with which his father had tried to amuse him as a child. Angela arrives not long after with Julian Castle, whose hospital she has been visiting. Castle quickly reinforces the mixed impression that his son’s earlier anecdote had conveyed, declaring Newt’s painting to be “[g]arbage—like everything else” and throwing it off the apartment’s balcony into a nearby waterfall. This act leads Jonah to comment that in order to write about Castle, he will need “to concentrate on his saintly deeds and ignore entirely the satanic things he thought and said.” While explaining the positive effects of boko-maru to Jonah, Castle also reveals that “everybody on San Lorenzo is a devout Bokononist” despite the omnipresent threats of severe punishment. He also suggests that this religion and aspirin are the two things that successfully relieve the misery of life on the island, going so far as to tell Jonah that he will realize that he, too, is a Bokononist before long.

While continuing to wait for Frank’s arrival, Jonah talks with Newt and Angela over drinks. Angela vociferously “complain[s] of how much the world had swindled her father” even as Castle reminds everyone of San Lorenzo’s immense poverty. As Angela gets increasingly agitated, Newt calms her down by encouraging her to play her clarinet, which she does beautifully, much to Jonah’s surprise. Her talent along with her choice of music—a blues song by composer Meade Lux Lewis—points to the fact that the “emotional and physical deformity of [each of] the Hoenikker offspring is even more tragic because of [their] thwarted artistic potential.” Despite Angela, Frank, and Newt’s demonstrable talents as, respectively, a musician, an architect, and a painter, none of them finds a way to make these creative abilities meaningful in their lives, choosing instead (as Jonah discovers late in the novel) to barter the lethal...
scientific reality of ice-nine for immediate comforts.

During the dinner that follows Angela’s emotional musical performance, Castle reveals “Papa’s” advanced cancer diagnosis and that he is being treated by his assistant, a man named Schlchter von Koenigswald, who is “[d]oing penance at the House of Hope and Mercy” for the grave misdeeds he committed while a Nazi camp doctor at Auschwitz during the Holocaust. Perhaps more than any other character in the book, von Koenigswald embodies the simultaneous capacity for great good and great evil in all humans, a trait that challenges the simplistic oppositional morality of the Cold War.

Jonah’s curiosity and anxiety concerning Frank’s delay in arriving both rise as one of the island’s frequent power outages coincides with the arrival of several trucks filled with soldiers, who begin digging fortifications around the apartment. Jonah falls asleep while reading from a copy of The Books of Bokonon that is sitting on Frank’s bedside table (further confirmation of Castle’s insistence that everyone on the island is a Bokononist). When he is startled awake by the sounds of the power being restored to the house, he finds himself face to face with Newt and Angela, each of whom carries a small Thermos jug that they are “shocked to find in their hands.” Only later does Jonah discover that these jugs hold the chips of ice-nine that they and Frank divided among themselves upon their father’s death years before.

Frank arrives soon thereafter and quickly pulls Jonah aside for a private conversation in which he offers him the presidency of San Lorenzo. Frank’s reasoning for passing on the responsibility with which “Papa” burdened him is that he recognizes that he shares both his father’s talents and his limitations: “I’ve got a lot of very good ideas, just the way my father did… but he was no good at facing the public, and neither am I.” Jonah remains uninterested in the job until Frank informs him that it is “predicted in The Books of Bokonon that [Mona will] marry the next President of San Lorenzo.”

**Chapters 91–93: Jonah and Mona**

Having still never met Mona in person but still believing himself to be deeply in love with her, Jonah finds himself shy and awkward when she is presented to him as his future bride not long after his meeting with Frank. She puts him at ease almost immediately by suggesting boko-maru, the experience of which he describes in a seventeen-line verse reminiscent of (bad) classical love poetry. As he basks in the afterglow of their ecstatic commingling of feet, she informs him that Frank intends to marry the soon-to-be ex-wife of the hobby shop owner in Ilium who had earlier defended Frank so thoroughly. When Jonah insists that Mona no longer practice boko-maru with anyone else but him now that they are betrothed, she angrily accuses him of being a sin-wat, a “man who wants all of somebody’s love,” and threatens to abandon him then and there because he cannot follow the Bokononist instruction “to love everyone exactly the same.” Her rejection of monogamy is not merely an echo of the growing sexual liberation movement of the 1960s, but also a clear contradiction to the Cold War’s demands of single-minded political loyalty. When Jonah asks to convert to Bokononism, Mona instantly professes her love for him (and everybody else) again.

**Chapters 94–105: Succession and Suicide**

Frank and Jonah set out to visit “Papa” with the intent of getting his approval for their arrangement regarding the succession. On the way to his castle, they pass the island’s highest point, Mount McCabe, which Frank says no one has ever climbed despite it being “no more forbidding than courthouse steps” in Jonah’s view. This observation presages the setting for the novel’s final scene, when Bokonon and Jonah finally meet atop the mountain.

Frank and Jonah arrive to find “Papa” ready to die, lying in a gilded bed made out of the lifeboat
that brought Johnson and McCabe to San Lorenzo. Although a somewhat cartoonish minister named Vox Humana is waiting to perform Christian last rites on “Papa” in keeping with the dictator’s stated religion, “Papa” angrily dismisses him and announces with his last energy that he is a Bokononist. Schlichter von Koenigswald administers the ritual, having watched Julian Castle perform it at his hospital on countless occasions. Von Koenigswald and “Papa” speak touching words of love and gratitude during the ritual, but “Papa” is still hanging onto life as Frank and Jonah depart to make preparations for Jonah’s succession to power. They make plans to announce him as the new president at that afternoon’s celebration of the Day of the Hundred Martyrs to Democracy (honoring a shipload of forced draftees from San Lorenzo who were torpedoed by a German submarine while sailing out of the island’s harbor to join the Allied side in World War II). At this ceremony, Minton is also scheduled to throw a wreath into the sea in his first official act as U.S. ambassador. As Jonah writes his speech for the occasion, he quickly shifts from ideistically considering an end to the ban on Bokonon and his religion to recognizing that “whatever entertainment there was in that was about all we had to give the people.” With all of the dignitaries gathered on the battlement of the castle that doubled as the presidential residence, Jonah looks down into the bay at a series of cardboard caricatures that are “to be fired upon and bombed in a demonstration of might by the six planes of the San Lorenzan Air Force” as part of the ceremony. The Crosbys approvingly identify all of the represented figures—including such Cold War adversaries as Joseph Stalin, Fidel Castro, and Mao Zedong, along with Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, “some old Jap,” Karl Marx, and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany—as “practically every enemy that freedom ever had.”

A brief metafictional interlude inserted at this point sheds a great deal of light on Vonnegut’s intention in writing Cat’s Cradle. While waiting for the ceremony to start, Jonah has a conversation with the Castles about his status as a writer (no one other than Frank knows about his imminent succession to the presidency, after all). After Philip Castle jokingly proposes “calling a general strike of all writers until mankind finally comes to its senses,” Jonah candidly responds by saying he could not support such a proposal because of his belief that being a writer is a “sacred obligation to produce beauty and enlightenment and comfort at top speed.” This comment might seem hypocritical, given his failure thus far to produce the book about the day of the Hiroshima bombing that he mentions in the novel’s opening chapter, but it also previews the fact that he will spend six months after the end of the world writing the book that we are now reading. Julian Castle’s implores both Jonah and his son to “please keep writing,” a message that Vonnegut himself seems to have taken to heart. Although Jonah’s book is a retrospective view on how the world ended that will never find an audience, Vonnegut’s book is a cautionary tale attempting—perhaps pessimistically—to stave off such a grim ending.

As the start of the ceremony nears, Jonah overhears a conversation between Frank and the Crosbys in which Frank indicts Bokonon for supposedly being “against science.” The Crosbys cite both the antibiotic penicillin and the anti-infection drug sulfathiazole as life-saving scientific discoveries. However, the ironic title of the very next chapter (“Pain-killer”) suggests that the use of science to develop deadly weapons outweighs such positive considerations, especially since the pain-killer that the title references is the chip of ice-nine that “Papa” uses to end his suffering, thereby setting into motion the series of events that leads to the freezing of the entire world. As Mark Brake and Neil Hook observe, “Vonnegut marks the limits of the dream of scientific progress. Cat’s Cradle does not suggest we abandon science. For Vonnegut the antinuclear struggle is a fight for human power, a war waged
against technocracy”¹⁰⁴ like that represented by the amoral researchers at General Forge and Foundry.

**Chapters 106–115: The Ice-Nine Genie Leaves its Bottle**

This section represents the climax of the novel’s action. Soon after Dr. Von Koenigswald discovers the frozen corpse of “Papa” in his golden bed, he accidentally kills himself as well by touching some of the mysterious new ice to his own lips. Jonah angrily confronts the Hoenikker children about how “Papa” got his hands on *ice-nine*, after which they all begin frantically cleaning up the remnants of the mess as though they had done so before. The siblings begin bickering among themselves, and Newt directly accuses Frank of being irresponsible in getting his “fancy job” from “Papa” by promising him “something better than the hydrogen bomb.”¹⁰⁵ Frank defends himself by pointing out that each of them has basically done the same thing: “His glassy smile went away and he turned sneeringly nasty for a moment—a moment in which he told [Angela] with all possible contempt, “I bought myself a job, just the way you bought yourself a tomcat husband, just the way Newt bought himself a week on Cape Cod with a Russian midget!”

Jonah quickly comprehends the terrifying implications of Frank’s outburst:

> I gathered that the Republic of San Lorenzo and the three Hoenikkers weren’t the only ones who had ice-nine. Apparently, the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had it, too. The United States had acquired it through Angela’s husband, whose plant in Indianapolis was understandably surrounded by electrified fences and homicidal German shepherds. And Soviet Russia had come by it through Newt’s little Zinka, that winsome troll of the Ukrainian ballet. I was without comment.¹⁰⁶

The Hoenikkers’ exposed selfishness justifies Lyman Enders Knowles’s calling them “[b]abies full of rabies”¹⁰⁷ during his brief appearance in the novel in chapter 29. However, the clandestine processes by which *ice-nine* proliferated among both superpowers parallel those of nuclear weapons development during the Cold War, thereby implicating not only Vonnegut’s fictional characters, but also the technocrats and politicians of the Cold War world for lusting after such exceptionally deadly knowledge. Jonah makes this broader connection clear by lamenting “What hope can there be for mankind…when there are such men as Felix Hoenikker to give such playthings as *ice-nine* to such short-sighted children as almost all men and women are?”¹⁰⁸

After carefully disposing of all the *ice-nine* they can find in the room, the Hoenikkers tell Jonah the story of how they acquired their three chips of *ice-nine* on the Christmas Eve when their father died. Unbeknownst to them, their father had been experimenting with *ice-nine* in the kitchen of their Cape Cod cottage when he died of a sudden heart attack while the children were out walking on the beach. When they returned home with a stray Labrador retriever, the dog licked a rag covered in frozen *ice-nine* and instantly froze stiff itself. When they looked for their father to report this odd event, the children found him stiff as well, though from far less unusual causes. None of the Hoenikkers can recall which of them proposed dividing the *ice-nine* amongst themselves, but “there was no talk of morals”¹⁰⁹ in regard to doing so, as was sadly typical for the family. Their last act in the process of hiding their father’s discovery is both a practical necessity and a grotesquely comical echo of the methods used to dispose of murdered prisoners in the Nazi death camps; they dispose of the frozen dog by putting him in the oven.

Upon concluding their most recent sanitation of *ice-nine*, Jonah and the Hoenikkers return to the battlements directly above the contaminated bedroom for the beginning of the ceremonies honoring the Hundred Martyrs to Democracy, having also spread the convenient lie “among the household staff that ‘Papa’ was feeling much better.”¹¹⁰ Unaware of the
potential for global doom that lies just below him, Minton gives a poignant speech in which he suggests that the “thrilling show” for which everyone is gathered is only appropriate “if we, the celebrants, are working consciously and tirelessly to reduce the stupidity and viciousness of ourselves and all mankind.” As he throws the tacky artificial wreath he has brought into the sea as a symbolic tribute, Minton adds that, “This wreath I bring is a gift from the people of one country to the people of another. Never mind which countries,” an assertion that contradicts the jingoistic slogan “PRO PATRIA” (“For one’s country” or, more literally, “For one’s Fatherland”) printed on the wreath’s ribbon.

His noble efforts at imparting a humanistic tone to the proceedings are almost immediately drowned out by the hum of the planes of the San Lorenzan Air Force approaching to strafe the floating cutouts of the U.S.’s most instantly recognizable twentieth-century enemies. During their maneuvers, one of the planes malfunctions and crashes into the cliff below the castle, thereby causing a landslide that breaks off a portion of the battlement on which the ceremony is taking place. All of the participants jump to safety except the Mintons, whose “good manners killed them, for the doomed crescent of castle now moved away from us like an ocean liner moving away from a dock,” sending them crashing to their deaths in the sea below. Although Jonah attributes their apparent suicide to a desire to maintain “dignity [and] emotional proportion” during a moment of crisis, it also results from their resignation at the failure of Minton’s speech to make an impression on the gathered crowd, a mood that the novel’s bleak conclusion reinforces.

Chapters 116–127: Catastrophe and Aftermath

With everyone except the Mintons seemingly having survived the rockslide, Jonah steps back from the jagged edge of the cliff’s new face. In doing so, he loosens a stone that falls to the level below, where the room in which the frozen corpse of “Papa” lies is now exposed to the open air. The stone crashes into the floor of that room, making it into a chute out of which all of the room’s furnishings, including the bed in which “Papa” lies, gradually fall toward the sea. As Jonah sees “Papa’s” body fall, he closes his eyes and only hears “a sound like that of the gentle closing of a portal as big as the sky, the great door of heaven being closed softly. It was a grand AH-WHOOM.” When he once again opens his eyes, the entire ocean is frozen solid and tornadoes scattering ice-nine crystals are everywhere.

All the people gathered on the battlements flee in uncomprehending terror, with the Crosbys instinctively shouting “American! American!...as though tornadoes were interested in the granfalloons to which their victims belonged.” Mona and Jonah climb down into the secret bomb shelter that “Papa” had constructed for himself, following the prescription for surviving a nuclear war that accompanied the “shelter craze” of the 1950s. They wait out the tornadoes for a week in their underground haven, drinking uncontaminated water from its storage tanks, reading from The Books of Bokonon, and presuming that “[a]nything that still lived would die soon enough of thirst—or hunger—or rage—or apathy.”

When they emerge into the castle, they discover a freshly written Bokononist verse describing God’s apathy in the face of human disapproval. Still looking for survivors, Jonah and Mona eventually come across thousands of dead bodies arranged in a manner that suggests that “each person had delivered himself to this melancholy place and then poisoned himself with ice-nine.” At the site of this mass suicide is a note signed by Bokonon in which he indicates that he suggested this course of action to the crowd after they asked him for guidance. Jonah finds Bokonon’s advice to be terribly cynical, whereas Mona is convinced enough by his proposal to choose it for herself and immediately kills herself in a similar fashion.

Jonah goes momentarily mad with grief and is discovered in this state by Frank, Newt, and the Crosbys, who had survived together in one of the castle’s dungeons. Despite the near-complete destruction of the world, three of these four survivors apparently still value their national identity, as Frank paints the letters “U.S.A.” on the roof of San Lorenzo’s taxicab, and Hazel Crosby sews an American flag out of strips of cloth in a conscious imitation of Betsy Ross, who has been mythologized as having stitched together the first American flag during the Revolutionary War. Hazel’s intention is to plant it atop Mount McCabe, extending the American colonial impulse into the postapocalyptic world.

Newt has largely withdrawn himself from what remains of the world, finally devoting himself to his
painting. Jonah goes off to find him, and they discuss Bokononism and the noble ways in which the Castles and Angela faced their deaths in the aftermath of the storm. The Castles returned to the House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle to offer whatever ultimately inconsequential aid they could, whereas Angela picked up her clarinet and played, much as the orchestra on the Titanic is reputed to have continued to play until the moment the great ship sank. As he did upon discovering the note at the site of the mass-suicide, Jonah rages against Bokonon and his book’s seeming lack of reassurance; he even directs a racial slur against Bokonon before Newt suggests that the most useful course of action remaining is to “find some neat way to die, too.”

Jonah responds by saying that he has come to believe that his karass has been “working night and day for maybe half a million years” to get him to the top of Mount McCabe with “some magnificent symbol” to leave there. He cannot, however, conceive of what that symbol might be (though it surely is not Hazel’s flag).

While he is saying this, their car passes a black man sitting by the side of the road, and Jonah belatedly realizes he has finally seen Bokonon. He loops back to speak with Bokonon, asking him simply what he is thinking. Bokonon replies that he, like Jonah, and Vonnegut is drawing his book to a close and hands Jonah a piece of paper with its final lines written on it. As Susan Farrell notes, “The history that the narrator is writing, the novel Cat’s Cradle itself, and The Books of Bokonon all become inextricably intertwined in this final page. Each begins with a warning that the pages contained within are nothing but lies, and each can be read as a history of human stupidity.”

Bokonon’s final lines (and thus the final lines of the other two books as well) involve using ice-nine to turn himself into a reclining statue atop Mount McCabe that perpetually thumbs its nose at God. Such a gesture acknowledges God’s existence while simultaneously undermining the moral and/or ethical significance thereof, making it the perfect closing statement for a writer who elsewhere called himself both a “Christ-worshipping agnostic” and a “scorner of the notion that there is a God who cares how we are or what we do.”

**CONTEXT: VONNEGUT’S EARLY NOVELS**

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.’s career as a writer only began after some fairly significant troubles in his early life. Born in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1922, he served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He was captured by German forces during the Battle of the Bulge late in 1944 and thereafter survived the Allied firebombing of the city of Dresden in February 1945 while a military prisoner there. He eventually wrote about this experience in his sixth novel, Slaughterhouse-Five (1969), but he published several other books—including Cat’s Cradle (1963)—well before he turned his attention to writing directly about his intense wartime trauma.

Vonnegut got a job in Schenectady, New York, in the late 1940s, where he wrote public relations copy for the General Electric Research Laboratory. While employed there, he began writing fiction and published his first story in 1950. Both encouraged by this success and disillusioned by his work at General Electric, he quit his job and moved his family—which by the end of the decade included his wife, their three biological children, and his sister’s three orphaned sons—to the Cape Cod village of West Barnstable, Massachusetts, where he started work on his first novel.

**Player Piano**

Each of the first three novels Vonnegut published contained elements that would later be combined in Cat’s Cradle. His debut, Player Piano (1952), is a dystopian novel that is based significantly on Vonnegut’s own negative experiences as an employee
of General Electric. Set in the relatively near future, the book presents an America that is still recovering from a third world war that required an extreme level of industrial automation to accommodate the loss of the human workforce that was off fighting the war. The success of the automation program, though, displaced all the now-expendable human workers when they returned at war’s end.

The book’s protagonist, Proteus, is a middle manager at a company called the Ilium Works in the same fictional town of Ilium, New York, where Felix Hoenikker works for General Forge and Foundry in *Cat’s Cradle*. Proteus initially enjoys the privileges that come with being a manager in a nation of largely aimless and unemployed workers. He gradually awakens to the dehumanizing aspects of the increasingly mechanized world he inhabits and joins in an ultimately unsuccessful revolt against the kinds of mechanized factories he once oversaw.

*Player Piano* was relatively well-reviewed but made little impression in a country distracted by the televised McCarthy hearings and uninterested in reading a book that apparently wanted to dismantle the same American industrial might that had helped to win World War II less than a decade earlier.

### The Sirens of Titan

Vonnegut’s next novel, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), contributed heavily to him being labeled as a writer of science fiction, a literary genre held in fairly low critical regard at the time. Science fiction novels were generally published in cheap paperback editions. Jerome Klinkowitz, one of Vonnegut’s most ardent critical champions, claims that Vonnegut’s embrace of this medium reflects both the difficult reality of the publishing market and a conscious choice about style and subject matter:

> When one of the author’s offerings would be passed over by the better-paying venues and wind up in a science-fiction publication, the sci-fi world had made it clear that ideas and not literary stylings were what counted there…. Theme, however, was not enough to satisfy the reader of a paperback original. Unlike the weightier matters of concern that found their place in hardcover fiction, the attractiveness of this cheaper, hybrid format was that it could entertain and not just instruct. Within its pages had to be the variety and delight of an entire issue of Collier’s [where many of Vonnegut’s previous short stories had been published], for such was the product it was replacing on the newsstands. By necessity Kurt Vonnegut would have to start playing with technique.124

*The Sirens of Titan* used the fantastical language and plot elements of conventional science fiction in telling the story of an eccentric billionaire named Malachi Constant, who interacts every fifty-nine days with a man named Winston Niles Rumfoord, who travels through space and time with his dog. Rumfoord informs Constant that the Earth and everything on it has been manipulated by a robot named Salo from a distant planet named Tralfamadore. Salo has been stranded for more than 200,000 years on Saturn’s largest moon, Titan, and all of the seemingly significant events of human history—including all of its greatest achievements and infamies—are reduced to relatively frivolous communications between Salo and his home planet about the status of the replacement part that he needs to fix his spacecraft. Despite its obvious science fictional aspects, Klinkowitz argues that the novel is

> ...only superficially about space [and...] actually takes its readers inward, to examine aspects of mind and matter, heart and soul…. How weak *The Sirens of Titan* would be if its substance were rooted in the claptrap of space opera. Instead, Vonnegut makes the materials of his science fiction so obviously ridiculous (the space aliens from Tralfamadore, for instance, look like plumbers’ helpers) that no one in his right mind would seek seriousness there.125

Much as Bokonon’s final gesture of thumbing his nose at a seemingly nonexistent (or at least uncaring) God at the end of *Cat’s Cradle* acknowledges but does nothing to change the world’s “all-encompassing absurdity,”126 Vonnegut validates Constant’s insistence at the end of *The Sirens of Titan* that “[a] purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved”127 as a better option than nihilism or despair.

### Mother Night

Vonnegut’s third novel, *Mother Night* (1961), uses both metafiction and conventions taken from the genres of
memoir and historical fiction, all of which are present in *Cat’s Cradle* as well. The book presents itself as being the manuscript of a memoir that Vonnegut himself is editing. This work has been written by a prisoner named Howard W. Campbell, Jr., who is awaiting trial in Israel for Nazi war crimes, but who has actually been working as a double agent. While spewing what appeared to be Nazi propaganda over the radio, Campbell was actually transmitting secret coded messages back to the United States. Although by the conventional moral wisdom of espionage, Campbell is innocent because his pretense of being a Nazi actually served the “right” side in the war, Vonnegut’s introduction to a later reprint of the novel warns that “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”128 Given the paranoia about spies that dominated American culture in the decade before the novel’s publication, *Mother Night*’s moral message pertains at least as much to its present-day context as to the recent history its plot fictionalizes.

Todd F. Davis observes that Vonnegut’s metafictional treatment of Campbell’s moral ambiguity allows him to emphasize that “Whether Campbell’s propaganda is merely a pose, a fiction constructed to hide his identity as an American spy, remains insignificant; the heinous acts that he helps lead the German people to commit in the name of Nazism are quite real; the deaths of the millions of Jews cannot be erased with language.”129 Davis also makes clear the connection between *Mother Night* and *Cat’s Cradle* by writing that “Grand narratives, the fictions we construct, even if their constructedness is exposed, still do as much harm as those that are hidden, and for that reason Vonnegut urges us to choose those narratives that are ‘harmless.’”130 Bokonon’s *foma* in *Cat’s Cradle* are explicitly identified on the novel’s epigraph page as “harmless untruths,” whereas the global extinction via *ice-nine* that happens at the close of the novel is dependent on a variety of decidedly harmful forms of untruth embodied by many of its characters.

**CONTEXT: VONNEGUT AND HUMANISTIC VALUES**

In part because of his traumatic wartime experiences, Vonnegut remained a principled, if also somewhat unconventional, spokesperson for peace and humanistic values throughout his life and writing career. As he wrote in his 1999 book *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian*, “I am a humanist, which means, in part, that I have tried to behave decently without any expectation of rewards or punishments after I am dead.”131 Many of his best-regarded works are essentially elaborations of the blunt (and mildly blasphemous) version of the Golden Rule expressed by Eliot Rosewater, the protagonist of his 1965 novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*: “God damn it, you’ve got to be kind.”132 This simple philosophy guides his belief that his writing could counteract the divisive and destructive politics of the Cold War. He expressed such sentiments unmistakably in a 1973 address in Stockholm, Sweden: “While it is true that we American fiction writers failed to modify the course of the war [in Vietnam], we have reason to believe that we have poisoned the minds of thousands or perhaps millions of American young people. Our hope is that the poison will make them worse than useless in unjust wars.”133 Although his revulsion at the existence of nuclear weapons is expressed indirectly through *ice-nine* in *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut makes it unmistakably clear elsewhere in his writings. For example, in his 1982 novel *Deadeye Dick*, the U.S. government intentionally explodes a neutron bomb in the fictional Midland City, Ohio, in order to test the theory that such weapons would only destroy biological life while leaving...
physical structures largely intact. Vonnegut’s narrator sarcastically describes the effects of this grotesque experiment:

> It might have been a bigger story, a signal for the start of World War Three, if the Government hadn’t acknowledged at once that the bomb was made in America. One newscast I heard...called it a “friendly bomb”.... Everybody in the county was killed...[b]ut most of the structures are still left standing and furnished. I am told that every one of the television sets in the new Holiday Inn is still fully operable. So are all the telephones. So is the ice-cube maker behind the bar.... Since all the property is undamaged, has the world lost anything it loved?¹³⁴

Although Vonnegut’s answer to this rhetorical question usually seems to have been a sad and frustrated “no,” he continued writing and speaking in an effort to change humanity’s mind in this regard until his death in 2007. *Cat’s Cradle* is thus very much a product of a particular historical and cultural moment in time, but also an expression of a complicated, sometimes even grudging, love for humanity as a whole that its author maintained both during and after the Cold War.

**CONTEXT: APOCALYPTIC FICTION**

Apocalyptic literature—that is, stories that depict the end of the world—is not unique to the Cold War. Most mythic traditions include some version of a story that speculates about the eschaton, the end of history; the *Christian Book of Revelation*, the story of *Kalki* in Hindu scripture, and the story of the *Battle of Ragnarök* in Norse mythology all qualify as apocalyptic tales. Works of speculative fiction that attempt to imagine the conditions that bring about the destruction of humanity are scattered throughout various literary traditions before the Cold War. Once the development of nuclear weapons made it clear that humanity now had the technological capacity to destroy itself within a matter of minutes, such works begin appearing with increasing frequency, not only in literature but in film and television as well.

Although some of the apocalyptic fiction from the early decades of the Cold War focuses on “genetic engineering, chemical contamination, energy depletion, natural catastrophe, overpopulation, viruses and plagues,”¹³⁵ the majority of literary doomsday tales involve a nuclear war of some kind. As Andrew Hammond notes, “While global cataclysm had been forecast in the disaster fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the memory of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and the advent of the thermonuclear age made it a far more immediate worry.”¹³⁶ Vonnegut clearly shared this worry, and *Cat’s Cradle* contains plentiful echoes of at least four other nuclear-themed works of apocalyptic fiction.

Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* (1957), Walter M. Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibovitz* (1959), Mordecai Roshwald’s *Level 7* (1959), and Pat Frank’s *Alas, Babylon* (1960) all predate the publication of *Cat’s Cradle* and share the trait of warning their readers against believing that the use of nuclear weapons would be anything but catastrophic. During the early and mid-1950s,
there were still a number of proponents of “limited” nuclear warfare, and the civil defense efforts often collectively described as the “shelter craze” were based on the assumption that nuclear war could be survivable with proper advance planning. However, the massive increase in both the size and power of the nuclear arsenals of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. soon rendered such arguments moot, and the aforementioned novels caution their readers against any lingering justification for nuclear war.

**Nevil Shute’s On the Beach (1957)**

*On the Beach* was popular enough upon its publication to be turned two years later into a Hollywood film featuring such prominent stars as Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, and Fred Astaire. Given that it depicts the gradual extinction of life on earth in the wake of a nuclear war, this might seem like an oddly depressing subject for a bestselling novel and blockbuster film, but its popularity speaks to the extent to which the morbid realities of nuclear war were beginning to be acknowledged by the late 1950s.

The novel is set in and around Melbourne, Australia, to which Shute himself had emigrated from Great Britain. A massive nuclear war that escalated from an initial exchange between the unlikely enemies of Albania and Italy has eradicated most of the Northern Hemisphere except for the crew of an American submarine that took refuge in Melbourne. The toxic radioactive fallout from the war is slowly spreading throughout the rest of the world, progressively wiping out the areas like Australia that escaped the initial war largely unscathed. As the inevitable arrival of the radioactive debris from the war draws nearer, the Australians commit painless suicide by taking pills that will allow them to avoid the miserable death caused by radiation poisoning. The relatively hopeless endings of both the book and the film version of *On the Beach* imply that even those with no direct stake in a nuclear war will be unable to escape the effects of one.

**Walter M. Miller’s A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959)**

*A Canticle for Leibowitz* may be even grimmer in its conclusions than Shute’s novel since it depicts not just one near-complete human self-extinction, but two. The novel opens in a remote monastery in the desert of the American Southwest, where a group of Catholic monks work to preserve the few remnants of human knowledge that managed to survive a nuclear war, now known simply as the Flame Deluge, six centuries earlier. A young monk named Brother Francis accidentally discovers a fallout shelter in which several documents are found on which the foundational knowledge for atomic weapons has been preserved (though neither Francis nor any of the monks understand this). Over the course of the next eleven centuries, human civilization manages to rebuild itself—partly with the aid of the documents that Francis uncovered—to the same level of technological development it had reached before the Flame Deluge, but the novel ends with the dark irony that human history—and the possible end thereof—appears likely to repeat itself in the form of another imminent nuclear war.

**Mordecai Roshwald’s Level 7 (1959)**

Whereas the previous two works focus on the flaws in human psychology that contribute to the likelihood of a nuclear apocalypse, *Level 7* is one of the first works to warn about the dangers of overreliance on
technology and automation in attempting to prepare for and/or to prevent a nuclear war. As in Yevgeny Zamynin’s dystopian novel *We* from decades before, all of the characters in *Level 7* are identified only by letters and numbers that indicate their role and relative importance within the hierarchy of the massive seven-level strategic bunker-system in which they live, nearly a mile beneath the earth’s surface.

The book is ostensibly the diary of X-127, a “push-button warfare” soldier whose sole reason for existing is to press—if and when commanded to by a voice coming from a loudspeaker—the series of three simple buttons that will launch an increasingly deadly salvo of missiles at the enemy of his unnamed country. Like most of his fellow residents of the lowest (and, hence, both the safest and most important) level of the bunker, X-127 is chosen in large part for his lack of human connections, since any psychological ties to the above-ground world could potentially interfere with the completion of his task.

X-127 performs his simple but gruesome task in the course of a devastating nuclear war that lasts less than three minutes, and the remainder of the book details the slow failure of the shelter system and, thus, the death of the surviving remnant of humanity. Furthermore, near the end of the novel it is revealed that the order that triggered the cataclysmic war was a faulty automated response from an early-warning system, meaning that no direct human decision-making was involved in bringing the world to an end.

*Pat Frank’s Alas, Babylon (1960)*

*Alas, Babylon* may be the most optimistic of the four apocalyptic novels considered here, but even that description must be heavily qualified. Frank’s novel focuses on Randy Bragg and a motley group of his neighbors, family members, and friends who rebuild their lives after a nuclear war in his sprawling house on the outskirts of a fictional Florida town named Fort Repose. As numerous critics have noted, the strategies and materials that Bragg and his compatriots use to survive are largely unavailable to the ordinary American (for example, few people have a thriving orange grove on their land to use as a source of much-needed vitamins), meaning that the book cannot be interpreted as Frank’s effort to provide a blueprint to readers for how to prepare themselves. Frank has also been accused of downplaying the likely effects of radioactive fallout and environmental damage after a large-scale nuclear exchange.

Whatever the case, the novel’s final two lines deflate any sense of accomplishment or jubilation that arises from either surviving or being on the winning side of a nuclear war. When Bragg asks a military officer representing the provisional federal government who won the war, his initial reaction is unthinkingly excited: “We won it. We really clobbered ’em.” Soon thereafter, though, his “eyes lowered and his arms drooped,” and he refutes his earlier enthusiasm by adding, “Not that it matters.” In response to this news, Bragg “turn[es] away to face the thousand-year night,” echoing *A Canticle for Leibowitz* in suggesting that the war has returned even the victors back to the Middle Ages.

**CONTEXT: “BLACK HUMOR” AS A RESPONSE TO ATOMIC ANXIETY**

*Cat’s Cradle* sits squarely in the intersection between two major trends within creative responses to the Cold War, particularly in American culture. The first is the surge in apocalyptic stories that took place from the
mid-1950s onward, which was detailed in the previous section. The second was the increasing prevalence of what has alternately been called black humor, gallows humor, grotesque humor, and dark comedy. The technique of using humor to critique an awful reality in moral and/or ethical terms obviously does not originate during the Cold War. For example, scholars have noted that “even the Jews languishing in the ghettos or anticipating their deaths in the camps exchanged jokes to ridicule their executioners, extract hope out of despair, or cope with the absurdity of their dilemma. Their resort to humor provided a defense mechanism to sublimate their rage against their oppressors and transform their misery into something bearable.”

Although defining the “oppressor” within the context of the Cold War was not always as simple as in the context of Auschwitz, the practitioners of black humor from the early 1960s onward were distinct for “trampling conventions of narrative art, snorting at the degradations” of politics in both the national and international contexts, and “trumpeting nothing less than ‘a new sense of reality.’” Although there are many examples of this mode from which one might choose, Cat’s Cradle is a particularly close relative of Joseph Heller’s novel Catch-22 (1961), Stanley Kubrick’s film Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964), and the comic-satirical songs of mathematician Tom Lehrer, all of which appeared at roughly the same time as Vonnegut’s novel.

**Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 (1961)**

Catch-22 and Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five are among the most famous examples of black humor in American literature, particularly in the post-World War II period. The title of Heller’s novel refers to the inherently paradoxical logic underlying the policies that define (and threaten) the lives of the U.S. Army bomber crews on which the story focuses:

*There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one’s safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn’t, but if he were sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn’t have to, but if he didn’t want to he was sane and had to.*

Whereas George Orwell’s dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four used almost no humor in criticizing the sinister manipulation of language to the point that words such as war and peace or freedom and slavery become indistinct from one another, Heller satirizes the American military as a bungling institution run by clownish individuals too simple-minded or self-interested to notice the glaring logical flaws in their thinking, of which “Catch-22” is but one example. The novel was so popular that its title quickly entered mainstream usage outside of literary discussions, now referring generally to absurdly self-contradictory situations that stem from seemingly inept leadership.
Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964)

*Dr. Strangelove* offers some of the most bizarrely iconic images (Major T. J. “King” Kong riding a nuclear bomb out of the cargo-hold of his plane like a rodeo pony) and one-liners (“Gentlemen, you can’t fight in here…this is the War Room!”) of Cold War black humor in telling the story of an insane American general named Jack D. Ripper who attempts to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the U.S.S.R. in order to safeguard his bodily fluids from communist infiltration. The film alternates between the general’s office, a gathering of military and political leaders at the Pentagon, and a B-29 bomber that is on course to deliver a nuclear bomb to the heart of the U.S.S.R. The main wrinkle in the story is that if the attack succeeds, it will trigger a secret “Doomsday Machine” that will destroy the entire world; as a result, the American and Soviet governments have to set aside their distrust and animosity in order to stop the plane from getting through to its target. Unfortunately, that task is entrusted to a cast of characters who are themselves only slightly less mad than General Ripper, dooming them (and thus the entire world) to a catastrophic failure at the end of the film.

The Comic-Satirical Songs of Tom Lehrer

Although he enjoyed a long career as a mathematician and college teacher, Tom Lehrer became wildly popular in the 1950s and 1960s for his comic musical performances in which he accompanied himself on the piano. While most of his songs were witty tunes about academic life or scientific concepts, many of his most memorable compositions also provided satirical commentary on such Cold War issues as nuclear war and civil defense. “We Will All Go Together When We Go” (1958) is a tongue-in-cheek celebration of the fact that there will be no need for attending funerals in the aftermath of a nuclear war because everyone will die at roughly the same time. One of the songs most memorable verses runs as follows: “And we will all bake together when we bake/There’ll be nobody present at the wake/With complete participation/In that grand incineration/Nearly three billion hunks of well-done steak.” In a similarly dark fashion, “So Long, Mom (A Song for World War III)” (1965) purports
to be a message from a bomber pilot to his mother, inviting her to watch him participate in a nuclear war from the comfort and safety of her bomb shelter: “So long, mom/I’m off to drop the bomb/So don’t wait up for me./But while you swelter/Down there in your shelter/You can see me/On your TV!”[43]
INTRODUCTION
Some of the sense of variety concerning the literature of the Cold War has faded with the passage of nearly thirty years. Paperback books, television, and movies all became readily available to a much wider audience after World War II. This helped popularize such “genre fiction” as alien invasion stories, postapocalyptic survival tales, military novels, and spy thrillers, each of which has become strongly associated with Cold War literature in the aftermath of the conflict. For example, the novels of John LeCarré, Graham Greene, Robert Ludlum, and Tom Clancy remain popular well into the twenty-first century and are still frequently adapted into blockbuster Hollywood films that reinforce the retrospective view that the Cold War was primarily a matter of military technology and daring espionage.

Much as historians have tried in recent years to revise the perception of the Cold War as a two-sided conflict between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., literary scholars have also begun working to broaden the boundaries of literature with meaningful cultural connections to the Cold War. Such an effort involves considering works that focus less on the large-scale issues related to the Cold War’s inherent ideological, political, and military dimensions, and more on the psychological and physical toll that life in the atomic age took on ordinary individuals from all walks of life. Alan Nadel coined the term “containment culture” to describe the way in which international politics filtered down into everyday American life at the height of the Cold War:

Although technically referring to U.S. foreign policy from 1948 until at least the mid-1960s, [containment] also describes American life in numerous venues and under sundry rubrics during that period: to the extent that corporate production and biological reproduction, military deployment and industrial technology, televised hearings and filmed teleplays, the cult of domesticity and the fetishizing of domestic security, the arms race and atoms for peace all contributed to the containment of communism, the disparate acts performed in the name of these practices joined the legible agenda of American history as aspects of containment culture.144

The “disparate acts” of domestic containment that Nadel has in mind include what Tyler T. Schmidt calls the “policing of gender and sexual practices and identities deemed threatening to traditional family life.” He goes on to add that such repression “overlaps with the sexual monitoring and physical constriction that defined [racial] segregation in the United States. African Americans experienced containment policies domestically in northern cities and throughout the South for decades before the Cold War.”145

Until recently, few works of literature produced by women, LGBTQ, and non-white writers between 1945 and 1990 have been interpreted specifically as products of and/or commentaries on the Cold War. Literary works focusing on issues of race, gender, and
sexuality were generally excluded from the category of Cold War literature because the era’s various domestic movements against discrimination and inequality were seen as either irrelevant or secondary to the global rivalry of ideologies.

The sampling of shorter works included here is still far from representative of the Cold War’s full breadth of literary expression, but it strives for a greater balance between the conventional—and predominantly white and male—perspective of Cold War literature and the more inclusive definition that remains in the process of emerging.

**SHORT STORIES**

**SELECTED WORK: “THERE WILL COME SOFT RAINS” (1950) BY RAY BRADBURY**

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August 2057

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!*

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 bacon, two coffees, and two cool glasses of milk.

“Today is August 4, 2057,” 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.

*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.

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.*

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.

*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.

*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.

Twelve noon.

A dog whined, shivering, on the front porch.

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 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 Baal in a dark corner.

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.

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.

Two thirty-five.


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.

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 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 spoors! 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.

It was the children’s hour.

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

“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.”

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.

At ten o’clock the house began to die.
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!

“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!”
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 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 Matisses 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!

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.

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.

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 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.

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....

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.

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 psychopathic 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 sub-ceeellar. Deep freeze, armchair, film tapes, circuits, beds, and all like skeletons thrown in a cluttered mound deep under.

Smoke and silence. A great quantity of smoke.

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, 2057, today is August 5, 2057, today is …”

**Introduction to Ray Bradbury**

Ray Bradbury was born in the northern suburbs of Chicago in 1920 and moved to Los Angeles with his family as a teenager. Fascinated from an early age by both science fiction and Hollywood films, he felt called to be a writer and began publishing short fiction in the early 1940s. During a prolific career that lasted more than six decades, he continued publishing stories, but also branched out into novels, plays, screenplays, children’s books, nonfiction, and even poetry.

Although his first major success came with the publication of his dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), his first book had actually been published three years earlier. *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) was a collection of loosely related stories—most of which had previously
been published in various periodicals—about human exploration and colonization of the planet Mars between the years 2030 and 2057. Set twenty years after a devastating nuclear war, “There Will Come Soft Rains” is the next-to-last story in the book and was originally published in Collier’s magazine in early 1950.146

The Martian Chronicles alternates between criticisms of human shortsightedness and hopeful meditations on the prospects for overcoming that trait, which Bradbury explicitly identifies as dangerous both to humanity and to those with whom the species comes in contact. In the course of fewer than thirty years, human explorers not only wipe out an ancient Martian civilization (a clear echo of European colonization of North America), but also destroy most of their own, leaving a handful of survivors to learn from these mistakes and evolve into a new kind of Martian. “There Will Come Soft Rains” is undoubtedly on the bleaker end of this scale, though the book’s closing story (“The Million-Year Picnic”) offers a vision of redemption.

“There Will Come Soft Rains”:
Summary
The story opens with the sound of a mechanical voice announcing the start of the day. However, there does not seem to be any human around to be roused by this alarm. As the highly mechanized house in which the entire story takes place prepares a classic American breakfast of toast, eggs, bacon, and milk, another of its voices runs through a series of informational announcements, situating the story in a typical family’s home, in a typical post-World War II American suburb: “Today is August 4, 2057…the water, gas, and light bills.”147 As the morning progresses, and the house discards the breakfast it has dutifully prepared, there is still no sign of the family implied by these announcements. The house continues its elaborate domestic routine, accompanied by cheerful exclamations such as “Nine-fifteen…time to clean.”148 but still no people appear.

Only at ten o’clock—nearly two full pages into the story—is it made clear what has happened to the house’s inhabitants: “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.”149 Unaware of its occupants’ demise, the house carries on with its programming, keeping the floors tidy, watering the grass, and warding off sparrows with an unwavering devotion to keeping things as they presumably should be.

Eventually, this absurd maintenance of normalcy comes to an end through a simple accident. A falling branch crashes through a window, spilling a container of flammable material onto the hot stove and setting the house ablaze. The house’s supply of water with which to put out the fire has been depleted by its years of performing its mechanical routines. Despite a zealous battle for self-preservation (and the protection of its long-dead inhabitants), the house and its many voices gradually succumb to the fire in a frenzy of mechanical lunacy: “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.”150 The house eventually collapses except for one wall, and the story ends with the same voice from the opening paragraph repeating the date: “Today is August 5, 2057, today is August 5, 2057, today is…”151

Analysis: Technology Displaces Humanity
The title of this story is taken from a poem published in 1918 by the American author Sara Teasdale. The entire poem is reproduced within the story, read aloud by the house as a “favorite”152 of one of its occupants. Written during the last months of World War I, Teasdale’s verses pick up a theme found in such notable poems as John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields” (1915), by depicting
the gradual regeneration of a landscape scarred by war. Whereas McCrae valorizes soldiers’ sacrifices with the image of poppies growing on their graves amidst the battlefields of eastern Belgium, Teasdale suggests that humanity’s tendency toward violence and destructiveness runs so contrary to nature that it would hardly be noticed if humanity were to wipe itself out:

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.\textsuperscript{153}

Teasdale’s poem laments the unprecedented devastation unleashed during World War I, but Bradbury repurposes her title to issue a prophetic warning against the complete destruction of humanity in an imagined nuclear war. However, it also more broadly criticizes the dehumanizing effects of a reliance on technology that essentially turns human existence into a mechanical process.

When the story was republished within \textit{The Martian Chronicles}, Bradbury’s revelation of the destruction of the city surrounding the house is a clear reference to the fictional nuclear war that happens twenty years prior to the start of this story. In its original stand-alone form, though, such imagery as the five “silhouettes in paint...burned on wood in one titanic moment” looks backward to some of the iconic images of the impact of actual atomic bombings of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. John Hersey’s journalistic accounts of vaporized human bodies leaving permanent “shadows” on walls\textsuperscript{154} and the photographs of the Genbaku Dome standing alone amidst the rubble of what had been Hiroshima would still have been fresh in the minds of Bradbury’s readers in 1950.
Having the house repeat the date—112 years minus a day since the Hiroshima bombing—at the story’s conclusion suggests to the reader that this grim future is a likely outcome of continuing the Cold War’s fundamentally alarmist mindset, summed up in the story as the house’s “preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical paranoia.” This ironic comment highlights the madness of a situation in which the house maintains all the trappings of middlebrow American values—the same values often invoked as being in need of protection against the Soviet menace—even though the humans who embodied them were vaporized long ago while playing on the lawn that the house continues to sprinkle with water.

Both the story’s setting and the lingering traces of its now-absent characters comment ironically on the propagandistic conception of “the American way of life as the triumph of capitalism…, characterized by affluence, located in suburbia, and epitomized by white middle-class nuclear families.” Nuclear weapons and labor-saving devices like automatic dishwashers—a precursor to the fully automated house in the story—are both technological products that came to define suburban American life in the decades immediately after World War II. Bradbury’s story does not highlight the great differences in these machines’ designed purposes but rather underscores the manner in which both are able to separate humans from the natural world, even to the point of complete nonexistence that Teasdale muses upon in her poem.

SELECTED WORK: “THE TERMINAL BEACH” (1964)
BY J. G. BALLARD


At night, as he lay asleep on the floor of the ruined bunker, Traven heard the waves breaking along the shore of the lagoon, like the sounds of giant aircraft warming up at the ends of their runways. This memory of the great night raids against the Japanese mainland had filled his first months on the island with images of burning bombers falling through the air around him. Later, with the attacks of beri-beri, the nightmare passed and the waves began to remind him of the deep Atlantic rollers on the beach at Dakar, where he had been born, and of watching from the window in the evenings for his parents to drive home along the corniche road from the airport. Overcome by this long-forgotten memory, he woke uncertainly from the bed of old magazines on which he slept and went out to the dunes that screened the lagoon.

Through the cold night air he could see the abandoned Superfortresses lying among the palms beyond the perimeter of the emergency landing field three hundred yards away. Traven walked through the dark sand, already forgetting where the shore lay, although the atoll was little more than half a mile in width. Above him, along the crests of the dunes, the tall palms leaned into the dim air like the symbols of a cryptic alphabet. The landscape of the island was covered by strange ciphers.

Giving up the attempt to find the beach, Traven stumbled into a set of tracks left years earlier by a large caterpillar vehicle. The heat released by the weapons tests had fused the sand, and the double line of fossil imprints, uncovered by the evening air, wound its serpentine way among the hollows like the footfalls of an ancient saurian.

Too weak to walk any further, Traven sat down between the tracks. Hoping that they might lead him to the beach, he began to excavate the wedge-shaped grooves from a drift into which they disappeared. He returned to the bunker shortly before dawn, and slept through the hot silences of the following noon.

The Blocks
As usual on these enervating afternoons, when not even a breath of on-shore breeze disturbed the dust, Traven sat in the shadow of one of the blocks, lost somewhere within the centre of the maze. His back resting against the rough concrete surface, he gazed with a phlegmatic eye down the surrounding aisles
and at the line of doors facing him. Each afternoon he left his cell in the abandoned camera bunker among
the dunes and walked down into the blocks. For the first half an hour he restricted himself to the perimeter
aisle, now and then trying one of the doors with the rusty key in his pocket—found among the litter of
smashed bottles and cans in the isthmus of sand separating the testing ground from the air-strip—and
then inevitably, with a sort of drugged stride, he set off into the centre of the blocks, breaking into a run
and darting in and out of the corridors, as if trying to flush some invisible opponent from his hiding place.
Soon he would be completely lost. Whatever his efforts to return to the perimeter, he always found himself
once more in the centre.

Eventually he would abandon the task, and sit down in the dust, watching the shadows emerge from
their crevices at the foot of the blocks. For some reason he invariably arranged to be trapped when the sun
was at zenith—on Eniwetok, the thermonuclear noon.

One question in particular intrigued him: ‘What sort of people would inhabit this minimal concrete city?’

**The Synthetic Landscape**

‘This island is a state of mind,’ Osborne, one of the scientists working in the old submarine pens, was later
to remark to Traven. The truth of this became obvious to Traven within two or three weeks of his arrival.
Despite the sand and the few anaemic palms, the entire landscape of the island was synthetic, a man-made
artefact with all the associations of a vast system of derelict concrete motorways. Since the moratorium
on atomic tests, the island had been abandoned by the Atomic Energy Commission, and the wilderness of
weapons aisles, towers and blockhouses ruled out any attempt to return it to its natural state. (There were
also stronger unconscious motives, Traven recognized: if primitive man felt the need to assimilate events
in the external world to his own psyche, 20th century man had reversed this process; by this Cartesian
yardstick, the island at least *existed*, in a sense true of few other places.)

But apart from a few scientific workers, no one yet felt any wish to visit the former testing ground, and
the naval patrol boat anchored in the lagoon had been withdrawn three years before Traven’s arrival. Its
ruined appearance, and the associations of the island with the period of the Cold War—what Traven had
christened ‘The Pre-Third’—were profoundly depressing, an Auschwitz of the soul whose mausoleums
contained the mass graves of the still undead. With the Russo-American *détente* this nightmarish chapter
of history had been gladly forgotten.

**The Pre-Third**

*The actual and potential destructiveness of the atomic bomb plays straight into the hands of
the Unconscious. The most cursory study of the dream-life and fantasies of the insane shows
that ideas of world-destruction are latent in the unconscious mind... Nagasaki destroyed by the
magic of science is the nearest man has yet approached to the realization of dreams that even
during the safe immobility of sleep are accustomed to develop into nightmares of anxiety.*

Glover: ‘War, Sadism and Pacifism’

The Pre-Third: the period was characterized in Traven’s mind above all by its moral and psychological
inversions, by its sense of the whole of history, and in particular of the immediate future—the two
decades, 1945–65—suspended from the quivering volcano’s lip of World War III. Even the death of his
wife and six-year-old son in a motor accident seemed only part of this immense synthesis of the historical
and psychic zero, the frantic highways where each morning they met their deaths the advance causeways
to the global armageddon.

**Third Beach**

He had come ashore at midnight, after a hazardous search for an opening in the reef. The small motorboat
he had hired from an Australian pearl-diver at Charlotte Island subsided into the shallows, its hull torn by
the sharp coral. Exhausted, Traven walked through the darkness among the dunes, where the dim outlines of bunkers and concrete towers loomed between the palms.

He woke the next morning into bright sunlight, lying halfway down the slope of a wide concrete beach. This ringed an empty reservoir or target basin some two hundred feet in diameter, part of a system of artificial lakes built down the centre of the atoll. Leaves and dust choked the exit grilles, and a pool of warm water two feet deep lay below him, reflecting a distant line of palms.

Traven sat up and took stock of himself. This brief inventory, which merely confirmed his physical identity, was limited to little more than his thin body in its frayed cotton garments. In the context of the surrounding terrain, however, even this collection of tatters seemed to possess a unique vitality. The desolation and emptiness of the island, and the absence of any local fauna, were emphasized by the huge sculptural forms of the target basins set into its surface. Separated from each other by narrow isthmuses, the lakes stretched away along the curve of the atoll. On either side, sometimes shaded by the few palms that had gained a precarious purchase in the cracked cement, were roadways, camera towers and isolated blockhouses, together forming a continuous concrete cap upon the island, a functional, megalithic architecture as grey and minatory (and apparently as ancient, in its projection into, and from, time future) as any of Assyria and Babylon.

The series of weapons tests had fused the sand in layers, and the pseudogeological strata condensed the brief epochs, microseconds in duration, of thermonuclear time. Typically the island inverted the geologist’s maxim, ‘The key to the past lies in the present.’ Here, the key to the present lay in the future. This island was a fossil of time future, its bunkers and blockhouses illustrating the principle that the fossil record of life was one of armour and the exoskeleton.

Traven knelt in the warm pool, and splashed his shirt and trousers. The reflection revealed the watery image of gaunt shoulders and bearded face. He had come to the island with no supplies other than a small bar of chocolate, assuming that in some way the island would provide its own sustenance. Perhaps, too, he had identified the need for food with a forward motion in time, and that with his return to the past, or at most into a zone of non-time, this need would be eliminated. The privations of the previous six months, during his journey across the Pacific, had already reduced his always thin body to that of a migrant beggar, held together by little more than the preoccupied gaze in his eye. Yet this emaciation, by stripping away the superfluities of the flesh, revealed an inner sinewy toughness, an economy and directness of movement.

For several hours Traven wandered about, inspecting one bunker after another for a convenient place to sleep. He crossed the remains of a small landing field, next to a dump where a dozen B-29s lay across one another like dead reptile birds.

**The Corpses**

Once he entered a small street of metal shacks, containing a cafeteria, recreation rooms and shower stalls. A wrecked jukebox lay half-buried in the sand behind the cafeteria, its selection of records still in their rack.

Further along, flung into a small target lake fifty yards from the shacks, were the bodies of what at first he thought were the former inhabitants of this ghost town—a dozen life-size plastic models. Their half-melted faces, contorted into bleary grimaces, gazed up at him from the jumble of legs and torsoes.

On either side of him, muffled by the dunes, came the sounds of waves, the great rollers on the seaward side breaking over the reefs, and on to the beaches within the lagoon. However, he avoided the sea, hesitating before any rise or dune that might take him within its sight. Everywhere the camera towers offered him a convenient aerial view of the confused topography of the island, but he avoided their rusting ladders.

Traven soon realized that however random the blockhouses and towers might seem, their common focus dominated the landscape and gave to it a unique perspective. As he noticed when he sat down to rest in the window slit of one of the bunkers, all these observation posts occupied positions on a series of concentric perimeters, moving in tightening arcs towards the inmost sanctuary. This ultimate circle, below ground zero, remained hidden beyond a line of dunes a quarter of a mile to the west.
The Terminal Bunker

After sleeping for a few nights in the open, Traven returned to the concrete beach where he had woken on his first morning on the island, and made his home—if the term could be applied to that damp crumbling hovel—in a camera bunker fifty yards from the target lakes. The dark chamber between the thick canted walls, tomb-like though it might seem, gave him a sense of physical reassurance. Outside, the sand drifted against the sides, half-burying the narrow doorway, as if crystallizing the immense epoch of time that had elapsed since the bunker’s construction. The narrow rectangles of the five camera slits, their shapes and positions determined by the instruments, studded the west wall like runic ideograms. Variations on these ciphers decorated the walls of the other bunkers, the unique signature of the island. In the mornings, if Traven was awake, he would always find the sun divided into its five emblematic beacons.

Most of the time the chamber was filled only by a damp gloomy light. In the control tower at the landing field Traven found a collection of discarded magazines, and used these to make a bed. One day, lying in the bunker shortly after the first attack of ben-ben, he pulled out a magazine pressing into his back and found inside it a full-page photograph of a six-year-old girl. This blonde-haired child, with her composed expression and self-immersed eyes, filled him with a thousand painful memories of his son. He pinned the page to the wall and for days gazed at it through his reveries.

For the first few weeks Traven made little attempt to leave the bunker, and postponed any further exploration of the island. The symbolic journey through its inner circles set its own times of arrival and departure. He evolved no routine for himself. All sense of time soon vanished, and his life became completely existential, an absolute break separating one moment from the next like two quantal events. Too weak to forage for food, he lived on the old ration packs he found in the wrecked Superfortresses. Without any implement, it took him all day to open the cans. His physical decline continued, but he watched his spindling legs and arms with indifference.

By now he had forgotten the existence of the sea and vaguely assumed the atoll to be part of some continuous continental table. A hundred yards to the north and south of the bunker a line of dunes, topped by the palisade of enigmatic palms, screened the lagoon and sea, and the faint muffled drumming of the waves at night had fused with his memories of war and childhood. To the east was the emergency landing strip and the abandoned aircraft. In the afternoon light their shifting rectilinear shadows made them appear to writhe and pivot. In front of the bunker, where he would sit, was the system of target lakes, the shallow basins extending across the atoll.

Above him, the five apertures looked out upon this scene like the tutelary symbols of a futuristic myth.

The Lakes and the Spectres

The lakes had been designed to reveal any radiobiological changes in a selected range of fauna, but the specimens had long since bloomed into grotesque parodies of themselves and been destroyed.

Sometimes in the evenings, when a sepulchral light lay over the concrete bunkers and causeways, and the basins seemed like ornamental lakes in a city of deserted mausoleums, abandoned even by the dead, he would see the spectres of his wife and son standing on the opposite bank. Their solitary figures appeared to have been watching him for hours. Although they never moved, Traven was sure they were beckoning to him. Roused from his reverie, he would stumble forward across the dark sand to the edge of the lake and wade through the water, shouting soundlessly at the two figures as they moved away hand in hand among the lakes and disappeared across the distant causeways.

Shivering with cold, Traven would return to the bunker and lie on the bed of old magazines, waiting for their return. The image of their faces, the pale lantern of his wife’s cheeks, floated on the river of his memory.

The Blocks (II)

It was not until he discovered the blocks that Traven realized he would never leave the island.
At this stage, some two months after his arrival, Traven had exhausted his small cache of food, and the symptoms of ben-ben had become more acute. The numbness in his hands and feet, and the gradual loss of strength, continued. Only by an immense effort, and the knowledge that the inner sanctum of the island still lay unexplored, did he manage to leave the palliasse of magazines and make his way from the bunker.

As he sat in the drift of sand by the doorway that evening, he noticed a light shining through the palms far into the distance around the atoll. Confusing this with the image of his wife and son, and visualizing them waiting for him at some warm hearth among the dunes, Traven set off towards the light. Within a hundred yards he lost his sense of direction. He blundered about for several hours on the edges of the landing strip, and succeeded only in cutting his foot on a broken coca-cola bottle in the sand.

After postponing his search for the night, he set out again in earnest the next morning. As he moved past the towers and blockhouses the heat lay over the island in an unbroken mantle. He had entered a zone devoid of time. Only the narrowing perimeters warned him that he was crossing the inner field of the fire-table.

He climbed the ridge which marked the furthest point in his previous exploration of the island. From the plain below it the recording towers rose into the air like obelisks. Traven walked down towards them. On their grey walls were the faint outlines of human forms in stylized poses, the flash-shadows of the target community burnt into the cement. Here and there, where the concrete apron had cracked, a line of palms hung in the motionless air. The target lakes were smaller, filled with the broken bodies of plastic models. Most of them lay in the inoffensive domestic postures into which they had been placed before the tests.

Beyond the furthest line of dunes, where the camera towers began to turn and face him, were the tops of what seemed to be a herd of square-backed elephants. They were drawn up in precise ranks in a hollow that formed a shallow corral, the sunlight reflected off their backs.

Traven advanced towards them, limping on his cut foot. On either side of him the loosening sand had excavated the dunes, and several of the blockhouses tilted on their sides. This plain of bunkers stretched for some quarter of a mile, the half-submerged hulks, bombed out onto the surface in some earlier test, like the abandoned wombs that had given birth to this herd of megaliths.

The Blocks (III)

To grasp something of the vast number and oppressive size of the blocks, and their impact upon Traven, one must try to visualize sitting in the shade of one of these concrete monsters, or walking about in the centre of this enormous labyrinth that extended across the central table of the island. There were two thousand of them, each a perfect cube 15 feet in height, regularly spaced at ten-yard intervals. They were arranged in a series of tracts, each composed of two hundred blocks, inclined to one another and to the direction of the blast. They had weathered only slightly in the years since they were first built, and their gaunt profiles were like the cutting faces of a gigantic dieplate, devised to stamp out rectilinear volumes of air the size of a house. Three of the sides were smooth and unbroken, but the fourth, facing away from the blast, contained a narrow inspection door.

It was this feature of the blocks that Traven found particularly disturbing. Despite the considerable number of doors, by some freak of perspective only those in a single aisle were visible at any point within the maze. As he walked from the perimeter line into the centre of the massif, line upon line of the small metal doors appeared and receded.

Approximately twenty of the blocks, those immediately below ground zero, were solid: the walls of the remainder were of varying thicknesses. From the outside they appeared to be of uniform solidity.

As he entered the first of the long aisles, Traven felt the sense of fatigue that had dogged him for so many months begin to lift. With their geometric regularity and finish, the blocks seemed to occupy more than their own volumes of space, imposing on him a mood of absolute calm and order. He walked on into the centre of the maze, eager to shut out the rest of the island. After a few random turns to left and right, he found himself alone, the vistas to the sea, lagoon and island closed.

Here he sat down with his back to one of the blocks, the quest for his wife and son forgotten. For the first
time since his arrival at the island the sense of dissociation set off by its derelict landscape began to recede.

One development he did not expect. With dusk, and the need to leave the blocks and find food, he realized that he had lost himself. However he retraced his steps, struck out left or right at an oblique course, oriented himself around the sun and pressed on resolutely north or south, he found himself back again at his starting point. Only when darkness came did he manage to make his escape.

Abandoning his former home near the aircraft dump, Traven collected together what canned food he could find in the waist turret and cockpit lockers of the Superfortresses. He pulled them across the atoll on a crude sledge. Fifty yards from the perimeter of the blocks he took over a tilting bunker, and pinned the fading photograph of the blonde-haired child to the wall beside the door. The page was falling to pieces, like a fragmenting mirror of himself. Since the discovery of the blocks he had become a creature of reflexes, kindled from levels above those of his existing nervous system (if the autonomic system was dominated by the past, Traven sensed, the cerebro-spinal reached towards the future). Each evening when he woke he would eat without appetite and then wander among the blocks. Sometimes he took a canteen of water with him and remained there for two or three days on end.

**The Submarine Pens**

This precarious existence continued for the following weeks. As he walked out to the blocks one evening, he again saw his wife and son, standing among the dunes below a solitary camera tower, their faces watching him expressionlessly. He realized that they had followed him across the island from their former haunt among the dried-up lakes. At about this time he once again saw the distant light beckoning, and decided to continue his exploration of the island.

Half a mile further along the atoll he found a group of four submarine pens, built over an inlet, now drained, which wound through the dunes from the sea. The pens still contained several feet of water, filled with strange luminescent fish and plants. The warning light winked at intervals from the apex of a metal scaffold. The remains of a substantial camp, only recently vacated, stood on the pier outside. Greedily, Traven heaped his sledge with the provisions stored inside one of the metal shacks.

With this change of diet, the ben-ben receded, and during the next days he returned often to the camp. It appeared to be the site of a biological expedition. In the field office he came across a series of large charts of mutated chromosomes. He rolled them up and took them back to his bunker. The abstract patterns were meaningless, but during his recovery he amused himself by devising suitable titles for them. (Later, passing the aircraft dump on one of his forays, he found the half-buried juke-box, and tore the list of records from the selection panel, realizing that these were the most appropriate captions. Thus embroidered, the charts took on many layers of associations.)

**Traven: In Parenthesis**

Elements in a quantal world:

- The terminal beach.
- The terminal bunker.
- The blocks.

* * *

The landscape is coded.

Entry points into the future=Levels in a spinal landscape=zones of significant time.

*August 5. Found the man Traven. A strange derelict figure, hiding in a bunker in the deserted interior of the island. He is suffering from severe exposure and malnutrition, but is unaware of this or, for that matter, of any other events in the world around him ... He maintains that he came to the island to carry out some scientific project—unstated—but I suspect*
that he understands his real motives and the unique role of the island... In some way its landscape seems to be involved with certain unconscious notions of time, and in particular with those that may be a repressed premonition of our own deaths. The attractions and dangers of such an architecture, as the past has shown, need no stressing ...

August 6. He has the eyes of the possessed. I would guess that he is neither the first, nor the last, to visit the island.

—from Dr C. Osborne, ‘Eniwetok Diary.’

**Traven lost within the Blocks**

With the exhaustion of his supplies, Traven remained within the perimeter of the blocks almost continuously, conserving what strength remained to him to walk slowly down their empty corridors. The infection in his right foot made it difficult for him to replenish his supplies from the stores left by the biologists, and as his strength ebbed he found progressively less incentive to make his way out of the blocks. The system of megaliths now provided a complete substitute for those functions of his mind which gave to it its sense of the sustained rational order of time and space. Without them, his awareness of reality shrank to little more than the few square inches of sand beneath his feet.

On one of his last ventures into the maze, he spent all night and much of the following morning in a futile attempt to escape. Dragging himself from one rectangle of shadow to another, his leg as heavy as a club and apparently inflamed to the knee, he realized that he must soon find an equivalent for the blocks or he would end his life within them, trapped inside this self-constructed mausoleum as surely as the retinue of Pharaoh.

He was sitting helplessly somewhere in the centre of the system, the faceless lines of tomb-booths receding from him, when the sky was slowly divided by the drone of a light aircraft. This passed overhead, and then returned five minutes later. Seizing his opportunity, Traven struggled to his feet and made his exit from the blocks, his head raised to follow the faintly glistening beacon of the exhaust trail.

As he lay in the bunker he dimly heard the aircraft return and carry out an inspection of the site.

**A Belated Rescue**

‘Who are you? Do you realize you’re on your last legs?’

‘Traven... I’ve had some sort of accident. I’m glad you flew over.’

‘I’m sure you are. But why didn’t you use our radio-telephone? Anyway, we’ll call the Navy and have you picked up.’

‘No...’ Traven sat up on one elbow and felt weakly in his hip pocket. ‘I have a pass somewhere. I’m carrying out research.’

‘Into what?’ The question assumed a complete understanding of Traven’s motives. He lay in the shade under the lee of the bunker, and drank weakly from a canteen as Dr Osborne dressed his foot. ‘You’ve also been stealing our stores.’

Traven shook his head. Fifty yards away the striped blue Cessna stood on the concrete apron like a brilliant dragonfly. ‘I didn’t realize you were coming back.’

‘You must be in a trance.’

The young woman sitting at the controls of the aircraft climbed out and walked over to them. She glanced at the grey bunkers and towers, and seemed uninterested in the decrepit figure of Traven. Osborne spoke to her and after a downward glance at Traven she went back to the aircraft. As she turned Traven rose involuntarily, recognizing the child in the photograph he had pinned to the wall of the bunker. Then he remembered that the magazine could not have been more than four or five years old.

The engine of the aircraft started. As Traven watched, it turned on to one of the roadways and took off into the wind.
Later that afternoon the young woman drove over to the blocks by jeep and unloaded a small camp-bed and a canvas awning. During the intervening hours Traven had slept. He woke refreshed when Osborne returned from his scrutiny of the surrounding dunes.

‘What are you doing here?’ the young woman asked as she secured the guy-ropes to the roof of the bunker.

Traven watched her move about. ‘I’m… searching for my wife and son.’

‘They’re on this island?’ Surprised, but taking the reply at face value, she looked around her. ‘Here?’

‘In a manner of speaking.’

After inspecting the bunker, Osborne joined them. ‘The child in the photograph—is she your daughter?’ Traven hesitated. ‘No. She’s adopted me.’

Unable to make any sense of his replies, but accepting his assurances that he would leave the island, Osborne and the young woman drove back to their camp. Each day Osborne returned to change the dressing, driven by the young woman, who seemed now to grasp the role cast for her by Traven. Osborne, when he learned of Traven’s previous career as a military pilot, appeared to suspect that he might be a latter-day martyr left high and dry by the moratorium on thermonuclear tests.

‘A guilt complex isn’t an indiscriminate supply of moral sanctions. I think you may be overstretched yours.’ When he mentioned the name Eatherly, Traven shook his head.

Undeterred, Osborne pressed: ‘Are you sure you’re not making similar use of the image of Eniwetok—waiting for your Pentecostal wind?’

‘Believe me, Doctor, no,’ Traven replied firmly. ‘For me the hydrogen bomb was a symbol of absolute freedom. I feel it’s given me the right—the obligation, even—to do anything I want.’

‘That seems strange logic,’ Osborne commented. ‘Aren’t we at least responsible for our physical selves, if for nothing else?’

‘Not now, I think,’ Traven replied. ‘After all, in effect we are men raised from the dead.’

Often, however, he thought of Eatherly: the prototypal Pre-Third Man—dating the Pre-Third from August 6, 1945—carrying a full load of cosmic guilt.

Shortly after Traven was strong enough to walk, he had to be rescued from the blocks for a second time. Osborne became less conciliatory.

‘Our work is almost complete,’ he said warningly. ‘You’ll die here, Traven. What are you looking for among those blocks?’

To himself, Traven murmured: the tomb of the unknown civilian, Homo hydrogenensis, Eniwetok Man. ‘Doctor,’ he said, ‘your laboratory is at the wrong end of this island.’

Tartly, Osborne replied: ‘I’m aware of that, Traven. There are rarer fish swimming in your head than in any submarine pen.’

On the day before they left, the young woman drove Traven over to the lakes where he had first arrived. As a final present, an ironic gesture unexpected from the elderly biologist, she had brought from Osborne the correct list of legends for the chromosome charts. They stopped by the derelict juke-box and she pasted them on to the selection panel.

They wandered among the supine wrecks of the Superfortresses. Traven lost sight of her, and for the next ten minutes searched in and out of the dunes. He found her standing in a small amphitheatre formed by the sloping mirrors of a solar energy device built by one of the visiting expeditions. She smiled to Traven as he stepped through the scaffolding. A dozen fragmented images of herself were reflected in the broken panes—in some she was sans head, in others multiples of her arms circled about her like the serpent limbs of a Hindu goddess. Confused, Traven turned and walked back to the jeep.

As they drove away he recovered himself. He described his glimpses of his wife and son. ‘Their faces are always calm,’ he said. ‘My son’s particularly, though really he was always laughing. The only time his face was grave was when he was being born—then he seemed millions of years old.’
The young woman nodded. ‘I hope you find them.’ As an afterthought she added: ‘Dr Osborne is going to tell the Navy that you’re here. Hide somewhere.’

Traven thanked her.

From the centre of the blocks he waved to her the following day when she flew away for the last time.

*The Naval Party*

When the search party came for him Traven hid in the only logical place. Fortunately the search was perfunctory, and was called off after a few hours. The sailors had brought a supply of beer with them and the search soon turned into a drunken ramble.

On the walls of the recording towers Traven later found balloons of obscene dialogue chalked into the mouths of the shadowy figures, giving their postures the priapic gaiety of the dancers in cave drawings.

The climax of the party was the ignition of a store of gasoline in an underground tank near the airstrip. As he listened, first to the megaphones shouting his name, the echoes receding among the dunes like the forlorn calls of dying birds, then to the boom of the explosion and the laughter as the landing craft left, Traven felt a premonition that these were the last sounds he would hear.

He had hidden in one of the target basins, lying among the broken bodies of the plastic models. In the hot sunlight their deformed faces gaped at him sightlessly from the tangle of limbs, their blurred smiles like those of the soundlessly laughing dead.

Their faces filled his mind as he climbed over the bodies and returned to his bunker. As he walked towards the blocks he saw the figures of his wife and son standing in his path. They were less than ten yards from him, their white faces watching him with a look of almost overwhelming expectancy. Never had Traven seen them so close to the blocks. His wife’s pale features seemed illuminated from within, her lips parted as if in greeting, one hand raised to take his own. His son’s face, with its curiously fixed expression, regarded him with the same enigmatic smile of the child in the photograph.

‘Judith! David!’ Startled, Traven ran forwards to them. Then, in a sudden movement of light, their clothes turned into shrouds, and he saw the wounds that disfigured their necks and chests. Appalled, he cried out. As they vanished, he ran off into the safety of the blocks.

*The Catechism of Goodbye*

This time he found himself, as Osborne had predicted, unable to leave the blocks.

Somewhere in the centre of the maze, he sat with his back against one of the concrete flanks, his eyes raised to the sun. Around him the lines of cubes formed the horizon of his world. At times they would appear to advance towards him, looming over him like cliffs, the intervals between them narrowing so that they were little more than an arm’s length apart, a labyrinth of corridors running between them. They then would recede from him, separating from each other like points in an expanding universe, until the nearest line formed an intermittent palisade along the horizon.

Time had become quantal. For hours it would be noon, the shadows contained within the blocks, the heat reflected off the concrete floor. Abruptly, he would find that it was early afternoon or evening, the shadows everywhere like pointing fingers.

‘Goodbye, Eniwetok,’ he murmured.

Somewhere there was a flicker of light, as if one of the blocks, like a counter on an abacus, had been plucked away.

*Goodbye, Los Alamos.* Again, a block seemed to vanish. The corridors around him remained intact, but somewhere in his mind had appeared a small interval of neutral space.

*Goodbye, Hiroshima.*

*Goodbye, Alamagordo.*


Shuttles flickered, a ripple of lost integers. He stopped, realizing the futility of this megathon farewell. Such a leave-taking required him to fix his signature upon every one of the particles in the universe.
Total Noon: Eniwetok
The blocks now occupied positions on an endlessly revolving circus wheel. They carried him upwards into the sky, from where he could see the whole island and the sea, and then down again through the opaque disc of the concrete floor. From here he looked up at the under-surface of the concrete cap, an inverted landscape of rectilinear hollows, the dome-shaped mounds of the lake-system, the thousands of empty cubic pits of the blocks.

‘Goodbye, Traven.’
Near the end, he found to his disappointment that this ultimate rejection gained him nothing.
In the interval of lucidity, he looked down at his emaciated arms and legs, decorated with a lace-work of ulcers. To his right was a trail of disturbed dust, the wavering marks of slack heels.
To his left lay a long corridor between the blocks, joining an oblique series a hundred yards away. Among these, where a narrow interval revealed the open space beyond, was a crescent-shaped shadow, poised in the air above the ground.
During the next half an hour it moved slowly, turning as the sun swung, the profile of a dune.

The Crevice
Seizing on this cipher, which hung before him like a symbol on a shield, Traven pushed himself through the dust. He climbed precariously to his feet, and shielded his eyes from the blocks. He moved forward a few paces at a time.
Ten minutes later he emerged from the western perimeter of the blocks, like a tottering mendicant leaving behind a silent desert city. The dune lay fifty yards in front of him. Beyond it, bearing the shadow like a screen, was a ridge of limestone that ran away among the hillocks of the wasteland beyond this point of the atoll. The remains of an old bulldozer, bales of barbed wire and fifty-gallon drums lay half-buried in the sand. Traven approached the dune, reluctant to leave this anonymous swell of sand. He shuffled around its edges, and sat down in the mouth of a shallow crevice below the brow of the ridge.
After dusting his clothes, he gazed out patiently at the great circle of blocks.
Ten minutes later he noticed that someone was watching him.

The Marooned Japanese
This corpse, whose eyes stared up at Traven, lay to his left at the bottom of the crevice. That of a man of middle age and strong build, it rested on its back with its head on a pillow of stone, hands outstretched at its sides, as if surveying the window of the sky. The fabric of the clothes had rotted to a bleached grey vestment, but in the absence of any small animal predators on the island the skin and musculature of the corpse had been preserved. Here and there, at the angle of knee or wrist, a bony point glinted through the leathery integument of the skin, but the facial mask was still intact, and revealed a male Japanese of the professional classes. Looking down at the strong nose, high forehead and broad mouth, Traven guessed that the Japanese had been a doctor or lawyer.
Puzzled as to how the corpse had found itself here, Traven slid a few feet down the slope. There were no radiation burns on the skin, which indicated that the Japanese had been there for five years or less. Nor did he appear to be wearing a uniform, so had not been some unfortunate member of a military or scientific party.
To the left of the corpse, within reach of his left hand, was a frayed leather case, the remains of a map wallet. To the right was the husk of a haversack, open to reveal a canteen of water and a small mess-tin.
Traven slid down the slope until his feet touched the splitting soles of the corpse’s shoes, the reflex of starvation making him for the moment ignore that the Japanese had deliberately chosen to die in the crevice. He reached out and seized the canteen. A cupful of flat water swilled around the rusting bottom. Traven gulped down the water, the dissolved metal salts cloaking his lips and tongue with a bitter film. The mess-tin was empty except for a tacky coating of condensed syrup. Traven prised at this with the lid, and chewed at the tarry flakes, letting them dissolve in his mouth with an almost intoxicating sweetness.
After a few moments he felt light-headed and sat back beside the corpse. Its sightless eyes regarded him with unmoving compassion.

The Fly

(A small fly, which Traven presumes has followed him into the fissure, now buzzes about the corpse’s face. Guiltily, Traven leans forward to kill it, then reflects that perhaps this minuscule sentry has been the corpse’s faithful companion, in return fed on the rich liqueurs and distillations of its pores. Carefully, to avoid injuring the fly, he encourages it to alight on his wrist.)

DR YASUDA: Thank you, Traven. In my position, you understand …

TRAVEN: Of course, Doctor. I’m sorry I tried to kill it—these ingrained habits, you know, they’re not easy to shrug off. Your sister’s children in Osaka in ’44, the exigencies of war, I hate to plead them. Most known motives are so despicable, one searches the unknown in the hope that

YASUDA: Please, Traven, do not be embarrassed. The fly is lucky to retain its identity for so long. ‘That son you mourn, not to mention my own two nieces and nephew, did they not die each day? Every parent in the world grieves for the lost sons and daughters of their earlier childhoods.

TRAVEN: You’re very tolerant, Doctor. I wouldn’t dare—

YASUDA: Not at all, Traven. I make no apologies for you. Each of us is little more than the meagre residue of the infinite unrealized possibilities of our lives. But your son, and my nephew, are fixed in our minds forever, their identities as certain as the stars.

TRAVEN: (not entirely convinced) That may be so, Doctor, but it leads to a dangerous conclusion in the case of this island. For instance, the blocks—

YASUDA: They are precisely what I refer to, Traven. Here among the blocks you at last find an image of yourself free of the hazards of time and space. This island is an ontological Garden of Eden, why seek to expel yourself into a world of quantal flux?

TRAVEN: Excuse me (The fly has flown back to the corpse’s face and sits in one of the dried-up orbits, giving the good doctor an expression of quizzical beadiness. Reaching forward, Traven entices it on to his palm. He examines it carefully) Well, yes, these bunkers may be ontological objects, but whether this is the ontological fly is doubtful. It’s true that on this island it’s the only fly, which is the next best thing …

YASUDA: You can’t accept the plurality of the universe—ask yourself why, Traven. Why should this obsess you? It seems to me that you are hunting for the white leviathan, zero. The beach is a dangerous zone. Avoid it. Have a proper humility, pursue a philosophy of acceptance.

TRAVEN: Then may I ask why you came here, Doctor?

YASUDA: To feed this fly. ‘What greater love—?’

TRAVEN: (Still puzzling) It doesn’t really solve my problem. The blocks, you see …

YASUDA: Very well, if you must have it that way …

TRAVEN: But, Doctor—

YASUDA: (Peremptorily) Kill that fly!

TRAVEN: That’s not an end, or a beginning.

(Hopelessly, he kills the fly. Exhausted, he falls asleep beside the corpse.)

The Terminal Beach

Searching for a piece of rope in the refuse dump behind the dunes, Traven found a bale of rusty wire. After unwinding it, he secured a harness around the corpse’s chest and dragged it from the crevice. The lid of a wooden crate made a crude sledge. Traven fastened the corpse to it in a sitting position, and set off along the perimeter of the blocks. Around him the island remained silent. The lines of palms hung in the sunlight, only his own motion varying the shifting ciphers of their criss-crossing trunks. The square turrets of the camera towers jutted from the dunes like forgotten obelisks. An hour later, when Traven reached the awning by his bunker, he untied the wire cord he had fastened
around his waist. He took the chair left for him by Dr Osborne and carried it to a point midway between
the bunker and the blocks. Then he tied the body of the Japanese to the chair, arranging the hands so that
they rested on the wooden arms giving the moribund figure a posture of calm repose.

This done to his satisfaction, Traven returned to the bunker and squatted under the awning.

As the next days passed into weeks, the dignified figure of the Japanese sat in his chair fifty yards from
him, guarding Traven from the blocks. He now had sufficient strength to rouse himself at intervals and
forage for food. In the hot sunlight the skin of the Japanese became more and more bleached, and Traven
would wake at night and find the septicral figure sitting there, arms resting at its sides, in the shadows that
crossed the concrete floor. At these moments he would often see his wife and son watching him from the
dunes. As time passed they came closer, and he would sometimes find them only a few yards behind him.

Patiently Traven waited for them to speak to him, thinking of the great blocks whose entrance was
guarded by the seated figure of the dead archangel, as the waves broke on the distant shore and the
burning bombers fell through his dreams.

1964

Introduction to J. G. Ballard

James Graham Ballard was born in 1930 in a British enclave within the Chinese city of Shanghai, where his
father worked as the manager of a textile company. He and his family were sent to internment camps in 1943
when the Japanese military occupied Shanghai during World War II and stayed in them until the occupation
ended with Japan’s surrender in August 1945. James and his sister soon moved back to Britain, and he
quickly demonstrated a talent and interest in writing, though he initially intended to become a psychiatrist.
By the early 1950s, he had changed the focus of his studies to literature and begun writing unusual stories
that were heavily influenced both by his study of

psychoanalysis and by his abiding interests in science fiction and surrealist art. Finding only limited initial
success in publishing his fiction, he instead supported his family by working as an editor for a scientific
journal from 1958 to 1964.

The various threads of Ballard’s life to that point—
writing, war, science, and, psychology—all began
coming together as his career as an author took off
in the early 1960s. His first three novels—The Wind
from Nowhere (1961), The Drowned World (1962),
and The Burning World (1964)—all depict worldwide
environmental disasters and the human responses to
them. He also published five collections of short stories
between 1962 and 1964, including the one named
for what would become its most famous story, The
Terminal Beach (1964). Throughout the remainder
of his career, Ballard produced nearly forty books
of stylistically unconventional and thematically
provocative fiction, most of which depict harsh future
societies that have been deformed or even destroyed
because of some flaw in human behavior, usually one
related to the misuse of technology.

“The Terminal Beach”: Summary

The story begins with a man identified only by
his last name—Traven—sleeping in a deserted
concrete bunker on what appears to be a tropical
island. Any sense that this is a peaceful vacation,
though, is quickly dissipated as the description of his
environment includes such details as the “abandoned
Superfortresses lying among the palms, beyond the
perimeter of the emergency landing field.”

This ominous tone is enhanced by mention of the sand that
has been fused by “one of the weapons tests.” By
the second page of the story, the narrator reveals that
Traven is living in solitude on one of the islands of the Eniwetok atoll, a chain of forty small islands in the South Pacific that are notable in Cold War history for having been the location of more than forty atomic explosions during testing by the United States.

Traven’s reasons for coming to this remote and contaminated place are unclear, though the narrator reveals that his wife and young son have recently died in a car accident, suggesting that Traven may be struggling with grief. During the months he spends on the island, he does little more than wander among the ruins of the test-site, which includes a large number of hollow concrete blocks arranged in concentric rings that radiate outward from where the explosions took place. Traven walks somewhat aimlessly around the island, musing on its place in the history of the “Pre-Third [World War],” a “period of the Cold War… characterized in Traven’s mind above all by its moral and psychological inversions.”

Other than the “bodies” of “a dozen life-size plastic models” whose “half-melted faces, contorted to bleary grimaces, gazed up at him” from the shallow pools of water in which Traven finds them, the only other human images he encounters on the island are the “spectres of his wife and son,” which appear to him on evenings when a “sepulchral light lay over the concrete bunkers and causeways, and the basins seemed like ornamental lakes in a city of deserted mausoleums, abandoned even by the dead.” The near-complete lack of life and the repeated references to sepulchers and mausoleums reinforce the sense that Traven has made a kind of tomb for himself out of the island and its concrete boxes, in the process suggesting that the title of the story refers to the beach on which Traven intends to arrive at the terminus (that is, the end) of his life.

He sleeps upon piles of old magazines and scavenges food both from the wrecks of the bombers that litter the island and from the camp of what he believes to be an abandoned scientific expedition. Traven is eventually discovered by two of the scientists from that expedition, a biologist named Osborne and an unnamed young woman who Traven initially thinks is a girl in a photograph he has torn from one of the magazines on which he sleeps. Based on the excerpts from Osborne’s diary that appear in the story, they first encounter Traven on August 5, the day before the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima (and, coincidentally, the same date on which Bradbury’s “There Will Come Soft Rains” ends). The scientists treat Traven’s injured foot and want to know his reasons for being on Eniwetok. During one of these conversations, Traven thinks of telling Osborne that he is there to look for “the tomb of the unknown civilian, Homo hydrogenensis [hydrogen-man],” but chooses instead to make a joke about his own fragile mental state.

After Osborne and the woman depart from the island, Traven hides out from a U.S. Navy search party that is sent to find him after Osborne reports his unauthorized presence. Before leaving, the young woman informs Traven of Osborne’s intention to turn him in, suggesting that she recognizes some value in his otherwise insane-seeking quest to meet the ghosts of his dead loved ones amid the nuclear remnants of Eniwetok. After the Navy searchers disappear, Traven resumes his routine, eventually remaining entirely within the maze of blocks.

One day, Traven encounters the corpse of a Japanese man and imagines a conversation with him during which Traven apologizes to Dr. Yasuda (as he calls him) for killing his “sister’s children in Osaka in ’44.” This is presumably a reference to Traven’s participation in wartime bombing raids over Japan that show up in his nightmares throughout the story. Traven eventually ties the man’s corpse to a chair, ostensibly to “guard Traven from the blocks.” He spends the remainder of the story awaiting a death that may either reunite him with his lost relatives or simply release him from his grief and guilt: “[H]e would often see his wife and son watching from the dunes. As time passed they came closer, and he would sometimes turn to find them only a few yards behind him. Patiently, Traven waited for them to speak to him, thinking of the great blocks whose entrance was guarded by the seated figure of the dead archangel, as the waves broke on the distant shore and the burning bombers fell through his dreams.”

Analysis: The Cold War’s Intertwined Physical and Psychological Damage

The cover illustration on the 1974 Penguin paperback edition of The Terminal Beach features a giant red bomb partially embedded in a uniform stretch of sand. This simple illustration captures the tone of the book’s title story, which depicts the overpowering trauma that results from having the omnipresent threat of death by nuclear war embedded within one’s psyche.
Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton has written extensively about the psychological damage that long-term nuclear anxiety inflicted upon ordinary individuals during the Cold War. Lifton and his colleague Greg Mitchell wrote that trying to ignore or to suppress awareness of the realities of nuclear war results in a form of “psychic numbing...a diminished capacity or inclination to feel.” Lifton’s observation of this trait began with his study of survivors of the bombing at Hiroshima, but soon extended outward to include “those who created the weapon, made the decision to use it, or carried out the atomic bombing,” and eventually to anyone who was aware of the bombing at all.

Lifton and Mitchell contend that psychic numbing began with the repression of shared guilt over the gruesome stories and imagery that emerged from Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the months after the bombings. This quickly transformed into full-scale avoidance of the anxiety that accompanied the threat of catastrophic nuclear war, especially after the Soviet Union tested its first nuclear weapon in 1949. They catalogued some of the “lasting effects” of this unmanageable anxiety on individuals: “[T]hey included equating individual death with collective annihilation.... There was also a sense that life itself is unmanageable, or at least likely to be suddenly and absolutely interrupted.... It is not too much to say that the entire generation [of those who came of age in the 1950s] was left with a feeling that the world had gone mad in producing and potentially using these weapons.”

Traven embodies all of these traits as he passes his days in a state of “death in life,” which was also the title of Lifton’s 1969 book about the psychology of Hiroshima survivors (called hibakusha—literally, “people affected by the explosion”—in Japanese). Although Traven is not directly a hibakusha, the story is filled with reminders that both the physical world and the psychology of individual people is littered with the rubble and refuse of the nuclear age. The island on which Traven has chosen to live not only bears the visible scars of nuclear explosions—“The series of weapons tests had fused the sand in layers, and the pseudogeological strata condensed the brief epochs, microseconds in duration, of the thermonuclear age”—but also has become a dumping ground for unwanted and unneeded remnants of the Cold War in the wake of the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty:

Despite the sand and a few anemic palms, the entire landscape of the island was synthetic, a man-made artifact with all the associations of a vast system of derelict concrete motorways. Since the moratorium on atomic tests, the island had been abandoned by the Atomic Energy Commission, and the wilderness of weapon aisles, towers, and blockhouses ruled out any attempt to return it to its natural state.

Unlike the World War I battlefield of Sara Teasdale’s poem or even the postapocalyptic California of Bradbury’s story, this completely “synthetic” environment is described as impossible to restore. This situation becomes even more disturbing as the parallels between it and the mind of the story’s main character become unavoidable.
Traven sleeps in a “ruined bunker” on “a bed of old magazines” near a “dump where a dozen B-29’s lay across each other like dead reptile birds.” This last detail is especially significant since these are not only the specific type of planes from which the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs were dropped, but also likely those that Traven sees falling from the sky in flames in his nightmares.

Eniwetok itself could be described as a kind of hibakusha. It was not only the site of a significant battle between U.S. and Japanese forces during World War II, but also was the location of forty-three U.S. nuclear tests between 1948 and 1958, most significantly the first successful hydrogen bomb test (“Ivy Mike”) on November 1, 1952. Elugelap, one of the atoll’s islands, was wholly obliterated by this massive explosion. The extensive series of explosions at Eniwetok left behind tons of radioactive debris that only began to be cleaned up by American military personnel starting in the late 1970s.

While the island’s real-life history links it back to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Ballard’s description of Traven’s emotional responses associates it with another “nightmarish chapter of history,” specifically the Holocaust. Soon after his arrival, Traven notes that the island’s role in keeping humanity “suspended from the quivering volcano’s lip of World War Three” for two decades has made it feel like “an Auschwitz of the soul whose mausoleums contained the mass graves of the still undead.” Traven does not experience this ruined space just as a disturbing memory of the traumatic past, but also perceives the “island [as] a fossil of time future.” This comment hints at a fear that the whole world is becoming a similarly wrecked landscape.

When the narrator reveals that Traven is also grieving the death of his wife and son, Lifton and Mitchell’s claims about the combination of individual and collective death as a part of the Cold War’s “psychic numbing” become relevant: “Even the death of his wife and six-year-old son in a motor accident seemed only part of this immense synthesis of the historical and psychic zero, and the frantic highways where each morning they met their deaths the advance causeways to the global armageddon.” Ballard consistently intertwines the physical environment of Eniwetok and the psychological environment of Traven’s mind to reveal the possibly irreversible harm done to both by the first two decades of the nuclear age.

SELECTED WORK: “REPORT ON THE THREATENED CITY” (1971) BY DORIS LESSING

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**Priority Flash One**

All coordinates all plans all prints cancelled. As of now condition unforeseen by us obtaining this city. Clear all programmes all planners all forecasters for new setting on this information.

**Priority**

Base to note well that transmission this channel will probably be interrupted by material originating locally. Our fuel is low and this channel therefore only one now operative.
SUMMARY OF BACKGROUND TO MISSION

Since our planet discovered that this city was due for destruction or severe damage, all calculations and plans of our department have been based on one necessity: how to reach the city to warn its inhabitants of what is to come. Observing their behaviour, both through Astrovencers and from our unmanned machines launched at intervals this past year, their time, our Commissioners for External Affairs decided these people could have no idea at all of what threatened, that their technology, while so advanced in some ways, had a vast gap in it, a gap that could be defined, in fact, precisely by that area of ignorance—not knowing what was to befall them. This gap seemed impossible. Much time was spent by our technicians trying to determine what form of brain these creatures could have that made this contradiction possible—as already stated, a technology so advanced in one area and blank in another. Our technicians had to shelve the problem, since their theories became increasingly improbable and since no species known to us anywhere corresponds even at a long remove with what we believed this one to be. It became, perhaps, the most intriguing of our unsolved problems, challenging and defeating one department after another.

SUMMARY OF OBJECTIVE THIS MISSION

Meanwhile, putting all speculations on one side, attractive though they were, all our resources have been used, at top speed and pressure, to develop a spacecraft that could, in fact, land a team on this planet, since it was our intention, having given the warning, offered the information available to us, but (we thought) not to them, which made the warning necessary, to offer them more: our assistance. We meant to help clear the area, transport the population elsewhere, cushion the shock to the area and then, having done what, after all, we have done for other planets, our particular mental structure being suited to this kind of forecasting and assistance, return to base, taking some suitable specimens of them with us, in order to train them in a way that would overcome the gap in their minds and, therefore, their science. The first part we achieved: that is, we managed, in the time set for it, to develop a spacecraft that could make the journey here, carrying the required number of personnel. It strained our own technology and postponed certain cherished plans of our own. But our craft landed here, on the western shore of the land mass, as planned, and without any trouble seven days ago.

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

You will have wondered why there have been no transmissions before this. There have been two reasons. One: we realised at once that there would be heavier demands on our fuel than we had anticipated and that we would have to conserve it. Two: we were waiting to understand what it was we had to tell you. We did not understand the problem. For it was almost at once clear to us that all our thinking about ‘the gap in their mental structure’ was off the point. We have never understood the nature of the problem. So improbable is it that we delayed communicating until we were sure. The trouble with this species is not that it is unable to forecast its immediate future; it is that it doesn’t seem to care. Yet that is altogether too simple a stating of its condition. If it were so simple—that it knew that within five years its city was to be destroyed, or partly destroyed, and that it was indifferent—we should have to say: This species lacks the first quality necessary to any animal species; it lacks the will to live. Finding out what the mechanism is has caused the delay. Which I now propose to partially remedy by going into an account of what befell us, step by step. This will entail a detailed description of a species and a condition absolutely without precedent in our experience of the inhabited planets.

AN IMPOSSIBLE FACT

But first, here is a fact that you will find hard to believe. We did not find this out at once, but when we did, it was a moment of focus in our investigation, enabling us to see our problem clearly. This city experienced a disaster, on a fairly large scale, about sixty-five years ago their time.
A thought immediately suggests itself: our experts did not know about this past disaster, only about the one to come. Our thinking is as defective in its way as theirs is. We had decided that they had a gap, that this gap made it impossible for them to see into the immediate future. Having decided this, we never once considered another possibility, the truth—that they had no gap, that they knew about the threatened danger and did not care. Or behaved as if they did not. Since we were unable to conceive of this latter possibility, we did not direct our thoughts and our instruments back in time—their time. We took it absolutely for granted, an assumption so strong that it prevented our effective functioning as these creatures’ assumptions prevent them from acting—we believed (since we are so built ourselves) that it would be impossible for a disaster to have occurred already, because if we had experienced such a thing, we would have learned from the event and taken steps accordingly. Because of a series of assumptions, then, and an inability to move outside our own mental set, we missed a fact that might have been a clue to their most extraordinary characteristic—the fact that such a very short time ago they experienced a disaster of the sort that threatens again, and soon.

**THE LANDING**

Our unmanned craft have been landing on their planet for centuries and have taken various shapes, been of varying substances. These landings were at long intervals until one year ago. These intervals were because, except for its unique destructiveness and belligerence, this species is not the most remarkable or interesting made available to our study by our Technological Revolution in its Space Phase. But twelve times recently, each when their planet was at full light potential, we have landed craft, and each time close to the place in question. This was easy, because the terrain is semi-desert and lightly populated. We chose material for the craft that would manifest as their substance light—which is why we always used maximum their planet light as landing times. These craft were visible, if at all, as strong moonlight. The craft we are using on this present mission, the thirteenth in this series, is of higher concentration since it is manned.

We landed as planned. The sky was clear, the light of their moon strong. We knew at once that we were visible, because a herd of their young was near, some fifty or sixty of them, engaged in a mating ritual that involved fire, food and strong sound, and as we descended, they dispersed. Tapping their mind streams established that they believed our machine was extra-terrestrial but that they were indifferent—no, that is not an exact description, but remember, we are trying to describe a mind state that none of us could have believed was possible. It was not that they were indifferent to us but that indifference was generalised throughout their process, felt by us as a block or a barrier. After the young creatures had gone, we surveyed the terrain and discovered that we were on high land rising to mountains, inland from the water mass on the edge of which stands the city. A group of older specimens arrived. We know now that they live nearby and are all some variety or other of agriculturist. They stood quite close, watching the craft. An examination of their minds showed a different type of block. Even at that early stage, we were able to establish a difference in texture between their thought streams and those of the young, which we later understood amounted to this: the older ones felt a responsibility or power to act, as members of society, while the young ones were excluded or had decided to exclude themselves. As this area of the planet turned into the sunlight, it was clear to us that our craft ceased to be visible, for two of these older creatures came so close we were afraid they would actually enter the concentration. But they showed an awareness of our presence by other symptoms—headache and nausea. They were angry because of this damage being done to them—which they could have alleviated by moving farther off; but at the same time, they were feeling pride. This reaction highlighted the difference between them and the young—the pride was because of what they thought we represented; for, unlike the young, they believed we were some kind of weapon, either of their own land mass or of a hostile one, but from their own planet.

**WAR-MAKING PATTERNS**

Everyone in the System knows that this species is in the process of self-destruction, or part destruction. This is endemic. The largest and most powerful groupings—based on geographical position—are totally governed
by their war-making functions. Rather, each grouping is a war-making function, since its economies, the lives of its individual members, its movements are all subservient to the need to prepare for or wage war. This complete domination of a land area by its war-making machinery is not always visible to the inhabitants of that area, as this species is able, while making war or preparing for it, to think of itself as peace-loving—yes, indeed, this is germane to our theme; the essence of it.

**RATIONAL ACTION IMPOSSIBLE**

Here we approach the nature of the block, or patterning, of their minds—we state it now, though we did not begin to understand it until later. *It is that they are able to hold in their minds at the same time several contradictory beliefs without noticing it.* Which is why rational action is so hard for them. Now, the war-making function of each geographical area is not controlled by its inhabitants but is controlled by itself. Each is engaged in inventing, bringing to perfection—and keeping secret from its own inhabitants as well as from the ‘enemy’—highly evolved war weapons of all sorts, ranging from devices for the manipulation of men’s minds to spacecraft.

**SUBSERVIENT POPULATIONS**

For instance, recent landings on their moon, much publicised by the geographical groupings that made them and followed breathlessly by the inhabitants of the whole planet, were by no means the first achieved by the said groupings. No, the first ‘moon landings’ were made in secret, in service of one grouping’s dominance in war over another, and the slavish populations knew nothing about them. A great many of the devices and machines used by the war departments are continuously under test in all parts of the earth and are always being glimpsed or even seen fully by inhabitants who report them to the authorities. But some of these devices are similar (in appearance, at least) to machines of extraterrestrial origin. Citizens reporting ‘flying saucers’—to use one of their descriptive phrases—may as well have seen the latest of their grouping’s machines on test as one of our observation craft or observation craft from the Jupiter family. Such a citizen will find that after reaching a certain level in the hierarchies of officialdom, silence will blanket him and his observations—he will in various ways be repulsed, ridiculed, or even threatened. As usually happens, a council of highly placed officials was recently ordered to take evidence and report on the by now innumerable sightings of ‘unidentified flying objects’, but this council finished its deliberations with public words that left the situation exactly as it was before. The official report nowhere stated that there was a minority report by some of its own number. This is the level of behaviour in their public representatives that is tolerated by them. Large numbers, everywhere on the planet, see craft like ours, or like other planets’ craft, or war machines from their own or other geographical areas. But such is the atmosphere created by the war departments that dominate everything that these individuals are regarded as mentally inadequate or deluded. Until one of them has actually seen a machine or a spacecraft, he tends to believe that anyone who claims he has is deranged. Knowing this, when he does see something, he often does not say so. But so many individuals now have seen things for themselves that there are everywhere all kinds of dissident or sullen sub-groupings. These are of all ages and they cut across the largest and most widespread subculture of them all, that of the young of the species who have grown up in a society of total war-preparedness, who are naturally reluctant to face a future that can only mean early death or maiming and who react in the way mentioned earlier, with a disinclination to take part in the administration of their various societies. The older ones seem much more able to delude themselves, to use words like ‘peace’ when engaged in warlike behaviour, to identify with their geographical areas. The young ones are clear-minded, more easily see the planet as a single organism, but are also more passive and hopeless. We put forward the suggestion that the greater, or at least more purposive energy of the older ones may be because of their comparative narrowness and identification with smaller ideas. We are now able to explain why the young we met on the night we landed moved away. Some had already had the experience of insisting to the authorities that they had seen strange machines and objects of various kinds and of being discouraged or threatened. They would
be prepared to publicise what they had seen in their own news-sheets or to spread it by word of mouth; but, unlike their elders, most of whom seem unable to understand the extent to which they are subjugated to the need of war, they would never put themselves in a position where their authorities could capture or question them. But the older ones of the area who had seen our previous twelve craft, which had all landed there, had evolved a different attitude. Some had reported what they had seen and been discouraged. One or two, persisting, had been described as mad and had been threatened with incarceration. But, on the whole, they had taken the attitude of the authorities as a directive to mind their own business. Discussing it among themselves, they had agreed to keep watch on their own account, not saying too much about what they saw. In this group are two spies, who report to the war departments on what is seen and on the reactions of their fellow agriculturalists.

**FIRST ATTEMPT AT A WARNING**

Now we come to our first attempt to communicate a warning. Since the twenty or so elders were already on the spot and were unafraid, staying on the site where they believed we might redescend—they did not know it was only the strength of the sun’s light that made us invisible—we decided to use them and again made contact with their thought streams, this time in an attempt to project our message. But there was a barrier, or at least something we could not understand, and it was time-consuming for us. We were already aware that we might run short of power.

**INCAPACITY FOR FEAR**

Now, of course, we know we made a wrong assessment, for, expecting that the news of the expected disaster would jam their thought machinery in panic, we fed it in very carefully and slowly, taking an entire day and night. When we hit the block, or resistance, we put it down to fear. We were mistaken. This is perhaps the time to state a psychological law we consider basic to them: this is a species immune from fear—but this will be elaborated later, if the power holds. At the end of the day and night, still meeting the same resistance, we allowed ourselves another period of a day and a night to repeat the message, hoping that the fear—as we then saw it—would be overcome. At the end of the second period of transmitting, there was no change in their mental structure. I repeat, none. We know now what was far from our understanding then, that we were telling them something they already knew. As we were not prepared at that time to entertain that hypothesis, we decided that this particular group of individuals was for some reason unsuitable for our purposes and that we must try an altogether different type, and preferably of a different age group. We had tried mature individuals. We had already suspected what we since have confirmed, that in this species, the older they get, the less open they are to new thought material. Now, it so happens that the place where our craft descended is in an area much used for the before-mentioned mating rituals. Several times in the two day-and-night periods of our attempt with the older group, youngsters had arrived in various types of metal machines from the city—and had quite soon gone away, sensing our presence, if they did not see us. They all arrived in daylight. But on the third day, as the sunlight went, four young ones arrived in a metal conveyance, got out of it, and sat fairly close to us on a small rocky rise.

**SECOND ATTEMPT AT A WARNING**

They looked like healthy, strong specimens, and we began to transmit our information, but in greater concentration than we had used with the older individuals. But in spite of the increased power, these four absorbed what we fed into them and reacted in exactly the same way as their elders. We did not understand this, and, taking the chance of setting them into a panic flight, concentrated our entire message (which had taken two entire days and nights with the mature group) into the space of time between the sunlight’s going and its return. Their minds did not reject what we said nor jam up in fear. They were voicing to one another, in a mechanical way, what we were feeding into them. It sounded like this, over and over again—with variations:
‘They say we have only five years.’
‘That’s bad.’
‘Yeah, it’s going to be real bad.’
‘When it comes, it’s going to be the worst yet.’
‘Half the city might be killed.’
‘They say it might be as bad as that.’
‘Any time in the next five years, they say.’

It was like pouring a liquid into a container that has a hole in it. The group of older ones had sat around for two days and nights repeating that the city was due for destruction, as if they were saying that they could expect a headache, and now these four were doing the same. At one point they stopped the monotone exchanges, and one, a young female, accompanying herself on a stringed musical instrument, began what they call a song; that is, the vocalizations cease to be an exchange between two or more individuals, but an individual, or a group, very much enlarging the range of tones used in ordinary exchange, makes a statement. The information we fed into these four emerged in these words, from the young female:

We know the earth we live upon
Is due to fall.
We know the ground we walk upon
Must shake.
We know, and so . . .
We eat and drink and love,
Keep high,
Keep love
For we must die.

PHASE I ABANDONED

And they continued with their mating rituals. We then discontinued the emission of thought material, if for no other reason than that we had already used up a fourth of our power supply with no result. This, then, was the end of Phase I, which was the attempt to transfer the warning material into the brains of selected members of the species for automatic telepathic transmission to others. We set about Phase II, which was to take possession of the minds of suitable individuals in a planned campaign to use them as mouthpieces for the warnings. We decided to abandon the first phase in the belief that the material was running straight through their mental apparatus like water through sieves because it was so foreign to the existing mental furniture of their minds that they were not able to recognise what we were saying. In other words, we still had no idea that the reason they did not react was that the idea was a commonplace.

PHASE II ATTEMPTED

Three of us therefore accompanied the four youngsters in their machine when they returned to the city, because we thought that in their company we would most quickly find suitable individuals to take over—we had decided the young were more likely to be useful than the mature. The way they handled this machine was a shock to us. It was suicidal. Their methods of transport are lethal. In the time it took to reach the suburbs of the city—between the lightening of the dark and the sun’s appearance—there were four near collisions with other, equally recklessly driven vehicles. Yet the four youngsters showed no fear and reacted with the mechanism called laughter; that is, with repeated violent contractions of the lungs, causing noisy emission of air. This journey, their recklessness, their indifference to death or pain made us conclude that this group of four, like the group of twenty older ones, was perhaps untypical. We were playing with the idea that there were large numbers of defective animals in this species and that we had been unlucky in our choices. The machine was stopped to refuel and the four got out and walked about. Three more youngsters were sitting on a bench huddled against one another, in a stupor. Like all the young, they wore a wide variety
of clothing and had long head fur. They had several musical instruments. Our four attempted to rouse them and partly succeeded: the responses of the three were slow, and it seemed to us, even more clumsy and inadequate. They either did not understand what was being said or could not communicate what they understood. We then saw that they were in the power of some kind of drug. They had quantities of it and the four wished to put themselves in its power. It was a drug that sharpens sensitivity while it inhibits ordinary responses: the three were more sensitive to our presence than the four had been—they had not been aware of our presence in the vehicle at all. The three, once roused from their semi-consciousness, seemed to see, or at least to feel us, and directed towards us muttered sounds of approval or welcome. They seemed to associate us with the sun's appearance over the roof of the refueling station. The four, having persuaded the three to give them some of the drug, went to their vehicle. We decided to stay with the three, believing that their sensitivity to our presence was a good sign. Testing their thought streams, we found them quite free and loose, without the resistance and tensions of the others we had tested. We then took possession of their minds—this was the only moment of real danger during the mission. Your envoys might very well have been lost then, dissolving into a confusion and violence that we find hard to describe. For one thing, at that time we did not know how to differentiate between the effects of the drug and the effects of their senses. We now do know and will attempt a short description. The drug causes the mechanisms dealing with functions such as walking, talking, eating, and so on, to become slowed or dislocated. Meanwhile, the receptors for sound, scent, sight, touch are opened and sensitised. But for us, to enter their minds is in any case an assault, because of the phenomenon they call beauty, which is a description of their sense intake in an ordinary condition. For us, this is like entering an explosion of colour; for it is this that is the most startling difference between our mode of perceiving and theirs: the physical structure of their level appears in vibrations of brilliant colour. To enter an undrugged mind is hard enough for one of us; to keep one's balance is difficult. As it was, it might easily have happened that we were swept away in contemplation of vivid colour.

NECESSITY TO CONDENSE REPORT, POWER FAILING

Although the temptation to dwell on this is great, we must condense this report if we wish to keep any use of this channel: the pressure of local material is getting very strong. In brief, then, the three youngsters, reeling with pleasure because of this dimension of brilliance which we of course all know about through deductions but which, I assure you, we have never approached even in imagination, shouting and singing that the city was doomed, stood on the side of the road until one of the plentiful machines stopped for us. We were conveyed rapidly into the city. There were two individuals in the vehicle, both young, and neither reacted in any way to the warnings we were giving them through the minds or, rather voices of our hosts. At the end of the rapid movement, we arrived in the city, which is large, populous, and built around a wide indentation of the shore of the water mass. It is all extremely vivid, colourful, powerfully affecting the judgement, and it heightened the assault on our balance. We made a tentative decision that it is impracticable for our species to make use of this method: of actually possessing selected minds for the purpose of passing on information. It is too violent a transformation for us. However, since we were there, and succeeding in not being swept away into a highly tinted confusion of pleasure, we agreed to stay where we were and the three we were possessing left the vehicle and walked out into the streets, shouting out the facts as we thought them: that there was little doubt that at some moment between now and five years from now, there would be a strong vibration of the planet at this point and that the greater part of the city might be destroyed, with severe loss of life. It was early in the day but many of them were about. We were waiting for some sort of reaction to what we were saying, interest at the very least; queries; some sort of response to which we could respond ourselves with advice or offers of help. But of the very many we met in that brief progress through the streets, no one took any notice at all, except for a glance or a short indifferent stare.

CAPTURE BY THE AUTHORITIES

Soon there was a screeching and a wailing, which we at first took to be the reaction of these creatures to
what we were saying, some sort of warning, perhaps, to the inhabitants, or statements that measures towards self-preservation must be taken; but it was another vehicle, of a military sort, and the three (we) were taken up from the streets and to a prison because of the disturbance we were making. This is how we understood it afterwards. At the time, we thought that the authorities had gathered us in to question us as to the revelations we had to make. In the hands of the guards, in the street and the military vehicle and the prison, we kept up a continuous shouting and crying out of the facts and did not stop until a doctor injected our three hosts with some other drug, which caused them instantly to become unconscious. It was when we heard the doctor talking to the guards that we first heard the fact of the previous catastrophe. This was such a shock to us that we could not then take in its implications. But we decided at once to leave our hosts, who, being in any case unconscious, would not be any use to us for some time, even if this method of conveying warnings had turned out to be efficacious—and it obviously was not—and make different plans. The doctor was also saying that he had to treat large numbers of people, particularly the young ones, for ‘paranoia’. This was what our three hosts were judged to be suffering from. Apparently, it is a condition when people show fear of forthcoming danger and try to warn others about it and then show anger when stopped by authority. This diagnosis, together with the fact that the doctor and the authorities knew of the coming danger and of the past catastrophe—in other words, that they consider it an illness or a faulty mental condition to be aware of what threatens and to try to take steps to avoid or soften it—was something so extraordinary that we did not then have time to evaluate it in depth, nor have we had time since to do so, because—

...And finally, to end this news flash, a real heart-warmer. Five people, not rich folks, no, but people like you and me, have given up a month’s pay to send little Janice Wanamaker, the child with the hole in the heart, to the world-famed heart center in Florida. Little Janice, who is two years old, could have expected a long life of invalidism: but now the fairy wand of love has changed all that and she will be flying tomorrow morning to have her operation, all thanks to the five good neighbors of Artesia Street—

... the expected interruptions on this wavelength; but, as we have no way of knowing at which point the interruption began, to recapitulate, we left the doctor and the guards in discussion of the past catastrophe, in which two hundred miles of ground was ripped open, hundreds of people were killed and the whole city was shaken down in fragments. This was succeeded by a raging fire.

**HUMOUR AS A MECHANISM**

The doctor was discussing humorously (note previous remarks about laughter, a possible device for release of tension to ward off or relieve fear and, therefore, possibly one of the mechanisms that keep these animals passive in the face of possible extinction) that for some years after the previous catastrophe, this entire geographical grouping referred to the great fire, rather than to the earth vibration. This circumlocution is still quite common. In other words, a fire being a smaller, more manageable phenomenon, they preferred, and sometimes still prefer, to use that word, instead of the word for the uncontrolled shaking of the earth itself. A pitiable device, showing helplessness and even fear. But we emphasize here again that everywhere else in the System, fear is a mechanism to protect or to warn, and in these creatures, the function is faulty. As for helplessness, this is tragic anywhere, even among these murderous brutes, but there is no apparent need for them to be helpless, since they have every means to evacuate the city altogether and to—

...the new Suburb planned to the west. This will house one hundred thousand people and will be open in the autumn of next year fully equipped with shops, cinemas, a church, schools, and a new motorway. The rapid expansion of our beautiful city, with its unique climate, its setting, its shoreline, continues. This new suburb will do
...In view of the failure of phases I and II, we decided to abandon Phase III, which was planned to be a combination of I and II—inhabiting suitable hosts to use them as loudspeakers and, at the same time, putting material into available thought streams for retransmission. Before making further attempts to communicate, we needed more information. To summarise the results of Phase II, when we inhabited the three drugged young, we understood we must be careful to assume the shapes of older animals, and those of a technically trained kind, as it was clear from our experience in the prison that the authorities disliked the young of their species. We did not yet know whether they were capable of listening to the older ones, who are shaped in the image of their society.

**INABILITY TO ASSESS TRUTH**

While at that stage we were still very confused about what we were finding, we had at least grasped this: that this species, on being told something, has no means of judging whether or not it is true. We on our planet assume, because it is our mental structure and that of all the species we have examined, that if a new fact is made evident by material progress, or by a new and hitherto unexpected juxtaposition of ideas, then it is accepted as a fact, a truth—until an evolutionary development by-passes it. Not so with this species. It is not able to accept new information, new material, unless it is from a source it is not suspicious about. This is a handicap to its development that is not possible to exaggerate. We choose this moment to suggest, though of necessity briefly, that in future visits to this planet, with information of use to this species (if it survives), infinite care must be taken to prepare plenipotentiaries who resemble in every respect the most orthodox and harmless members of the society. For it is as if the mechanism fear has been misplaced from where it would be useful—preventing or softening calamity—to an area of their minds that makes them suspicious of anything but the familiar. As a small example, in the prison, because the three young animals were drugged and partly incoherent, and because (as it has become clear to us) the older animals who run the society despise those who are not similar to the norms they have established, it would not have mattered what they said. If they had said (or shouted or sung) that they had actually observed visitors from another planet (they had, in fact, sensed us, felt us) as structures of finer substance manifesting as light—if they had stated they had seen three roughly man-sized creatures shaped in light—no notice at all would have been taken of them. But if an individual from that section of society which is especially trained for that class of work (it is an infinitely subdivided society) had said that he had observed *with his instruments* (they have become so dependent on machinery that they have lost confidence in their own powers of observation) three rapidly vibrating light structures, he would at least have been credited with good faith. Similarly, great care has to be taken with verbal formulation. An unfamiliar fact described in one set of words may be acceptable. Present it in a pattern of words outside what they are used to and they may react with all the signs of panic—horror, scorn, fear.

**ADAPTATION TO THEIR NORM FOR THEIR DOMINANT ANIMALS**

We incarnated as two males of mature age. We dressed ourselves with the attention to detail they find reassuring. An item of clothing cut differently from what is usual for older animals will arouse disapproval or suspicion. Sober tones of colour are acceptable; bright tones, except in small patches, are not. We assure you that if we had dressed even slightly outside their norm, we could have done nothing at all. It is the dominant males who have to restrict their choice of clothing. Women’s garb is infinitely variable, but always changing, suddenly and dramatically, from one norm or pattern to another. The young can wear what they please as long as they are not a part of the machinery of government. The cutting and arranging of their head fur is also important. Women and the young enjoy latitude in this, too, but we had to see that our head fur was cut short and kept flattened. We also assumed a gait indicating soberness and control, and facial expressions...
that we had noted they found reassuring. For instance, they have a way of stretching the lips sideways and exposing the teeth in a facial arrangement they call a smile that indicates that they are not hostile, will not attack, that their intentions are to keep the peace.

Thus disguised, we walked about the city engaged in observation, on the whole astounded that so little notice was taken of us. For while we were fair copies, we were not perfect, and a close scrutiny would have shown us up. But one of their characteristics is that they, in fact, notice very little about one another; it is a remarkably unnoticing species. Without arousing suspicion, we discovered that everybody we talked to knew that a disturbance of the earth was expected in the next five years, that while they ‘knew’ this, they did not really believe it, or seemed not to, since their plans to live as if nothing whatsoever was going to happen were unaltered and that a laboratory or an institute existed to study the past upheaval and make plans for the forthcoming one—

...at the baseball game this afternoon, a portion of the scaffolding gave way and sixty people were killed, there have been messages of sympathy from the president, her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain, and the Pope. The manager of the sports stadium was in tears as he said: this is the most terrible thing that I have ever seen. I keep seeing those dead faces before my eyes. The cause of the accident is that building of the stands and their maintenance, and the provision of crush barriers, are subject to maximum profit being earned by the owners. The fund set up as the corpses were carried from the stadium has already reached $200,000 and more keeps pouring—

THE INSTITUTE

We entered the Institute for Prognosis and Prevention of Earth Disturbance as visitors from Geographical Area 2—one allied at this time with this area and, therefore, welcome to observe its work.

A short description of this organization may be of use: there are fifty of their most highly skilled technicians in it, all at work on some of the most advanced (as advanced as ours in this field) equipment for the diagnosis of vibrations, tremors, quakes. The very existence of this institute is because of the knowledge that the city cannot survive another five years—or is unlikely to do so. All these technicians live in the city, spend their free time in it—and the institute itself is in the danger area. They are all likely to be present when the event occurs. Yet they are all cheerful, unconcerned, and—it is easy to think—of extreme bravery. But after a short time in their company, discussing their devices for predicting the upheaval, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that like the youngsters in the machine for transportation, who steer it in such a way that they are bound to kill or maim themselves or others, they are in some way set not to believe what they say—that they are in danger and will most certainly be killed or maimed together with the rest of the population—

...the fire broke out at dawn, when few people were in the streets, and was so powerful that it reached the fourth story from the basement in minutes. The scores of people in the building were driven upwards by the fire, a few managing to negotiate the fire escapes, which were mostly engulfed in flames. An unknown man in the street penetrated the building, and rescued two small children left crying on the second floor. Another two minutes and it would have been too late. He instantly plunged back into the inferno and brought out an old woman on his back. In spite of protests from the by now large crowd, he insisted on reentering the flaming building and was last seen at a second-floor window from which he threw down a baby to the people below. The baby will survive, but the unknown hero fell back into the flames and—

A BASIC MECHANISM

...we believe we have established one of their mechanisms for maintaining themselves in impotence and
indecision. It is precisely this: that they do continually discuss and analyse. For instance, the technicians of this institute are always issuing warnings to the city’s officials and to the populace. Their prognoses, one after another, come true—that minor vibrations are likely to occur in this or that area—yet warnings continue to be issued, discussion goes on. So accustomed have they become to this state of affairs that we found it was not possible to discuss active means for prevention with them. They would have become suspicious that we were some sort of troublemaker. In short, they do not find frightening discussion about the timing, the nature, the power of probable earth convulsions, but they are hostile to suggestions about the possible transfer of population or rebuilding of the city elsewhere. We have said that this is an infinitely subdivided society: it is the institute’s task to warn, to forecast, not its responsibility to suggest solutions. But this mechanism—the role of talk—is merely part of a much deeper one. We now suspect that a great many of the activities that they themselves see as methods of furthering change, saving life, improving society are, in fact, methods of preventing change. It is almost as if they were afflicted with a powerful lassitude, a lack of vital energy. They are soothed and relieved by stating a problem, but having done this, seldom have the energy left to act on their verbal formulations. We have even concluded that they feel that by stating a problem, it becomes in some way nearer solution—

...protests that the three skyscrapers on third street are to be pulled down in order to build three much higher buildings, instead of putting the money into providing low-rate accommodation for the city’s poor, of which recent surveys reveal there are one million or more, nearly a quarter of the total population, and all in accommodations so inadequate that—

...for instance, debates, discussions, verbal contests of all sorts, public and private, continue all the time. All their activities, public and private, are defined in talk, public or private. It is possible that they are so constituted that for them an event has not occurred at all unless it has been discussed, presented in words—

...thirty-five conventions in the month of May alone totaling seventy-five thousand delegates from every part of the continent, while at the same time, the tourist figures for May topped those for any previous May. This year is already a record for conventions and tourism generally, proving that the attractions of our city, its situation, its climate, its amenities, its reputation for hospitality, ever increase in every part of the civilized globe. It is essential to step up the building of new hotels, motels and restaurants and to—

...the one thing they do not seem able to contemplate is the solution that has seemed to us obvious ever since we observed their probable future and decided to devote so much of our own planet’s resources to trying to help our sister planet—to evacuate the city altogether. This is incredible, we know. Of course, you will find it so.

**INDIFFERENCE TO LOSS OF LIFE**

We can only report what we find—that at no point have the inhabitants of this city even considered the possibility of abandoning it and moving to an area that is not absolutely certain to be destroyed. Their attitude toward life is that it is unimportant. They are indifferent to their own suffering, assume that their species must continuously lose numbers and strength and health by natural disasters, famine, constant war. That this attitude goes side by side with infinite care and devotion to individuals or to small groups seems to us to indicate—

...the donated sum is to be used to build a memorial, to be erected in the square. It will be in the shape of a column, with the head of William Underscribe, the deceased, in relief on one side.
Laid to Rest
Upon the Breast
of Nature
Gone But Not Forgotten

will be carved on the other. Joan Underscribe, who lost her husband five years ago, has worked seven days a week from six in the morning until ten at night at the Avenue Motel to earn the sum necessary for this simple but moving memorial. She has jeopardized her health, she claims. The five years of unremittent toil have taken their toll. But she has no regrets. ‘He was the best husband a woman ever had,’ she told our reporter—

…on the point of deciding there was nothing we could do against such total indifference to their condition; but since they are at least prepared to talk about situations, we devised a plan—

…the biggest entertainment ever, combining the world’s top circuses, ice shows, non-stop pop concerts for the entire week, day and night, not to mention three operas from the world’s greatest, the British National Theatre Company, in that perennial attraction, the international cultural star ace, ‘The Three Sisters’, which will be attended by our own first lady and her charming daughters and a glittering array of stars, including Bob Hope—

…‘calling a conference’ is to gather a large number of individuals in one place, in order to exchange verbal formulations. This is probably their main anxiety-calming mechanism; they certainly resort to it on every occasion, whether under that name, called by governments, administrative bodies, authorities of all kinds, or under other names, for very often this procedure is social. For instance, a conference can be called a party and be for pleasure, but discussion on a theme or themes will be, in fact, the chief activity. The essential factor is that many of the creatures assemble in one place, to exchange word patterns with others, afterwards telling others not present what has occurred—

…the city’s conservation year is over and must be counted a remarkable success. It burned an awareness of what we can expect so deeply into all our minds and hearts that interest is now not likely to fade. A conference to—

THEIR EDUCATION

The ability to define these, and to differentiate them from those of other people’s, forms a large part of their education. When two of these creatures meet for the first time, they will set about finding out what opinions the other holds and will tolerate each other accordingly. Non-stimulating, easily tolerated opinions can also be called ‘received ideas’. This means that an idea or a fact has been stamped with approval by some form of authority. The phrase is used like this: ‘That is a received idea.’ ‘Those are all received ideas.’ This does not necessarily mean that the idea or fact has been acted on nor that behaviour has been changed. Essentially, a received idea is one that has become familiar, whether effective or not, and no longer arouses hostility or fear. The mark of an educated individual is this: that he has spent years absorbing received ideas and is able readily to repeat them. People who have absorbed opinions counter to the current standard of ideas are distrusted and may be called opinionated. This description is earned most easily by women and young people.

By that time, we were well known to everyone in the institute as Herbert Bond, thirty-five years old, male, and John Hunter, forty years old, male. We had learned enough to avoid the direct ‘Why don’t you take such-and-such steps?’ since we had learned that this approach caused some sort of block or fault in their functioning, but approached like this: ‘Let us discuss the factors militating against the taking of such-and-such a step’; for instance, making sure that new buildings were not erected close to the area where tremors or
This formulation was initially successful, evoking the maximum amount of animated talk without arousing hostility. But very shortly, strong emotion was aroused by phrases and words of which we list a few here: profit motive, conflicting commercial interests, vested interests, capitalism, socialism, democracy—there are many such emotive words. We were not able to determine, or not in a way that our economic experts would recognise as satisfactory, the significance of these phrases, since the emotions became too violent to allow the conference to continue. The animals would certainly have begun to attack one another physically. In other words, the range of opinion (see above) was too wide to be accommodated. Opinion, that is, on matters to do with disposal and planning of population. Opinion concerning earth disturbance was virtually unanimous.

**BARBARIC METHOD OF TOWN PLANNING UNIQUE IN OUR SYSTEM, BUT SEE HISTORIES OF PLANETS 2 AND 4**

It appears that their population disposal, their city planning, is not determined by the need of the people who live in an area but is the result of a balance come to by many conflicting bodies and individuals whose reason for participating in such schemes is self-interest. For instance: before the violence engendered by this subject closed the conference, we had gathered that the reason a particularly large and expensive group of buildings was built directly in the line of maximum earth disturbance was that that part of the city commands high ‘rents’—that is, people are prepared to pay more to live and work in that area than elsewhere. Nor can the willingness of the builders and planners to erect buildings in the maximum danger area be put down to callousness, since in many cases the individuals concerned themselves live and work there—

...THE EMERGENCY UNIT AT THE HOSPITAL IN WHICH A TEAM OF TEN DOCTORS AND NURSES WORKS AROUND THE CLOCK TO SAVE LIVES THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST IN HOSPITALS NOT EQUIPPED WITH EMERGENCY UNITS. THE PATIENTS ARE USUALLY THE VICTIMS OF CAR ACCIDENTS OR STREET FIGHTS AND ARRIVE AT THE UNIT IN A STATE OF SEVERE SHOCK. SINCE AS SHORT A DELAY AS FIVE MINUTES CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH, TREATMENT IS STARTED AS THE PATIENT IS LIFTED OUT OF THE AMBULANCE—

...as a good deal of the anger was directed against their own young, we left the institute and returned to the centre of the city, where we again made contact with the young.

**THE INSTITUTE FOUND NOT USEFUL**

The young ones working at the institute in menial and assistive positions were all of a different subculture, patterned on the older animals in clothing and behaviour. The young animals we met in the city were in herds, or smaller groups, and not easily contacted by Herbert Bond and John Hunter, who, being older and dressed in the uniform of the dominant males, were suspected of being spies of some sort. We therefore reincarnated ourselves as two youngsters, male and female, having decided to spend a fourth of what was left of our supply of power in trying to persuade them to agree on one issue and to act on it. For, like their elders, they discuss and talk and sing endlessly, enjoying pleasurable sensations of satisfaction and agreement with others, making these an end in themselves. We suggested that in view of what was going to happen to the city, they, the young ones, might try to persuade all those of their age to leave and live elsewhere, to make for themselves some sort of encampment if to build a new city was beyond their resources, at any rate, a place in which refugees would be welcomed and cared for.

**FAILURE WITH THE YOUNG**

All that happened was that a number of new songs were sung, all of a melancholy nature, all on the theme of unavoidable tragedy. Our encounter with these young ones was taking place on the beach and at the...
time of the fading of the sunlight. This is a time that has a powerfully saddening effect on all the animals. But it was not until afterwards that we understood we should have chosen any time of the day but that one. There were large numbers of young, many with musical instruments. Half a dozen of them converted the occasion into a conference (see above) by addressing the mass not as their elders do, through talking, but through singing—the heightened and emotional sound. The emotion was of a different kind from that at the conference at the institute. That had been violent and aggressive and nearly resulted in physical attack. This was heavy, sad, passive. Having failed to get them to discuss, either by talking or by singing, a mass exodus from the city, we then attempted discussing how to prevent individuals from massing in the most threatened areas (we were on one at the time), and how, when the shock occurred, to prevent mass deaths and injuries and how to treat the injured, and so forth.

DESPAIR OF THE YOUNG

All these attempts failed. We might have taken a clue from the drugged condition of the three whose minds we at first occupied and from the indifference to death of the four in the metal conveyance. We have concluded that the young are in a state of disabling despair. While more clear-minded, in some ways, than their elders—that is, more able to voice and maintain criticism of wrongs and faults—they are not able to believe in their own effectiveness. Again and again, on the beach, as the air darkened, versions of this exchange took place:

‘But you say you believe it must happen, and within five years.’
‘So they say.’
‘But you don’t think it will?’
‘If it happens, it happens.’
‘But it isn’t if—it will happen.’
‘They are all corrupt, what can we do? They want to kill us all.’
‘Who are corrupt?’
‘The old ones. They run everything.’
‘But why don’t you challenge them?’
‘You can’t challenge them. They are too strong. We have to evade. We must be fluid. We must be like water.’
‘But you are still here, where it is going to happen.’
‘So they say.’

A song swept the whole gathering. It was now quite dark. There were many thousands massed near the water.

*It will happen soon,*
*So they say*
*We will not live to fight*
*Another day.*
*They are blind.*
*They have blown our mind.*
*We shall not live to fight.*
*We live to die*

MASS SUICIDES

And hundreds of them committed suicide—by swimming out into the water in the dark, while those who stood on higher ledges by the water threw themselves in—

...a donation of $500,000 to build a bird sanctuary in the park. This will have specimens of every known species in the world. It is hoped that species threatened with extinction
DUE TO MAN’S CRUELTY AND UNCONCERN WILL FIND THIS SANCTUARY A USEFUL BANK FROM WHICH THEY CAN REPLENISH AND STRENGTHEN VARIETIES UNDER THREAT—

...very low stock of power. We decided to make one last attempt, to concentrate our material in a single place. We decided to leave the herds of young and to return to the older animals, since these were in authority. Not to the institute, since we had proved their emotional instability. It was essential to choose a set of words that would not cause emotion—a received idea.

Now the idea that the behaviour of an individual or a group can be very different from its, or their, self-description is already part of their mental furniture and is enshrined in many time-worn word sets. For instance, ‘Don’t judge by what he says but by what he does.’

We decided to reinforce this soothing received idea with another of their anxiety-reducing devices. We have already noted that a conference is such a device. A variety of this is to put ideas into heightened or emotional sound, as was done by the young on the beach. We decided that neither of these was suitable for our last attempt. We considered and discarded a third that we have not yet mentioned. This is when disturbing or unpalatable ideas are put into ritual form and acted out in public in small groups or relayed by a technical device, ‘television’, which enables visual images to be transmitted simultaneously to millions of people. A sequence of events that may fall outside their formal code of morality, or be on its borderline, will be acted out, causing violent approval or disapproval—it is a form of catharsis. After a time, these sequences of acted-out events become familiar and are constantly performed. This way of trying out, of acclimatising unfamiliar ideas, goes on all the time, side by side with ritual acting out of situations that are familiar and banal—thus making them appear more interesting. This is a way of making a life situation that an individual may find intolerably tedious and repetitive more stimulating and enable him to suffer it without rebelling. These dramas, of both the first and the second kind, can be of any degree of sophistication. But we decided on a fourth mechanism or method: a verbal game. One of their games is when sets of words are discussed by one, two or more individuals, and these are most often transmitted through the above-mentioned device.

LAUGHTER, FUNCTIONS OF, SEE ABOVE

We proposed a game of words on the theme ‘Don’t judge by words but by actions.’ The debate took place last night. To begin with, there was a good deal of laughter, a sign that should have warned us. This was not antagonistic, ‘laughing at’, which is found disagreeable, but which, in fact, is a much safer reaction than ‘laughing with’, which is laughter of agreement, of feeling flattered. This second type is evoked by ideas that are minority ideas, when the minorities consider they are in advance of the mass. The aggressive and hostile laughter is a safer reaction because it reassures onlookers that a balance is being kept, whereas the sympathetic laughter arouses feelings of anxiety in those watching if the ideas put forward are challenging to norms accepted by them. Our thesis was simple and as already outlined: that this society is indifferent to death and to suffering. Fear is not experienced, or not in a way that is useful for protecting society or the individual. No one sees these facts, because all the sets of words that describe behaviour are in contrast to the facts. The official sets of words are all to do with protection of oneself and others. Throughout all this—that is, while we developed our thesis—we were greeted by laughter.

These games have audiences invited to the places where they are played, so that the makers of the ritual can judge the probable reaction of the individuals outside all over the city in front of their television. The laughter was loud and prolonged. Opposing Herbert Bond and John Hunter, professors of words from Britain, were two professors of words from the local university. They have rules of debate, the essence of which is that each statement must have the same weight or importance as the preceding. The opposing professors’ statements, of equal length as ours, stated the opposite view and were light and humorous in tone. Our turn coming again, we proved our point by stating the facts about this city’s behaviour in the face of a certain disaster—but we did not get very far. As soon as we switched from the theoretical, the general, to the particular, the laughter died away and violent hostility was shown. There is a custom that if people watching a ritual dislike it, they send hostile messages to the relay point. What Herbert Bond and John Hunter said
caused so much violent emotion that the technical equipment used for listening to these messages broke down. While the two local professors maintained the calmness of manner expected during these games, they were nervous and, the ritual over, they said they thought they would lose their employment. They were hostile to us, as being responsible. They complained that as ‘foreigners’, we did not realise that these rituals must be kept light in tone and general in theme.

When we two got to the door of the building, there was a mob outside, mostly of older animals, very hostile. The managers of the ritual game pulled us back and took us to the top of the building and set guards on us, as apparently the mob was angered to the point of wishing to kill us—again, the focus of their anger was that we were foreign. We complied, since there was no point in creating further disorder and—

...bring your deceased to us, who are friends of your family, friends in your distress.
Treated with all reverence, cared for as you cared when mother, father, husband, wife, brother, or little sister was still with you, the sleeping one will be borne to the last home, laid gently to rest in a plot where flowers and birds will always play and where you can visit and muse...in your leisure hours, you will always have a haven where your thoughts can dwell in loving happiness on your departed friends, who—

...We are running very short of power. There is nothing more we can do. This mission must be regarded as a failure. We have been able to achieve nothing. We have also failed to understand what is the cause of their defectiveness. There is no species like this one on any other planet known to us.

As the guards on our place of detention relaxed their vigilance, we simply dematerialised and returned to the craft. They will think we escaped or perhaps were the subjects of kidnapping by the still-hostile crowd that we could see from the top of the building where—

...shocking and disgusting program that offended in a way no other program has in this commentator’s memory. It is not what was said by our two visitors, it was the way it was said. After all, we all have to live with ‘the facts’ that they so naively seem to imagine are a revelation to us. For sheer bad taste, crudity of tone, ugliness of manner, and insensitivity to the deeper feelings of the viewer, nothing can be compared with professors Bond and Hunter last night.

**DEPARTURE FROM THE PLANET**

We are now reassembled as our original six and will shortly be returning. We have a tentative conclusion. It is this: that a society that is doomed to catastrophe, and that is unable to prepare for it, can expect that few people will survive except those already keyed to chaos and disaster. The civil, the ordered, the conforming, the well-tempered can expect to fall victim at first exposure. But the vagabonds, criminal, mad, extremely poor will have the means to survive. We concluded, therefore, that when, within the next five years, the eruption occurs, no one will be left but those types the present managers of society consider undesirable, for the present society is too inflexible to adapt—as we have already said, we have no idea why this should be so, what is wrong with them. But perhaps concealed in this city are groups of individuals we did not contact, who saw no reason to contact us, who not only foresee the future event but who are taking steps—

*The West Coast Examiner*

Sam Baker, a farmer from Long Ridge, said he saw a ‘shining round thing’ take off 100 yards away from his fence yesterday evening as the sun went down. Says Sam: ‘It rose into the air at such a rate it was almost impossible to follow it with my eyes. Then it disappeared.’ Others from the same area claim to have seen ‘unusual sights’ during the past few days. The official explanation is that the unusually vivid sunsets of the past month have caused strong reflections and mirages off rocks and stretches of sand.
MILITARY SECTOR III TO HQ
(TOP CONFIDENTIAL)

The UFO that landed some time in the night of the 14th, and was viewed as it landed, remained stationary for the entire period of seven days. No one was seen to leave the UFO. This is exactly in line with the previous twelve landings in the same spot. This was the thirteenth UFO of this series. But this was rather larger and more powerful than the previous twelve. The difference registered by Sonoscope 15 was considerable. This UFO, like the previous twelve, was only just visible to ordinary vision. Our observer, farmer Jansen H. Blackson, recruited by us after that first landing a year ago, volunteered that this one was much more easily seen. ‘You had to stare hard to see the others, but I saw this one coming down, also lifting off, but it went up so fast I lost it at once.’ The suggestion from M8 is that all thirteen are observation craft from the Chinese. The view of this section is that they are from our Naval Department 15, and it is our contention that as they have no right of access to this terrain, which is under the aegis of War Department 4, we should blast them to hell and gone the next time they try it on.

AIR FORCE 14 TO CENTER

The alightings continue—number thirteen last week. This was also unmanned. Confirm belief Russian origin. Must report also two further landings to the south of the city, both in the same place and separated by an interval of three weeks. These two craft identical with the series of fifty-five alighting to north of city last year. The two southern landings coincided with the disappearance of eleven people, five the first time, six the second. This makes 450 people gone without trace during the last two years. We suggest it is no longer possible to dismiss the fact that the landings of these craft always mean the disappearance of two to ten people with the word ‘coincidence’. We must face the possibility that all or some are manned, but by individuals so dissimilar in structure to ourselves that we cannot see them. We would point out the Sonoscope 4 is only just able to bring these types of craft within vision and that, therefore, the levels of density that might indicate the presence of ‘people’ might escape the machine. We further suggest that the facetiousness of the phrase ‘Little Green Men’ might mask an attitude of mind that is inimical to a sober evaluation or assessing of this possibility.

Confirm at earliest if we are to continue policy of minimizing these disappearances. We can still find no common denominator in the type of person taken off. The only thing they all have in common is that they were, for a variety of reasons, somewhere in the areas in which these craft choose to descend.

The West Coast Examiner

Our observer at filling station Lost Pine reports that groups of people are driving south out of the city to the area where the latest UFOs are known to descend and take off. Last night they numbered over fifty thousand.

AIR FORCE 14 TO CENTER

In spite of Total Policy 19, rumors are out. We consider it advisable to cordon off the area, although this might precipitate extreme panic situation. But we see no alternative. The cult called Be Ready for the Day is already thousands strong and sweeping the city and environs. Suggest an announcement that the area is contaminated with a chance leak of radioactivity.

Introduction to Doris Lessing

Doris Tayler was born in Iran in 1919, while the country was under British occupation immediately after World War I. Six years after her birth, her family moved to the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (the modern-day nation of Zimbabwe), where she remained through two short-lived marriages—the second of which gave her the last name by which she became famous as a writer—until moving to England in 1949, where she resided until her death in 2013.
Lessing became involved with several leftist political and cultural organizations during the 1940s, and her move to England following her second divorce was partially motivated by the desire to be part of a more vibrant socialist community than that of Southern Rhodesia. She had begun writing as a teenager and had even begun selling stories to magazines before she graduated from high school, but she did not publish her first books until the early 1950s. Her first novel—*The Grass is Singing* (1950)—and her first collection of stories—*This Was the Old Chief’s Country* (1951)—are generally representative of her earliest work, both for their African settings and their leftist political commentary on the events taking place there.

By the late 1950s, Lessing had become disenchanted both with communism as practiced by the Soviet Union and with many of her fellow travelers in British socialist circles. Correspondingly, she began moving toward less overt expression of political themes in her writing, although many of the philosophical foundations of these later works remained at least partially Marxist. Her 1962 novel *The Golden Notebook* brought Lessing widespread critical praise and popularity, but its formally experimental style and its complex treatment of politics, gender relations, and psychological trauma left many readers unsure about how to categorize her or her work. Her outspoken criticism of racism, sexism, militarism, and economic inequality had never fully meshed with rigid ideologies—communist or otherwise—and that independence of thought became even more pronounced as her career progressed. Much as the Non-Aligned Movement sought a “third way” for nations to define themselves outside the superpower rivalry of the Cold War, Lessing’s writing—both fictional and nonfictional—consistently expressed an ethical humanistic perspective that transcended such oversimplified oppositions as left vs. right, communist vs. capitalist, East vs. West.

As her publishing career approached its third decade, she increasingly began using the conventions of science fiction and dystopia in her writing, switching almost entirely to them for the better part of the 1970s and 1980s. Two years prior to the publication of “Report on the Threatened City,” Lessing had published *The Four-Gated City* (1969), the fifth novel in a series called “Children of Violence” that she had begun in 1952. Whereas *Martha Quest* (1952), the first book in the series, was a realistic coming-of-age novel that paralleled much of Lessing’s own adolescence and early adulthood in Southern Rhodesia, *The Four-Gated City* moves her protagonist’s story nearly forty years into the future in depicting the long decline of British society and the outbreak of a cataclysmic Third World War. A similarly dark and cautionary tone pervades her five-book “Canopus in Argos: Archives” (1979–83) series. “Report on the Threatened City,” published between these two multi-book projects, reflects their collective focus on human psychology and large-scale destruction.

**“Report on the Threatened City”: Summary**

“Report on the Threatened City” is ostensibly the transcript of a broadcast by a group of emissaries back to the unnamed planet from which they came. Having become aware of a city on Earth that is “due for destruction or severe damage” by an earthquake within a few years, the benevolent aliens undertake an elaborate effort not just to warn the city’s population, but also to “help clear the area, transport the population elsewhere, cushion the shock to the area, and then, having done what, after all, we have done for other planets...return to base, taking some suitable specimens of them with us, in order to train them in a way that would help them overcome the gap in their minds and, therefore, their science.”

From the start of their report, though, the aliens repeatedly note their deep confusion at the reception they receive from the various humans with whom they interact. Although they take great pains to avoid terrifying or overwhelming their subjects, the aliens
are puzzled by the fact that they cannot seem to elicit any reaction whatsoever, regardless of the age or social status of the humans they encounter: “It was not that they were indifferent to us but that indifference was generalised throughout their processes, felt by us as a block or a barrier [to communication].”

From the start of the story, the disaster that threatens the city is clearly an earthquake. The aliens’ shocked discovery that “This city experienced a disaster, on a fairly large scale, about sixty-five years ago, their time,” strongly hints that the story is set in San Francisco (which experienced a catastrophic earthquake in 1906). Such a supposition is further supported by the fact that the aliens interact with groups of young people described as wearing “a wide variety of clothing and [having] long head fur,” while also being “engaged in a mating ritual that involved fire, food, and strong sound” as the aliens first land. These are presumably some of the “hippies” who helped make San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury neighborhood a hotbed of countercultural music, art, and politics during the mid-to-late 1960s.

Neither these young pleasure-seekers nor any of the other groups of humans—including seismic researchers, college professors, policemen, television celebrities, and ordinary citizens—to whom the aliens try to convey their warning react in any helpful way. Some laugh nervously and distract themselves with trivial thoughts, whereas others angrily denounce the warning as unwarranted paranoia or compose indulgently passive songs: “We know the earth we live upon/Is due to fall./We know the ground we walk upon/Must shake./We know, and so.../We eat and drink and love./Keep high/Keep love/For we must die.” The aliens react with frustration and befuddlement: “It was like pouring liquid into a container that has a hole in it. The group of older ones had sat around for two days and nights repeating that the city was due for destruction, as if they were saying they could expect a headache, and now these four [young people] were doing the same.” Later in the story, this fatalism becomes even worse, leading hundreds of the young to commit mass suicide, thereby increasing the aliens’ desperation.

The aliens’ report is interrupted with increasing frequency by what appear to be snippets of television or radio broadcasts: “…AND FINALLY, TO END THIS NEWS FLASH, A REAL HEART-WARMER. FIVE PEOPLE, NOT RICH FOLKS, NO, BUT PEOPLE JUST LIKE YOU AND ME, HAVE GIVEN UP A MONTH’S PAY TO SEND LITTLE JANICE WANAMAKER, THE CHILD WITH THE HOLE IN THE HEART, TO THE WORLD-FAMED HEART CENTER IN FLORIDA.”

Some of these stories are wholly frivolous, whereas others describe the grim small-scale tragedies that will nevertheless be dwarfed by the massive disaster about to befall the city. The aliens are aware of these interruptions but literally powerless—they are running out of fuel and must soon end their transmission to return home—to do anything about them.

The aliens’ transmission ends with a somewhat hopeful speculation that there are possibly “concealed in this city...groups of individuals we did not contact, who saw no reason to contact us, who not only foresee the future event but who are taking steps—.” Following this abrupt ending is a snippet from a newspaper article that describes the aliens’ departure in the familiar language of UFO sightings. Although the reports are readily dismissed by government officials as simply a mirage caused by “the unusually vivid sunsets of the past month,” the text of the confidential military brief that follows next makes it clear that the aliens’ presence has, in fact, been well-known to the government. Moreover, they have been actively suppressing knowledge of the aliens’ presence, believing them to be either “from the Chinese” or of “Russian origin,” that is, covert agents of the Cold War instead of benign messengers. The aliens’ hopeful last wish seems unlikely to be fulfilled as the story ends. The final communiqué suggests that the military is ready to cut off all access to the aliens’ landing site in order to minimize the possible influence of a “cult called Be Ready for the Day,” which is
“already thousands strong and sweeping the city and environs.”187

**Analysis: How and Why Humanity is Threatened by the Cold War**

“Report on the Threatened City” is hardly the first artistic attempt to imagine extraterrestrial visitors observing human society. The Robert Wise film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), Isaac Asimov’s short story “The Gentle Vultures” (1957), and Mordecai Roshwald’s novel *Level 7* (1959) are only three of the many creative works that offered commentary on the Cold War by imagining how an alien society would perceive human behavior in that conflict as dangerous foolishness. This technique is known in literary criticism as defamiliarization, a term coined in the early twentieth century by Russian scholar Viktor Shklovsky. According to Shklovsky, the value of defamiliarization was to allow an author to breathe new life into themes and ideas whose meaning was essentially taken for granted by audiences. By depicting such concepts from a radically different perspective, an author could essentially force readers to reevaluate their own understandings of those concepts. One of Shklovsky’s most famous examples of this technique was Leo Tolstoy’s depiction in *War and Peace* (1869) of an opera from the perspective of an aristocratic teenager from the Russian countryside who had little to no life experience to help her understand the elaborate performance she was seeing and hearing. Tolstoy used her naive but honest perception of the event to critique opera as being, in his opinion, an absurd and conceited spectacle that was intended more as a means of validating social status than as true artistic expression.

Lessing’s use of defamiliarization in this story expands the scale from that of a single society to that of human civilization as a whole. Her alien visitors report back to their home planet about human behaviors that are not simply foibles or hypocrieties worthy of scorn (as in Tolstoy), but rather seem to threaten the survival of the species. In particular, the fact that one of the main problems they identify in human beings is “that this species, on being told something, has no means of judging whether or not it is true,”188 a condition that makes the people they meet either fatalistically indifferent or defensively hostile toward the aliens’ revelation of the impending earthquake. Lessing uses the aliens’ unheeded warning to stand in for willful ignorance about the looming catastrophe of nuclear war, with the aliens asserting early on that “[e]veryone in the System knows that this species is in the process of self-destruction, or part destruction.”189

Lessing emphasizes that the failure to understand the seriousness of the threat is not a sign of inherent stupidity, but rather the result of intentional processes that encourage people to ignore or to dismiss it. She indicts numerous different powerful groups for their role in helping to create a society of individuals for whom “rational action is so hard.”190 For example, the aliens observe fairly early on that each of the “largest and most powerful groupings [of humans]…is a war-making function, since its economies, the lives of its individual members, its movements are all subservient to the need to prepare for or wage war.”

Still more problematic is the fact that this thorough militarism “is not always visible to the inhabitants…as
this species is able, while making war or preparing for it, to think of itself as peace-loving.”191 Three years prior to the publication of Lessing’s story, a U.S. military officer in Vietnam was quoted in an article by journalist Peter Arnett as saying, “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.”192 It seems likely Lessing had such paradoxical comments in mind—and perhaps President Kennedy’s expressed “intention to challenge the Soviet Union, not to an arms race, but to a peace race”193—while writing the aliens’ observation that humans “are able to hold in their minds at the same time several contradictory beliefs without noticing it.”194

Later in the story, she similarly calls out governmental secrecy (“such is the atmosphere created by war departments that dominate everything”195), academic ineffectuality (“one of their mechanisms for maintaining themselves in impotence and indecision…[is] that they do continuously discuss and analyse”196), withdrawal into soothing distractions (“[W]e then saw that they were in the power of some drug…that sharpens sensitivity while it inhibits ordinary response”197), and repressive authoritarianism (“they consider it an illness or a faulty mental condition to be aware of what threatens and to try to take steps to avoid or to soften it”198).

As the aliens’ report is increasingly intruded upon by media messages expressing one or more of these tendencies, the garbled form of Lessing’s story begins to mirror its message. Their desire to assist humanity in surviving a predictable (and, thus, avoidable) catastrophe is drowned out by comparatively trivial news and then by the suspicions of the military, which uses the same conventional Cold War logic to presume that the aliens’ message is part of a communist propaganda campaign and therefore in need of suppression. In doing so, Lessing contends that they will inevitably extend the flawed logic of “destroy[ing] the town to save it” to the city as a whole (and by metaphorical extension, to the entire world).

POEMS AND SONGS

SELECTED WORK: “ADVICE TO A PROPHET” (1959) BY RICHARD WILBUR


When you come, as you soon must, to the streets of our city,
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,
Not proclaiming our fall but begging us
In God’s name to have self-pity,

Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range,
The long numbers that rocket the mind;
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,
Unable to fear what is too strange.

Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the race.
How should we dream of this place without us?—
The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,
A stone look on the stone’s face?

Speak of the world’s own change. Though we cannot conceive
Of an undreamt thing, we know to our cost
How the dreamt cloud crumbles, the vines are blackened by frost,
How the view alters. We could believe,
If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will slip
Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy,
The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,
The jack-pine lose its knuckled grip

On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn
As Xanthus once, its gliding trout
Stunned in a twinkling. What should we be without
The dolphin’s arc, the dove’s return,

These things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken?
Ask us, prophet, how we shall call
Our natures forth when that live tongue is all
Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken

In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean
Horse of our courage, in which beheld
The singing locust of the soul unshelled,
And all we mean or wish to mean.

Ask us, ask us whether with the worldless rose
Our hearts shall fail us; come demanding
Whether there shall be lofty or long standing
When the bronze annals of the oak-tree close.

Introduction to Richard Wilbur
By the time “Advice to a Prophet” was published in the April 4, 1959, issue of The New Yorker, Richard Wilbur was already among the leading poets in the United States, although quite a few critics complained that Wilbur’s work was overly formulaic, especially compared to such avant-garde contemporaries as John Ashbery, Allen Ginsberg, or Denise Levertov. Fellow poet and literary scholar Dana Gioia described the debate over Wilbur’s poetry as follows:

There was no question that his poetry was immensely accomplished…. Wilbur seemed incapable of writing a bad poem. The real question was whether he was sufficiently ambitious. Did Wilbur achieve perfection on a small scale at the expense of larger accomplishment? Was he unwilling to risk failure by tackling big themes and extended forms?

Consisting of thirty-six fairly short lines of verse, “Advice to a Prophet” certainly does not use an “extended form” of poetic expression; however, it is hard to imagine a bigger theme than nuclear annihilation.

Born in New York in 1921 and raised in neighboring New Jersey, Wilbur started publishing poetry in his mid-twenties. Many of these early works had been written during Wilbur’s two years of service in the U.S. Army during World War II. He published his first collection, The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems, in 1947 and followed up with four more books over the course of the next fourteen years, much of which he spent as a member of the faculty at Harvard University in Massachusetts and Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

Wilbur’s comparatively traditional poetic style has frequently been compared to that of W. H. Auden and Robert Frost, with whom Wilbur worked at Harvard in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Wilbur’s award-winning 1956 collection Things of This World (1956) set him alongside these celebrated precursors in terms of his stature within American poetry. Over the course of nearly seven decades as a publishing writer, Wilbur received nearly every honor available to a poet, including serving as Poet Laureate of the United States.
(1987–88). He also translated a number of seventeenth-century plays from French into English. Although its politics remain fairly subtle compared to some of his more radical contemporaries, the call to both courage and action implied within “Advice to a Prophet” is still something of a departure from most of Wilbur’s other poetry to that point.

“Advice to a Prophet”: Summary and Analysis

According to Wilbur’s biographers Robert and Mary Bagg, “On the day the bomb annihilated Hiroshima, an acquaintance in a London pub challenged Wilbur to write a good poem about the prospect that the new weapon had opened for wiping out the human race. He offered Wilbur ten dollars if he could bring it off and did not specify a time limit.”

It would take him fourteen years to make good on this bet, and “Advice to a Prophet” reveals both Wilbur’s strong emotional reaction to the foreboding realities of nuclear weapons and his belief that their use in a catastrophic war would not be prevented simply through detailed literal description of the destruction they will unleash.

Critic John Gery has asserted that in supposedly giving “advice” to a “prophet” who would try to steer humanity away from its self-destructive course, the poem emphasizes “the loss of language (and through that the loss of perception) as our only means of appreciating the dangers of nuclearism. Annihilation, in other words, is a physical and psychic condition that encompasses...everything else imaginable.”

“Advice to a Prophet” anticipates some of the observations that Lessing makes in “Report on the Threatened City,” which was published more than a decade after Wilbur’s poem first appeared. The extraterrestrial observers in Lessing’s poem are dismayed by repeated demonstrations of humanity’s resigned indifference to their warning about the potential for their imminent destruction; similarly, Wilbur begins his poem by imagining a newly arrived prophet who is “Mad-eyed from stating the obvious” as he is “begging us/In God’s name to have self-pity.”

Raymond-Jean Frontain contends that Wilbur’s poem is a recommendation for how to “reach an alienated, uninterested, and even apathetic audience grown deaf to the poet/prophet’s voice of admonition and entreaty.” Wilbur insists that he should “Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range” and not attempt to “scare us with talk of the death of the race.” His rationale is not that these things are unimportant, but rather that such grotesque information is beyond human comprehension (“Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind./Unable to fear what is too strange... How should we dream of this place without us?”) and thus will not make people change their attitudes.
Instead, he suggests that the prophet “Speak of the world’s own change,” proceeding thereafter to run through a list of images related to the natural world that contrast with the “undreamt thing” (that is, the deeply repressed concept of our own nonexistence). His invocation of the natural world is not simply an accounting of the massive environmental cost of nuclear war. Instead, it associates this loss with humanity’s ability to think and to speak about “all we mean or wish to mean.” He suggests that the natural world is the mirror through which humans metaphorically see ourselves and that we need to be aware of the implications of its loss: “Ask us, prophet, how we shall call/Our natures forth when that live tongue is all/Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken.” The poet suggests that the destruction of “the rose of our love and the clean/ Horse of our courage” along with the rest of the natural world will also eradicate humanity’s ability to understand itself as a part of that world. Such a state essentially equals death for him (“Ask us, ask us whether with the worldless rose/Our hearts shall fail us”).

SELECTED WORK: “TALKIN’ WORLD WAR III BLUES” (1963)
BY BOB DYLAN


Some time ago a crazy dream came to me
I dreamt I was walkin’ into World War Three
I went to the doctor the very next day
To see what kinda words he could say
He said it was a bad dream
I wouldn’t worry 'bout it none, though
They were my own dreams and they’re only in my head

I said, “Hold it, Doc, a World War passed through my brain”
He said, “Nurse, get your pad, this boy’s insane”
He grabbed my arm, I said, “Ouch!”
As I landed on the psychiatric couch
He said, “Tell me about it”

Well, the whole thing started at 3 o’clock fast
It was all over by quarter past
I was down in the sewer with some little lover
When I peeked out from a manhole cover
Wondering who turned the lights on

Well, I got up and walked around
And up and down the lonesome town
I stood a-wondering which way to go
I lit a cigarette on a parking meter and walked on down the road
It was a normal day

Well, I rung the fallout shelter bell
And I leaned my head and I gave a yell
“Give me a string bean, I’m a hungry man”
A shotgun fired and away I ran
I don’t blame them too much though, I know I look funny
Down at the corner by a hot-dog stand
I seen a man
I said, “Howdy friend, I guess there’s just us two”
He screamed a bit and away he flew
Thought I was a Communist

Well, I spied a girl and before she could leave
“How’s it go and play Adam and Eve”
I took her by the hand and my heart it was thumpin’
When she said, “Hey man, you crazy or sumpin’
You see what happened last time they started”

Well, I seen a Cadillac window uptown
And there was nobody aroun’
I got into the driver’s seat
And I drove down 42nd Street
In my Cadillac. Good car to drive after a war

Well, I remember seein’ some ad
So I turned on my Conelrad
But I didn’t pay my Con Ed bill
So the radio didn’t work so well
Turned on my record player—
It was Rock-a-day Johnny singin’, “Tell Your Ma, Tell Your Pa
Our Love’s A-gonna Grow Ooh-wah, Ooh-wah”

I was feelin’ kinda lonesome and blue
I needed somebody to talk to
So I called up the operator of time
Just to hear a voice of some kind
“When you hear the beep it will be three o’clock”
She said that for over an hour
And I hung up

Well, the doctor interrupted me just about then
Sayan’, “Hey I’ve been havin’ the same old dreams
But mine was a little different you see
I dreamt that the only person left after the war was me
I didn’t see you around”

Well, now time passed and now it seems
Everybody’s having them dreams
Everybody sees themselves
Walkin’ around with no one else
Half of the people can be part right all of the time
Some of the people can be all right part of the time
But all of the people can’t be all right all of the time
I think Abraham Lincoln said that
“I’ll let you be in my dreams if I can be in yours”
I said that
**Introduction to Bob Dylan**

Robert Zimmerman was born in northern Minnesota in 1941 and lived there until moving away in 1959 to attend college in Minneapolis. Although his undergraduate career only lasted a year, it was during this time that he began performing folk music and using the stage name Bob Dylan (an homage to the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas). He moved to New York early in 1961, throwing himself fully into the thriving folk music scene of Greenwich Village in lower Manhattan. Within weeks, he had begun making a name for himself, and by early 1962, he had recorded and released a self-titled album of mostly traditional folk, blues, and gospel songs. Although it received some positive reviews, it neither sold particularly well nor did much to expand the reputation of the young Dylan.

By the next year, though, he had legally changed his name and released *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963), an album made up mostly of Dylan’s own compositions, including “Talkin’ World War III Blues.” Such songs as “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Masters of War,” “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall,” and “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” became both international hits and theme-songs for the growing countercultural youth movement that was openly challenging traditional American values. Dylan’s fame rose to the level of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, both of whom were becoming popular sensations at roughly the same time. Over the course of the next five decades, Dylan remained both politically engaged and artistically innovative, receiving accolades both as a performer and as a poet. In 2016, he became the first singer-songwriter to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

**“Talkin’ World War III Blues”: Summary and Analysis**

“Talkin’ World War III Blues” is an example of a “talking blues,” a style of American folk music that dates back to the 1920s and is strongly associated with Woody Guthrie, one of Dylan’s most significant early influences. From its earliest examples, this style combined humor and social commentary, and Dylan’s repeated use of it in songs such as “Talkin’ World War III Blues” early in his career helped make it a common form for protest music during the 1960s.

As was typical of its style, “Talkin’ World War III Blues” was improvised in the studio during the recording sessions for the album, a fact that is reflected in the intentionally unpolished nature of his vocal performance on the track. The song’s lyrics essentially deal with the same subject matter as *The Terminal Beach*, namely the psychological disturbance that results from anxiety about nuclear war. Whereas Ballard shows his protagonist being crippled by this disturbance, Dylan is more comical in his description of “land[ing] on the psychiatric couch” to tell his doctor all about his “bad dream” of “walkin’ into World War III.”

Dylan’s comedy, though, is dark and ironic, like that of Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* or Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*. After recounting that the war in his dream lasted only fifteen minutes (during which he was “down in the sewer with some little lover”), he emerges from underground to discover a depopulated city. As he looks around and lights a cigarette on a presumably radioactive parking meter, he comments ironically that this is a sign that “[i]t was a normal day.” He goes off in search of food and the first two men he meets react in terror. The first fires a shotgun at him as he “leaned...
Bob Dylan shakes hands with President Barack Obama after a performance at the White House in 2010.

[his] head” into a fallout shelter to ask for a “string bean,” whereas the second runs away screaming as Dylan attempts small-talk: “I said, ‘Howdy, friend, I guess there’s just us two? He screamed a bit and away he flew.” The reason for his terror seems even more ridiculous in light of the mass extinction that has occurred: “Thought I was a communist.”

He next finds a young woman and propositions her to regenerate the species with him (“Let’s go and play Adam and Eve”), but she rejects his advances by suggesting that the story didn’t work out very well the first time. Left on his own, he gets into an abandoned Cadillac and drives down Manhattan’s famous 42nd Street—something that would have been an act of brash rebellion in real life—adding a line that sounds like an advertising slogan (“Good car to drive after a war”) that seems absurdly out of place in a postapocalyptic setting.

He returns to his room and tries to listen to his government-issued Civil Defense radio (“my CONELRAD”), but discovers that there’s no electricity to power it (a fact he attributes with tongue in cheek to having not paid his bill), so instead he plays a song attributed to a fictional singer named “Rock-a-Day Johnny” entitled “Our Love’s a-Gonna Grow,” a situation unlikely to be true after a nuclear war. This realization seems to leave him “lonesome and blue,” so he calls the automated operator that provides the correct time of day “just to hear a voice of some kind.” Much like the house’s voice at the end of Bradbury’s “There Will Come Soft Rains,” this mechanical woman repeats the exact time at which the war started—three o’clock—for “over an hour” until he hangs up, presumably without a cure for his lonely blues.

At this point, Dylan’s psychiatrist interrupts him and admits to having similar dreams, with the sole difference being that “the only person left after the war was me/I didn’t see you around.” Echoing Lifton and Mitchell’s assertions about the universality of nuclear anxiety in Cold War America, Dylan suggests that “Everybody’s having them dreams” in which they are the sole survivors of an apocalypse. After comically mangling a quote by Abraham Lincoln that in any case seems fairly unsuited to helping with this nationwide epidemic of bad dreams, Dylan concludes the song with a simple request for mutual compassion that transcends the song’s general tone of dark humor: “I’ll let you be in my dreams if I can be in yours.”

SELECTED WORK: “FOR ETHEL ROSENBERG” (1981) BY ADRIENNE RICH


Convicted, with her husband, of “conspiracy to commit espionage”; killed in the electric chair June 19, 1953

I

Europe 1953:
throughout my random sleepwalk
the words
Scratched on walls, on pavements
painted over railway arches

*Liberez les Rosenberg!*

Escaping from home I found
home everywhere:
the Jewish question, Communism

marriage itself
a question of loyalty
or punishment

my Jewish father writing me
letters of seventeen pages
finely inscribed harangues

questions of loyalty
and punishment
One week before my wedding

that couple gets the chair
the volts grapple her, don’t
kill her fast enough

*Liberez les Rosenberg!*
I hadn’t realized
our family arguments were so important

my narrow understanding
of crime of punishment
no language for this torment

mystery of that marriage
always both faces
on every front page in the world

Something so shocking so
unfathomable
it must be pushed aside

II

She sank however into my soul A weight of sadness
I can hardly register how deep
her memory has sunk that wife and mother

like so many
who seemed to get nothing out of any of it
except her children
that daughter of a family
like so many
needing its female monster

she, actually wishing to be an artist
wanting out of poverty
possibly also really wanting
revolution

that woman strapped in the chair
no fear and no regrets
charged by posterity

not with selling secrets to the Communists
but with wanting to distinguish
herself being a bad daughter a bad mother

And I walking to my wedding
by the same token a bad daughter a bad sister
my forces focussed

on that hardly revolutionary effort
Her life and death the possible
ranges of disloyalty

so painful so unfathomable
they must be pushed aside
ignored for years

III

Her mother testifies against her
Her brother testifies against her
After her death

she becomes a natural prey for pornographers
her death itself a scene
her body sizzling half-strapped whipped like a sail

She becomes the extremest victim
described nonetheless as rigid of will
what are her politics by then no one knows

Her figure sinks into my soul
a drowned statue
sealed in lead
For years it has lain there unabsorbed
first as part of that dead couple
on the front pages of the world the week

I gave myself in marriage
then slowly severing drifting apart
a separate death a life unto itself

no longer the Rosenbergs
no longer the chosen scapegoat
the family monster

till I hear how she sang
a prostitute to sleep
in the Women’s House of Detention

Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg would you
Have marched to take back the night
Collected signatures

For battered women who kill
What would you have to tell us
Would you have burst the net

IV

Why do I even want to call her up
to console my pain (she feels no pain at all)
why do I wish to put such questions
to ease myself (she feels no pain at all
she finally burned to death like so many)
why all this exercise of hindsight?

since if I imagine her at all
I have to imagine first
the pain inflicted on her by women

her mother testifies against her
her sister-in-law testifies against her
and how she sees it

not the impersonal forces
not the historical reasons
why they might have hated her strength

If I have held her at arm’s length till now
if I have still believed it was
my loyalty, my punishment at stake
Introduction to Adrienne Rich

Adrienne Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1929. Her father, despite being a man of science—he was a doctor of pathology at the renowned Johns Hopkins Medical School—strongly encouraged her interest in poetry from an early age. She studied literature at Radcliffe, an all-women’s college closely affiliated with Harvard University and published her first book of poems, *A Change of World* (1951), while still an undergraduate. Soon thereafter she received a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship that allowed her to continue her studies at Oxford University in England. She received the National Book Award for her collection *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) although she insisted on accepting the award on behalf of all women.

Over the course of a subsequent career that spanned six decades, Rich not only developed a considerable literary reputation on the basis of both her poetry and her essays, but also became an outspoken and visible activist. She vehemently opposed American military involvement in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere and was a prominent member of the movement against nuclear weapons. She also actively supported a wide range of groups seeking societal justice and political liberation, including the Black Panthers and the New Jewish Agenda. Perhaps most significantly, Rich became one of the leading public voices of a comparatively radical feminism that espoused not only legal equality for women but the general dismantling of what she saw as an oppressively patriarchal society (that is, one that inherently gives men power over women). She divorced her husband of nearly twenty years in 1970, declaring herself to be through suppressing her true sexuality. Rich remained in a relationship with novelist and literary critic Michelle Cliff from the mid-1970s until her death in 2012.

“For Ethel Rosenberg”: Summary and Analysis

“For Ethel Rosenberg” is one of many poems in which Rich blends her dedication to poetic craft with the desire to make a pointed social statement. Ethel Rosenberg had been executed for espionage in 1953 along with her husband Julius. They were accused and convicted of having conspired to acquire secret U.S. military documents—including some related to the atomic bomb—and transmitting them to the Soviet Union. At the time of their trial and execution, there was considerable belief that the Rosenbergs were innocent victims of the “Red Scare” that was sweeping the nation at the time, and the highly politicized and public nature of their case and its handling did little to change this perception. Soviet documents declassified...
after the end of the Cold War, though, strongly suggest that Julius Rosenberg had been actively engaged in espionage, while Ethel had knowingly supported his action, even if she had not herself been a spy. Three decades after the end of the Cold War, the debate over Ethel Rosenberg’s guilt or innocence (as well as the question of whether the harsh punishment for her alleged crime was justified) remains unresolved.

When Rich published “For Ethel Rosenberg” in 1981, though, the additional evidence from the Soviet archives had not yet appeared, and her status as a victim of such powerful male figures as Richard Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover was somewhat less complicated than it is now. The four-and-a-half pages of Rich’s poem combine a sympathetic portrayal of Ethel caught up in the anticommunist hysteria of the early 1950s with her own thoughts about marriage and the patriarchal pressures that faced women of their generation. (Ethel Rosenberg was fourteen years older than Rich.) The result is a poem that uses one of the iconic figures of Cold War history to question Rich’s own place within the United States at one of the peak moments of its repression of perceived outsiders, whether they be women, Jews, or political leftists (or like both Rich and Ethel Rosenberg, all three).

Divided into four parts, the poem is prefaced with an epigraph in which Rich notes the precise date of Ethel Rosenberg’s execution as well as the precise crime of which she was convicted. Even twenty-eight years later it seems unlikely that Rich believes her audience would have forgotten these details, making it likely that this initial reminder of the gravity of Rosenberg’s life is intended as a glaring contrast to Rich’s reference in the first section of the poem to the fact that she felt herself to be on a “random sleepwalk” through Europe at the very moment of Rosenbergs’ execution. Seeing graffiti supporting the couple throughout her trip, she remarks that she feels pursued by the issues surrounding their situation:

Escaping from home I found
home everywhere:
the Jewish question, Communism
marriage itself
a question of loyalty
or punishment

This last reference takes on additional significance when Rich informs the reader “One week before my wedding/that couple gets the chair,” following up with a gruesome reminder that Ethel Rosenberg’s execution was initially botched, requiring multiple bursts of electricity to carry out the death sentence: “the volts grapple her, don’t/kill her fast enough.” She ends the first section by suggesting that the couple’s faces—which she notes are never presented individually, as though Ethel has no existence without Julius—express “Something so shocking so/unfathomable/it must be pushed aside.”

What that “something” might be is not immediately addressed, as Rich begins the second section of the poem by focusing on her thoughts about Ethel specifically (“She sank however into my soul”). Rich sees her not primarily in the context of her alleged espionage but as a “wife and mother,” adding that she “seemed to get nothing out of” those roles “except her children.” Rich intertwines the government’s charge of espionage with her perception that society has additionally condemned her for being a “female monster,” “a bad daughter,” and “a bad mother.” She identifies herself as “by the same token a bad daughter” as she prepares for her wedding, and links the two of them with a word that took on a distinctly political charge during the Cold War: “disloyalty.”

Writing more than a decade after the dissolution of her own marriage, Rich depicts herself as a reluctant, almost doomed, participant in her own wedding, much like Ethel on her way to the electric chair.

The third section of the poem begins by lamenting the
lack of control Ethel had over both her physical body and her biography during and after death:

she becomes a natural prey for pornographers
her death itself a scene
her body sizzling half-strapped whipped like a sail

She becomes the extremest victim
described nonetheless as rigid of will
what are her politics by then no one knows

Nevertheless, she suggests that after death Ethel becomes separate from her husband in Rich’s memory, a process that correlates with Rich’s own divorce and her ex-husband’s subsequent suicide: “I gave myself in marriage/then slowly severing drifting apart/a separate death a life unto itself.” Ethel is released from the external judgment of being “the family monster” and valorized for her sympathy toward her fellow prisoners “in the Women’s House of Detention” just before her execution. Ethel Rosenberg was executed for espionage in 1953 along with her husband Julius.

Over the course of her six-decade career, Adrienne Rich developed a considerable literary reputation as a poet and essayist and became an outspoken activist.

Rich seems especially doubtful of her act of imagination when she notes that she feels the “pain inflicted on her by women” such as her mother and sister-in-law (both of whom testified against her, as Rich notes) at least as much as the “impersonal forces” and “historical reasons” that led to her execution. Rich thereafter implicates herself in trying to force Ethel Rosenberg to conform to her desires, rather than allowing her to be who she was. Given that Rich spent much of her adult life fighting for women to have the freedom of self-determination, she changes her perspective entirely in the poem’s final five stanzas, writing that “if I dare imagine her surviving…I must allow her to be at last/political in her ways not in mine.” Rich releases Ethel Rosenberg from the kind of externally imposed ideological judgments that would reduce her either to the status of an unforgivable traitor or that of a pitiable victim of forces beyond her control. Rich’s imagined act of allowing Ethel to keep the “secrets she has never sold” repudiates the inflexible certainties about good and evil that dominated American culture during the Cold War.
Mr Chairman, the turn this discussion has taken is a much wider one than that we had expected. In fact, it has covered the whole major heading. We have just had the advantage of listening to the distinguished leader of the Turkish delegation who told us what he, as a responsible leader of the nation, must do and must not do. He gave us an able statement of what I might call one side representing the views of one of the major blocs existing at the present time in the world. I have no doubt that an equally able discourse could be given on the part of the other bloc. I belong to neither and I propose to belong to neither whatever happens in the world. If we have to stand alone, we will stand by ourselves, whatever happens—and India has stood alone without any aid against a mighty empire, the British Empire—and we propose to face all consequences.

What has the “reality” led us to? What has the reality of the peace that followed the last war led us to? I would like the honourable delegates to realize that, to appreciate that. This so-called realistic appreciation of the world situation, where has it led us to? It has led us to the brink of war, a third world war. It has been stated by eminent persons who know about it that if there is another war there will be total destruction of mankind. That is to say, a third world war would bring us not only to the abyss of civilisation and culture but would mean total destruction. We have to face that.

The delegate for Turkey has gone through the history of the past ten years. Perhaps that history could be, here and there, interpreted differently. Much of it may be true and much of it may be interpreted differently. It is hardly possible for us to discuss the history of the past ten years because we have been living in revolutionary times. Following this last world war, in Asia great things have happened. There is that great nation, China, which has risen after hundreds of years of strife and oppression. That is a major fact of the situation. There is India which does not presume to possess any military might but presumes to have the strength to face any danger, whenever it may come.

We do not agree with the communist teachers, we do not agree with the anti-communist teachers, because they are both based on wrong principles. I never challenged the right of any country to defend itself; it has to. We will defend ourselves with whatever arms and strength we have, and if we have no arms we will defend ourselves without arms. I am dead certain that no country can conquer India. Even the two great power blocs together cannot conquer India; not even the atom or the hydrogen bomb. I know what my people are. But I know also that if we rely upon others, whatever great powers they might be, if we look to them for sustenance, then we are weak indeed.

True, our outlook is different. Ideologies are talked about. Let us not talk about ideologies. What did the honourable delegate from Turkey talk about ideology? He talked about it all the time. If I am to talk about another ideology, the Gandhian ideology, I can go on for hours, but I do not want to impose it on honourable members here. I know that Gandhi won my freedom. I am afraid of nobody. I suffer from no fear complex; my country suffers from no fear complex. We rely on nobody except on the friendship of others; we rely on ourselves and none others.

I do not want to take up the time of honourable delegates here but I wish to tell this House that I neither believe in the communist nor the anti-communist approach to this question. So far as we are concerned, we have adopted a line of action and we propose to adhere to it, come what may. But let us examine the situation as it is today. What does it lead to? Some delegates have pointed out the dangers of the situation. One side says, “Let us arm, and arm and arm because the other party is arming” and the other party says, “Let us
arm, and arm and arm because the other party is arming.” So, both sides go on making arms.

My country has made mistakes. Every country makes mistakes. I have no doubt we will make mistakes; we will stumble and fall and get up. The mistakes of my country and perhaps the mistakes of other countries here do not make a difference; but the mistakes the great powers make do make a difference to the world and may well bring about a terrible catastrophe. I speak with the greatest respect for these great powers because they are not only great in military might but in development, in culture, in civilisation. But I do submit that greatness sometimes brings quite false values, false standards. When they begin to think in terms of military strength—whether it be the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union or the USA—then they are going away from the right track and the result of that may be that the overwhelming might of one country will conquer the world. Thus far the world has succeeded in preventing that; I cannot speak for the future. But you have today two mighty colossuses, neither of whom can put an end to each other but obviously they can ruin each other and the rest of the world. There is no other way out. Everybody recognises it; the great statesmen of England, Russia and America recognise it. Let us admit that we have all committed mistakes. Let us admit that one has committed more mistakes than the other. However, that is immaterial, except in academic debate.

We have to face the position as it is today, namely, that whatever armaments one side or other might possess, war will lead to consequences which will result in not gaining an objective but ruin. Therefore, the first thing we have to settle is that war must be avoided. Naturally war cannot be avoided if any country takes to a career of conquest and aggression. Secondly, we countries of Asia have to consider whether we can, all of us put together, certainly not singly, prevent the great powers or big countries going to war. We certainly cannot prevent the big countries going to war if they want to but we can make a difference. Even a single country can make a difference when the scales are evenly balanced. What are we going to do? Are we going to throw our weight in the scales on the side of peace or war? It is no use blaming the Soviet Union or America. It is perfectly true that at the present moment we, not only in Asia but in Europe as well, have every reason to dislike and oppose, not only external aggression, but internal subversion and all the rest of it.

Let us then talk of the steps we can take. The first step is to make our view clear that these things should not happen. So far as I am concerned, it does not matter what war takes place; we will not take part in it unless we have to defend ourselves. If I join any of these big groups I lose my identity; I have no identity left, I have no view left. I may express it here and there generally but I have no views left. If all the world were to be divided up between these two big blocs, what would be the result? The inevitable result would be war.

Therefore every step that takes place in reducing that area in the world which may be called the “unaligned area” is a dangerous step and leads to war. It reduces that objectivity, that balance, that outlook which other countries without military might can perhaps exercise.

Honourable members laid great stress on moral force. It is with military force that we are dealing now but I submit that moral force counts and the moral force of Asia and Africa must, in spite of the atomic and hydrogen bombs of Russia, the USA or another country, count! Unfortunately, in discussing this very desirable proposition put forward by the Prime Minister [U Nu] of Burma, we have drifted to all kinds of other things. On the face of it, nobody can challenge the proposition of the Prime Minister of Burma. All that may be said of it is that it does not go far enough, that it is rather reiterating, even repetitive, of the Charter. Every truth that you say is likely to have originated somewhere or other. The point is that a certain truth has a certain application at a particular moment. If it has no application at a particular moment, it will be forgotten. Why does this simple word “coexistence” raise all sorts of turmoil in peoples’ minds? Because it has a significance in the present state of the world. Otherwise everybody recognises it. What is the alternative to peaceful coexistence? There may be coexistence, not peaceful, but something in the nature of cold war. Why then be afraid of the word? Are we choosing war deliberately or moving unconsciously towards war, which cold war implies. I say that there is no alternative for any country, unless it wants war, but to accept the concept of peaceful coexistence. In some countries the very word, peace, is looked upon with horror. It is most amazing. That word is considered dangerous.
So I submit, let us consider these matters practically, leaving out ideologies. Many members present here do not obviously accept the communist ideology, while some of them do. For my part I do not. I am a positive person, not an “anti” person. I want positive good for my country and the world. Therefore, are we, the countries of Asia and Africa, devoid of any positive position except being procommunist or anti-communist? Has it come to this, that the leaders of thought who have given religions and all kinds of things to the world have to tag on to this kind of group or that and be hangers on of this party or the other carrying out their wishes and occasionally giving an idea? It is most degrading and humiliating to any self-respecting people or nation. It is an intolerable thought to me that the great countries of Asia and Africa should come out of bondage into freedom only to degrade themselves or humiliate themselves in this way. Well, I do not criticise these powers. They are probably capable of looking after themselves and know what is best for themselves. But I will not tie myself to this degradation. Am I to lose my freedom and individuality and become a camp-follower of others? I have absolutely no intention of doing that.

A reference was made to these various attacks made in the Middle East, South-East Asia and so on. The whole course of the discussion has proceeded on that theme. Mr Mohammad Ali [Prime Minister of Pakistan] put forward an excellent resolution. Certainly the first four points in that resolution are acceptable to us all. The fifth deals with self-defence, singly or collectively: I do not deny the right of any country to defend itself. It is a natural right that cannot be denied. Then why is it put there? It has been put there because of these pacts that have been organised in Western and Eastern Asia. If that is the position I am not prepared to accept it. If that point is put there to cover those pacts, how can we accept it? I do not challenge Mr Mohammad Ali’s right to enter into any pacts although I may disagree with him, but under cover of words to ask this Conference to accept the principle of those pacts is, I submit, something that should not be done. It is open to him to have those pacts. It is open to me not to have them. But to bring in this way the collective defence pacts made in the last year is going far beyond our subject and bringing in things which are highly controversial and which tend to lead to fundamental differences of opinion.

I submit to you, every pact has brought insecurity and not security to the countries which have entered into them. They have brought the danger of atomic bombs and the rest of it nearer to them than would have been the case otherwise. They have not added to the strength of any country, I submit, which it had singly. It may have produced some idea of security, but it is a false security. It is a bad thing for any country thus to be lulled into security.

The distinguished delegate of Turkey referred to NATO. I have nothing to say against NATO. It is open to the European countries to join it for self-defence. I cannot challenge it in the slightest. But I should like to point out to this assembly that this conception of the NATO has extended itself in two ways. It has gone far away from the Atlantic and has reached other oceans and seas. Leave that alone. Secondly, do honourable members of this Conference realise that the NATO today is one of the most powerful protectors of colonialism? I say that explicitly. I am not saying that indirectly, but directly and explicitly. Here is the little territory of Goa, in India, which Portugal holds. We get letters from the NATO powers—mind you, Portugal is a member of NATO—and Portugal has approached its fellow members in the NATO on this point—telling us, “You should not do anything in regard to Goa, you should not do this and that.” I will not mention these powers; they are some of the so-called big powers. It does not matter what powers they are, but it is gross impertinence. The Republic of India told them that it is gross impertinence on their part. Let there be no doubt about it, we shall deal with this little matter in the way we like.

The distinguished delegate of Iraq was eloquent about Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Does he realise that these three territories would probably have been independent if it were not for NATO? Today because of the assistance given by these great powers NATO has bases for various purposes in these parts of the world. So we must take a complete view of the situation and not be contradictory ourselves when we talk
about colonialism, when we say “colonialism must go”, and in the same voice say that we support every policy or some policies that confirm colonialism. It is an extraordinary attitude to take up.

So I do submit that we must for the moment leave out past history, as to what happened in Potsdam, at the Cairo Conference and at Yalta, as to what President Roosevelt said or Winston Churchill said and what somebody else did. All post-war confusion has arisen from all kinds of steps taken, right or wrong, in the past. And we have to suffer today because of this confusion, because it clouds our view of the total world situation. Turkey said that the US and other powers disarmed rapidly after the war. Let us admit that. What happens today? Can we forget that the situation we have to face today is that the world, a good part of it, is ranged with one big bloc or other, both having a certain ideology? I do not know the ideology of the Western bloc. Certainly it is not one single ideology; those in it differ, but in a military sense they hold together. There are other countries in the world which have not aligned themselves in this way. Some may sympathise with this bloc or the other, and some may not. Two big colossuses stand face to face with each other, afraid of each other.

Today in the world, I do submit, not only because of the presence of these two colossuses but also because of the coming of the atomic and hydrogen bomb age, the whole concept of war, of peace, of politics, has changed. We are thinking and acting in terms of a past age. No matter what generals and soldiers learned in the past, it is useless in this atomic age. They do not understand its implications or its use. As an eminent military critic said: “The whole conception of war is changed. There is no precedent.” It may be so. Now it does not matter if one country is more powerful than the other in the use of the atomic bomb and the hydrogen bomb. One is more powerful to cause ruin than the other. That is what is meant by saying that the point of saturation has been reached. However powerful one country is, the other is also powerful. It is the world that suffers; there can be no victory. It may be said perhaps rightly that owing to this very terrible danger, people refrain from going to war. I hope so. The difficulty is that while governments want to refrain from war, something suddenly happens and there is war and utter ruin. There is another thing: because of the present position in the world there is not likely to be aggression. If there is aggression anywhere in the world, it is bound to result in world war. It does not matter where the aggression is. If one commits aggression there is world war.

I want the countries here to realise it and not to think in terms of any limitation. Today, a war however limited it may be, is bound to lead to a big war. Even if tactical atomic weapons, as they are called, are used, the next step would be the use of the big atomic bomb. You cannot stop these things. In a country’s life-and-death struggle, it is not going to stop short of this. It is not going to decide on our or anybody else’s resolutions but it would engage in war, ruin and annihilation of others before it allows itself to be annihilated completely. Annihilation will result not only in the countries engaged in war, but owing to the radioactive waves which go thousands and thousands of miles it will destroy everything. That is the position. It is not an academic position; it is not a position of discussing ideologies; nor is it a position of discussing past history. It is looking at the world as it is today.

The leaders of the great nations like the President of the United States have to carry a world of responsibility in having to face this position. So are the leaders of United Kingdom and Russia. It is a tremendous burden. I do not know at what time an error might be made this way or that way which would lead to war.

Now, therefore, are we, the Asian and African countries, going to look on it passively or are we going to take a step which will upset the balance on one side or the other? This is not a question of security. Will not security be damned if war comes? Who is going to protect us if war comes and if atomic bombs come? Of course, every country will look after itself, but it will be difficult to do that with atomic bombs, radioactive waves and all that. Therefore, I would beg this Conference to appreciate the gravity of this
situation. It is a very grave situation indeed. We have not discoursed Formosa and the rest, nor is it necessary for us to discuss the merits of the question. But the fact is that in the Far Eastern countries the situation is very grave. One does not know where it will lead to. Therefore, can we not in our own way say something peacefully, and in a friendly way, firmly declaring something, which will set the scales in favour of peace? That is the problem.

I do submit that the so-called five principles (whatever the number may be, they have more or less been included in the resolution of the Prime Minister of Burma) is not a magic formula which will prevent all the ills of the world. But it is something which meets the needs of the day. It lessens tension; it does not harm anybody, criticise anybody, condemn anybody. And I assure you, broadly speaking, President Eisenhower is in agreement with those principles. I know that the present Prime Minister of England [Anthony Eden] has said so in a public address given to our Members of Parliament. Some of us here may disagree with it, but surely that is the reverse of the right step for us to take. I therefore beg of this Conference to consider the matter in the light of the actualities of today. I am entirely one with the honourable head of the Turkish delegation when he says that we must take a realistic view, a view which is related to facts of today, not yesterday or the day before yesterday.

Between the day before yesterday and today there have been wars and vast revolutions have taken place; many changes have taken place and all kinds of things have been happening. So that one must consider things as they are today. If the honourable delegate of Iraq represents the right viewpoint, I can say that the world is going to ruin. It is not an approach to this question and his speech is full of irritation, hatred and disregard. His whole speech is a tirade. It is not a balanced speech. Let us not align ourselves as independent nations of Asia and Africa, but take a line of our own. I do not say that it should be a single line. I do submit that the resolution put forward by the Burmese Prime Minister is the correct solution. A word may be changed here and there. It works on a correct basis, a friendly basis for all countries. It does not say anything which might irritate anybody.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan says that it is good but not enough, and he wanted to add many things. There is some resolution which he had about colonialism. We have dealt with it already. You take away the force of the resolution if you add all these things. He said something about the peaceful solution of disputes. Have a resolution or an amendment; but he has referred to all kinds of things. Some people have said: “Let us have the Charter”. As a matter of fact, some of the honourable delegates were not present when the Prime Minister of Burma proposed his resolution. So, Mr President, with your permission, I shall read it out again:

“The nations assembled at the Asian-African Conference declare that their relations between themselves, and their approach to the other nations of the world, shall be governed by complete respect for the national sovereignty and integrity of other nations. They will not intervene or interfere in the territory or the internal affairs of each other or of other nations, and will totally refrain from acts or threats of aggression. They recognise the equality of races and of nations, large and small. They will be governed by the desire to promote mutual interest and cooperation, by respect for the fundamental human rights and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”

I do submit that there is not a word in this resolution to which anybody can object. As a matter of fact, the word “coexistence” is not used at all, although we are discussing this resolution under that head. Unless one thinks that there is no alternative to this except war, and to be prepared for war, this resolution has to be accepted.
Introduction to Jawaharlal Nehru

Born in Allahabad in the British Raj of India in 1889, Jawaharlal Nehru became the first Prime Minister of India upon its independence in 1947 and served in that capacity for nearly seventeen years. Prior to India gaining its independence, Nehru had been a prominent politician for several decades. Nehru was heavily influenced by Mohandas Gandhi, the most prominent philosophical and political figure in the Indian independence movement. Like Gandhi, Nehru was influential in helping lead the effort by the Indian National Congress to create a secular multiethnic state that would replace British Colonial rule on the Indian subcontinent. Although India became independent only after a violent partition that separated predominantly Muslim territories to its west (Pakistan) and east (East Pakistan, later Bangladesh), Nehru’s vision of a modernized and democratic state remained. He oversaw a significant cultural transformation of the Republic of India during his nearly two decades in power.

One of the most remarkable features of Nehru’s rule was that for the most part he kept India separate from the largely two-sided dynamic of the Cold War’s early decades, avoiding alliances with the U.S. and U.S.S.R. Although far from hesitant to use military action to defend India against perceived aggression by its neighbors, Nehru also strongly supported the United Nations as a means of practicing international politics collectively. He also took a leadership role within the Non-Aligned Movement, which positioned itself as an anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist alternative to the superpower rivalry, especially for nations that were just emerging (or re-emerging) into independence. Nehru’s speech at the 1955 Asian-African Conference at Bandung, Indonesia, lays out his vision for how and why such an alternative is preferable to the status quo.

Nehru’s Speech at the Bandung Conference: Summary and Analysis

Nehru begins his speech by noting that the representative from Turkey—an ally of the United States—had just given “an able statement of what I might call one side representing the views of one of the major blocs existing at the present time in the world.” Nehru has no trouble imagining “that an equally able discourse could be given on the part of the other bloc,” but insists that “I belong to neither and I propose to belong to neither whatever happens in the world.”

Pointing out that the “reality of the peace that followed the last war” has “led us to the brink of war, a third world war...[that] would bring us not only to the abyss of civilisation and culture but would mean total destruction,” Nehru pointedly rejects both “the communist teachers” and “the anti-communist teachers, because they are both based on wrong principles.” His primary argument for remaining separate from the superpowers is that “every step that takes place in reducing that area in the world which may be called the ‘unaligned area’ is a dangerous step and leads to war. It reduces that objectivity, that balance, that outlook which other countries without military might can perhaps exercise.”

Nehru insists that a nation’s place in global politics should not be determined by the size of its arsenal: “It is with military force that we are dealing now, but I submit that moral force counts, and the moral force of Asia and Africa must, in spite of the atomic and hydrogen bombs of Russia, the USA, or another country, count!” Nehru equates being coerced into a political alliance with one of the superpowers with colonial subjugation: “It is an intolerable thought to me that the great countries of Asia and Africa should
come out of bondage into freedom only to degrade themselves or humiliate themselves in this way.”

Furthermore, he argues that thinking in terms of alliances with great powers means “thinking and acting in terms of a past age.” Nehru insists that the radically altered nature of war in the atomic age has invalidated the idea of national security being assured through political or military alliance: “Will not security be damned if [nuclear] war comes? Who is going to protect us if war comes and if atomic bombs come? Of course, every country will look after itself, but it will be difficult to do that with atomic bombs, radioactive waves, and all that.”

He concludes his speech by restating a proposal made by the Prime Minister of Burma (the country now known as Myanmar), which closely corresponds to the United Nations Charter in affirming the sovereignty and equality of all nations.

The idealistic rhetoric of Nehru’s speech—and that of the Bandung Conference as a whole—ultimately struggled to make inroads against the overwhelming economic and military influence of the two superpowers and their affiliated “blocs.” It nevertheless serves as a reminder that the notion that the Cold War world was cleanly and wholly divided into two rival camps was inaccurate from the earliest days of the conflict.


I

Mr. President, honored delegates, ladies and gentlemen:

We meet in an hour of grief and challenge. Dag Hammarskjöld is dead. But the United Nations lives. His tragedy is deep in our hearts, but the task for which he died is at the top of our agenda. A noble servant of peace is gone. But the quest for peace lies before us.

The problem is not the death of one man—the problem is the life of this organization. It will either grow to meet the challenges of our age, or it will be gone with the wind, without influence, without force, without respect. Were we to let it die, to enfeeble its vigor, to cripple its powers, we would condemn our future.

For in the development of this organization rests the only true alternative to war—and war appeals no longer as a rational alternative. Unconditional war can no longer lead to unconditional victory. It can no longer serve to settle disputes. It can no longer concern the great powers alone. For a nuclear disaster, spread by wind and water and fear, could well engulf the great and the small, the rich and the poor, the committed and the uncommitted alike. Mankind must put an end to war—or war will put an end to mankind.

So let us here resolve that Dag Hammarskjöld did not live, or die, in vain. Let us call a truce to terror. Let
us invoke the blessings of peace. And as we build an international capacity to keep peace, let us join in dismantling the national capacity to wage war.

II

This will require new strength and new roles for the United Nations. For disarmament without checks is but a shadow—and a community without law is but a shell. Already the United Nations has become both the measure and the vehicle of man’s most generous impulses. Already it has provided—in the Middle East, in Asia, in Africa this year in the Congo—a means of holding man’s violence within bounds.

But the great question which confronted this body in 1945 is still before us: whether man’s cherished hopes for progress and peace are to be destroyed by terror and disruption, whether the “foul winds of war” can be tamed in time to free the cooling winds of reason, and whether the pledges of our Charter are to be fulfilled or defied—pledges to secure peace, progress, human rights and world law.

In this Hall, there are not three forces, but two. One is composed of those who are trying to build the kind of world described in Articles I and II of the Charter. The other, seeking a far different world, would undermine this organization in the process.

Today, of all days, our dedication to the Charter must be maintained. It must be strengthened first of all by the selection of an outstanding civil servant to carry forward the responsibilities of the Secretary General—a man endowed with both the wisdom and the power to make meaningful the moral force of the world community. The late Secretary General nurtured and sharpened the United Nations’ obligation to act. But he did not invent it. It was there in the Charter. It is still there in the Charter.

However difficult it may be to fill Mr. Hammarskjöld’s place, it can better be filled by one man rather than three. Even the three horses of the Troika did not have three drivers, all going in different directions. They had only one—and so must the United Nations executive. To install a triumvirate, or any panel, or any rotating authority, in the United Nations administrative offices would replace order with anarchy, action with paralysis, confidence with confusion.

The Secretary General, in a very real sense, is the servant of the General Assembly. Diminish his authority and you diminish the authority of the only body where all nations, regardless of power, are equal and sovereign. Until all the powerful are just, the weak will be secure only in the strength of this Assembly.

Effective and independent executive action is not the same question as balanced representation. In view of the enormous change in membership in this body since its founding, the American delegation will join in any effort for the prompt review and revision of the composition of United Nations bodies.

But to give this organization three drivers—to permit each great power to decide its own case, would entrench the Cold War in the headquarters of peace. Whatever advantages such a plan may hold out to my own country, as one of the great powers, we reject it. For we far prefer world law, in the age of self-determination, to world war, in the age of mass extermination.

III

Today, every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman, and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the
slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us.

Men no longer debate whether armaments are a symptom or a cause of tension. The mere existence of modern weapons—ten million times more powerful than any that the world has ever seen, and only minutes away from any target on earth—is a source of horror, and discord and distrust. Men no longer maintain that disarmament must await the settlement of all disputes—for disarmament must be a part of any permanent settlement. And men may no longer pretend that the quest for disarmament is a sign of weakness—for in a spiraling arms race, a nation’s security may well be shrinking even as its arms increase.

For fifteen years this organization has sought the reduction and destruction of arms. Now that goal is no longer a dream—it is a practical matter of life or death. The risks inherent in disarmament pale in comparison to the risks inherent in an unlimited arms race.

It is in this spirit that the recent Belgrade Conference—recognizing that this is no longer a Soviet problem or an American problem, but a human problem—endorsed a program of “general, complete and strictly an internationally controlled disarmament.” It is in this same spirit that we in the United States have labored this year, with a new urgency, and with a new, now statutory agency fully endorsed by the Congress, to find an approach to disarmament which would be so far-reaching, yet realistic, so mutually balanced and beneficial, that it could be accepted by every nation. And it is in this spirit that we have presented with the agreement of the Soviet Union—under the label both nations now accept of “general and complete disarmament”—a new statement of newly-agreed principles for negotiation.

But we are well aware that all issues of principle are not settled, and that principles alone are not enough. It is therefore our intention to challenge the Soviet Union, not to an arms race, but to a peace race—to advance together step by step, stage by stage, until general and complete disarmament has been achieved. We invite them now to go beyond agreement in principle to reach agreement on actual plans.

The program to be presented to this assembly—for general and complete disarmament under effective international control—moves to bridge the gap between those who insist on a gradual approach and those who talk only of the final and total achievement. It would create machinery to keep the peace as it destroys the machinery of war. It would proceed through balanced and safeguarded stages designed to give no state a military advantage over another. It would place the final responsibility for verification and control where it belongs, not with the big powers alone, not with one’s adversary or one’s self, but in an international organization within the framework of the United Nations. It would assure that indispensable condition of disarmament—true inspection—and apply it in stages proportionate to the stage of disarmament. It would cover delivery systems as well as weapons. It would ultimately halt their production as well as their testing, their transfer as well as their possession. It would achieve under the eyes of an international disarmament organization, a steady reduction in force, both nuclear and conventional, until it has abolished all armies and all weapons except those needed for internal order and a new United Nations Peace Force. And it starts that process now, today, even as the talks begin.

In short, general and complete disarmament must no longer be a slogan, used to resist the first steps. It is no longer to be a goal without means of achieving it, without means of verifying its progress, without means of keeping the peace. It is now a realistic plan, and a test—a test of those only willing to talk and a test of those willing to act.

Such a plan would not bring a world free from conflict and greed—but it would bring a world free from the terrors of mass destruction. It would not usher in the era of the super state—but it would usher in an
era in which no state could annihilate or be annihilated by another.

In 1945, this Nation proposed the Baruch Plan to internationalize the atom before other nations even possessed the bomb or demilitarized their troops. We proposed with our allies the Disarmament plan of 1951 while still at war in Korea. And we make our proposals today, while building up our defenses over Berlin, not because we are inconsistent or insincere or intimidated, but because we know the rights of free men will prevail—because while we are compelled against our will to rearm, we look confidently beyond Berlin to the kind of disarmed world we all prefer.

I therefore propose on the basis of this Plan, that disarmament negotiations resume promptly, and continue without interruption until an entire program for general and complete disarmament has not only been agreed but has actually been achieved.

IV

The logical place to begin is a treaty assuring the end of nuclear tests of all kinds, in every environment, under workable controls. The United States and the United Kingdom have proposed such a treaty that is both reasonable, effective and ready for signature. We are still prepared to sign that treaty today.

We also proposed a mutual ban on atmospheric testing, without inspection or controls, in order to save the human race from the poison of radioactive fallout. We regret that the offer has not been accepted.

For fifteen years we have sought to make the atom an instrument of peaceful growth rather than of war. But for fifteen years our concessions have been matched by obstruction, our patience by intransigence. And the pleas of mankind for peace have met with disregard.

Finally, as the explosions of others beclouded the skies, my country was left with no alternative but to act in the interests of its own and the free world’s security. We cannot endanger that security by refraining from testing while others improve their arsenals. Nor can we endanger it by another long, uninspected ban on testing. For three years we accepted those risks in our open society while seeking agreement on inspection. But this year, while we were negotiating in good faith in Geneva, others were secretly preparing new experiments in destruction.

Our tests are not polluting the atmosphere. Our deterrent weapons are guarded against accidental explosion or use. Our doctors and scientists stand ready to help any nation measure and meet the hazards to health which inevitably result from the tests in the atmosphere.

But to halt the spread of these terrible weapons, to halt the contamination of the air, to halt the spiraling nuclear arms race, we remain ready to seek new avenues of agreement, our new Disarmament Program thus includes the following proposals:

—First, signing the test-ban treaty by all nations. This can be done now. Test ban negotiations need not and should not await general disarmament.

—Second, stopping the production of fissionable materials for use in weapons, and preventing their transfer to any nation now lacking in nuclear weapons.

—Third, prohibiting the transfer of control over nuclear weapons to states that do not own them.
—Fourth, keeping nuclear weapons from seeding new battlegrounds in outer space.

—Fifth, gradually destroying existing nuclear weapons and converting their materials to peaceful uses; and

—Finally, halting the unlimited testing and production of strategic nuclear delivery vehicles, and gradually destroying them as well.

V

To destroy arms, however, is not enough. We must create even as we destroy—creating worldwide law and law enforcement as we outlaw worldwide war and weapons. In the world we seek, the United Nations Emergency Forces which have been hastily assembled, uncertainly supplied, and inadequately financed, will never be enough.

Therefore, the United States recommends that all member nations earmark special peace-keeping units in their armed forces—to be on call of the United Nations, to be specially trained and quickly available, and with advanced provision for financial and logistic support.

In addition, the American delegation will suggest a series of steps to improve the United Nations’ machinery for the peaceful settlement of disputes—for on-the-spot fact-finding, mediation and adjudication—for extending the rule of international law. For peace is not solely a matter of military or technical problems—it is primarily a problem of politics and people. And unless man can match his strides in weaponry and technology with equal strides in social and political development, our great strength, like that of the dinosaur, will become incapable of proper control—and like the dinosaur vanish from the earth.

VI

As we extend the rule of law on earth, so must we also extend it to man’s new domain—outer space.

All of us salute the brave cosmonauts of the Soviet Union. The new horizons of outer space must not be driven by the old bitter concepts of imperialism and sovereign claims. The cold reaches of the universe must not become the new arena of an even colder war.

To this end, we shall urge proposals extending the United Nations Charter to the limits of man’s exploration of the universe, reserving outer space for peaceful use, prohibiting weapons of mass destruction in space or on celestial bodies, and opening the mysteries and benefits of space to every nation. We shall propose further cooperative efforts between all nations in weather prediction and eventually in weather control. We shall propose, finally, a global system of communications satellites linking the whole world in telegraph and telephone and radio and television. The day need not be far away when such a system will televise the proceedings of this body to every corner of the world for the benefit of peace.

VII

But the mysteries of outer space must not divert our eyes or our energies from the harsh realities that face our fellow men. Political sovereignty is but a mockery without the means of meeting poverty and illiteracy and disease. Self-determination is but a slogan if the future holds no hope.

That is why my nation, which has freely shared its capital and its technology to help others help
themselves, now proposes officially designating this decade of the 1960s as the United Nations Decade of Development. Under the framework of that Resolution, the United Nations’ existing efforts in promoting economic growth can be expanded and coordinated. Regional surveys and training institutes can now pool the talents of many. New research, technical assistance and pilot projects can unlock the wealth of less developed lands and untapped waters. And development can become a cooperative and not a competitive enterprise—to enable all nations, however diverse in their systems and beliefs, to become in fact as well as in law free and equal nations.

VIII

My country favors a world of free and equal states. We agree with those who say that colonialism is a key issue in this Assembly. But let the full facts of that issue be discussed in full.

On the one hand is the fact that, since the close of World War II, a worldwide declaration of independence has transformed nearly 1 billion people and 9 million square miles into forty-two free and independent states. Less than two percent of the world’s population now lives in “dependent” territories.

I do not ignore the remaining problems of traditional colonialism which still confront this body. Those problems will be solved, with patience, good will, and determination. Within the limits of our responsibility in such matters, my Country intends to be a participant and not merely an observer, in the peaceful, expeditious movement of nations from the status of colonies to the partnership of equals. That continuing tide of self-determination, which runs so strong, has our sympathy and our support.

But colonialism in its harshest forms is not only the exploitation of new nations by old, of dark skins by light, or the subjugation of the poor by the rich. My Nation was once a colony, and we know what colonialism means; the exploitation and subjugation of the weak by the powerful, of the many by the few, of the governed who have given no consent to be governed, whatever their continent, their class, their color.

And that is why there is no ignoring the fact that the tide of self-determination has not reached the Communist empire where a population far larger than that officially termed “dependent” lives under governments installed by foreign troops instead of free institutions—under a system which knows only one party and one belief—which suppresses free debate, and free elections, and free newspapers, and free books, and free trade unions—and which builds a wall to keep truth a stranger and its own citizens prisoners. Let us debate colonialism in full—and apply the principle of free choice and the practice of free plebiscites in every corner of the globe.

IX

Finally, as President of the United States, I consider it my duty to report to this Assembly on two threats to the peace which are not on your crowded agenda, but which cause us and most of you, the deepest concern.

The first threat on which I wish to report is widely misunderstood: the smoldering coals of war in Southeast Asia. South Viet-Nam is already under attack—sometimes by a single assassin, sometimes by a band of guerrillas, recently by full battalions. The peaceful borders of Burma, Cambodia, and India have been repeatedly violated. And the peaceful people of Laos are in danger of losing the independence they gained not so long ago.

No one can call these “wars of liberation.” For these are free countries living under their own
governments. Nor are these aggressions any less real because men are knifed in their homes and not shot in the fields of battle.

The very simple question confronting the world community is whether measures can be devised to protect the small and the weak from such tactics. For if they are successful in Laos and South Viet-Nam, the gates will be opened wide.

The United States seeks for itself, no base, no territory, no special position in this area of any kind. We support a truly neutral and independent Laos, its people free from outside interference, living at peace with themselves and their neighbors, assured that their territory will not be used for attacks on others, and under a government comparable (as Mr. Khrushchev and I agreed at Vienna) to Cambodia and Burma.

But now the negotiations over Laos are reaching a crucial stage. The cease-fire is at best precarious. The rainy season is coming to an end. Laotian territory is being used to infiltrate South Viet-Nam. The world community must recognize—and all those who are involved—that this potent threat to Laotian peace and freedom is indivisible from all other threats to their own.

Secondly, I wish to report to you on the crisis over Germany and Berlin. This is not the time or the place for immoderate tones, but the world community is entitled to know the very simple issues as we see them. If there is a crisis, it is because an existing peace is under threat, because an existing island of free people is under pressure, because solemn agreements are being treated with indifference. Established international rights are being threatened with unilateral usurpation. Peaceful circulation has been interrupted by barbed wire and concrete blocks.

One recalls the order of the Czar in Pushkin’s “Boris Godunov”: “Take steps at this very hour that our frontiers be fenced in by barriers. . . . That not a single soul pass o’er the border, that not a hare be able to run or a crow to fly.”

It is absurd to allege that we are threatening a war merely to prevent the Soviet Union and East Germany from signing a so-called “treaty” of peace. The Western Allies are not concerned with any paper arrangement the Soviets may wish to make with a regime of their own creation, on territory occupied by their own troops and governed by their own agents. No such action can affect either our rights or our responsibilities.

If there is a dangerous crisis in Berlin—and there is—it is because of threats against the vital interests and the deep commitments of the Western Powers, and the freedom of West Berlin. We cannot yield these interests. We cannot fail these commitments. We cannot surrender the freedom of these people for whom we are responsible. A “peace-treaty” which carried with it the provisions which destroy the peace would be a fraud. A “free city” which was not genuinely free would suffocate freedom and would be an infamy.

For a city or a people to be truly free they must have the secure right, without economic, political or police pressure, to make their own choice and to live their own lives. And as I have often said before, if anyone doubts the extent to which our presence is desired by the people of West Berlin, we are ready to have that question submitted to a free vote in all Berlin and, if possible, among all the German people.

The elementary fact about this crisis is that it is unnecessary. The elementary tools for a peaceful settlement are to be found in the charter. Under its law, agreements are to be kept, unless changed by all those who made them. Established rights are to be respected. The political disposition of peoples should
rest upon their own wishes, freely expressed in plebiscites or free elections. If there are legal problems, they can be solved by legal means. If there is a threat of force, it must be rejected. If there is desire for change, it must be a subject for negotiation, and if there is negotiation, it must be rooted in mutual respect and concern for the rights of others.

The Western Powers have calmly resolved to defend, by whatever means are forced upon them, their obligations and their access to the free citizens of West Berlin and the self-determination of those citizens. This generation learned from bitter experience that either brandishing or yielding to threats can only lead to war. But firmness and reason can lead to the kind of peaceful solution in which my country profoundly believes.

We are committed to no rigid formula. We see no perfect solution. We recognize that troops and tanks can, for a time, keep a nation divided against its will, however unwise that policy may seem to us. But we believe a peaceful agreement is possible which protects the freedom of West Berlin and allied presence and access, while recognizing the historic and legitimate interests of others in insuring European security.

The possibilities of negotiation are now being explored; it is too early to report what the prospects may be. For our part, we would be glad to report at the appropriate time that a solution has been found. For there is no need for a crisis over Berlin, threatening the peace—and if those who created this crisis desire peace, there will be peace and freedom in Berlin.

X

The events and decisions of the next ten months may well decide the fate of man for the next ten thousand years. There will be no avoiding those events. There will be no appeal from these decisions. And we in this hall shall be remembered either as part of the generation that turned this planet into a flaming funeral pyre or the generation that met its vow “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”

In the endeavor to meet that vow, I pledge you every effort this Nation possesses. I pledge you that we will neither commit nor provoke aggression, that we shall neither flee nor invoke the threat of force, that we shall never negotiate out of fear, we shall never fear to negotiate.

Terror is not a new weapon. Throughout history it has been used by those who could not prevail, either by persuasion or example. But inevitably they fail, either because men are not afraid to die for a life worth living, or because the terrorists themselves came to realize that free men cannot be frightened by threats, and that aggression would meet its own response. And it is in the light of that history that every nation today should know, be he friend or foe, that the United States has both the will and the weapons to join free men in standing up to their responsibilities.

But I come here today to look across this world of threats to a world of peace. In that search we cannot expect any final triumph—for new problems will always arise. We cannot expect that all nations will adopt like systems—for conformity is the jailor of freedom, and the enemy of growth. Nor can we expect to reach our goal by contrivance, by fiat or even by the wishes of all.

But however close we sometimes seem to that dark and final abyss, let no man of peace and freedom despair. For he does not stand alone. If we all can persevere, if we can in every land and office look beyond our own shores and ambitions, then surely the age will dawn in which the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.
Introduction to John F. Kennedy

At the time he won the election of 1960, forty-three-year-old John F. Kennedy was the youngest person ever to be elected President of the United States. Although the campaign between Kennedy and Richard Nixon had in many ways been a contest to see which man could project a more convincingly anticommunist message to voters, Kennedy also represented a generational shift from his three predecessors, each of whom had been born in the nineteenth century. John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born in a suburb of Boston in 1917. His family had deep political roots, and both John and his younger brother Robert (who served as Attorney General in John’s administration) continued this family tradition from a young age.

Kennedy served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and brought aspects of that experience prominently into his political career. The early stages of his presidency were marred by the April 1961 “Bay of Pigs” invasion, a failed attempt to remove the communist government of Fidel Castro from power in Cuba. This misadventure set the stage for what eventually became one of the most infamous and sobering episodes of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Kennedy’s so-called “Sword of Damocles” speech to the United Nations, though, predates the Cuban Missile Crisis by more than a year and reflects the complex reality of the global situation as of the fall of 1961. Even as Kennedy uses a mythical metaphor about the delicate nature of power to articulate the need to reduce the anxiety created by the threat of nuclear war, he also tries to serve notice that the United States intends to continue its policy of vehemently opposing what it sees as communist expansionism, both in Europe and the rapidly decolonizing “Third World.”

Kennedy’s “Sword of Damocles” Speech: Summary and Analysis

Kennedy gave his speech to the United Nations delegates gathered in New York exactly a week after a plane crash that killed UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld while on his way to negotiate peace in the Republic of the Congo. Kennedy used the occasion of Hammarskjöld’s untimely death to suggest the organization’s best option for carrying on its deceased leader’s legacy of peacemaking, particularly in light of the challenge presented by the massive nuclear arsenals of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. The opening section of his speech articulates the stakes bluntly: “Mankind must put an end to war—or war will put an end to mankind.”

Another of the subtexts of his speech involved the proposal—made before Hammarskjöld’s death—by Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev to change the governing structure of the UN. Khrushchev wished to replace the office of Secretary-General with “a triumvirate (or ‘troika’) composed of representatives of the three groups of states that dominated the international system of the time: Western, communist, and Afro-Asian.” In addition to giving—or at least appearing to give—the Non-Aligned Movement a more clearly defined leadership role in the UN, Khrushchev’s proposal also hoped to take advantage of recent frustration with what was seen by many African
nations as a pro-Western bias in Hammarskjöld’s tactics while trying to broker peace in Congo. Even as much of his speech extends an open palm toward the Soviets, Kennedy also forcefully rejects this proposal and accuses Khrushchev of trying to “undermine” the UN.

Having stated his case against Khruschev’s proposal, Kennedy turns to the central metaphor of his speech. He refers to the fact that “[e]very man, woman, and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut by accident or miscalculation or madness.” His allusion is to the classical Greek story of Damocles, a man who believed that being a ruler was a great fortune until his king arranged for him to sit on the throne beneath a sword hung from a single hair. This vivid image symbolized the ever-present fear and danger that accompanies power. Kennedy’s use of the metaphor to describe nuclear anxiety is not entirely in keeping with the original myth since—unlike Kennedy or his Soviet counterpart—the vast majority of those threatened by nuclear war received no power in exchange like the king of the original story. Nevertheless, the image served Kennedy well throughout the remainder of the speech as he sought to make the case for disarmament in the service of all humanity.

Kennedy’s entire speech walks a fine line in trying to appease the anticommunist sentiment in the U.S. that helped get him elected the previous fall while also leaving the door open to negotiation and cooperation with the Soviets. He praises the bravery of the Soviet cosmonauts, but also asserts without sugar-coating that “the tide of self-determination has not reached the Communist empire where a population…lives under governments installed by foreign troops instead of free institutions.” He challenges the Soviets to a “peace race,” but also blames the Soviet Union entirely for the crisis happening in Berlin at that moment as well as the increasing tensions in Southeast Asia. Like Khrushchev before him, Kennedy tries to gain the sympathy of the Non-Aligned Movement by referring to the “spirit of the recent Belgrade Conference” (a meeting of heads of state of most of the countries that had participated in the Bandung Conference in 1955) while describing his proposals for negotiations that could lead to complete nuclear disarmament. Anticipating his rivals’ criticism, Kennedy states that “we make our proposals today…because we know the rights of free men will prevail—because while we are compelled against our will to rearm, we look confidently…to the kind of disarmed world we all prefer.” Kennedy’s claim that the U.S.’s participation in the arms race is a strictly defensive response to Soviet aggression is a rhetorical strategy that leaders of both countries used throughout the Cold War. The alien anthropologists of Lessing’s “Report on the Threatened Cities” might consider Kennedy’s constant juxtaposition of words urging peace and justifying war to be “inconsistent or insincere or intimidated,” despite the young president’s protests otherwise.
SELECTED WORK: ADDRESS BY MIKHAIL GORBACHEV AT THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY SESSION (EXCERPTS), DECEMBER 7, 1988


Two great revolutions, the French revolution of 1789 and the Russian revolution of 1917, have exerted a powerful influence on the actual nature of the historical process and radically changed the course of world events. Both of them, each in its own way, have given a gigantic impetus to man’s progress. They are also the ones that have formed in many respects the way of thinking which is still prevailing in the public consciousness.

That is a very great spiritual wealth, but there emerges before us today a different world, for which it is necessary to seek different roads toward the future, to seek—relying, of course, on accumulated experience—but also seeing the radical differences between that which was yesterday and that which is taking place today.

The newness of the tasks, and at the same time their difficulty, are not limited to this. Today we have entered an era when progress will be based on the interests of all mankind. Consciousness of this requires that world policy, too, should be determined by the priority of the values of all mankind.

The history of the past centuries and millennia has been a history of almost ubiquitous wars, and sometimes desperate battles, leading to mutual destruction. They occurred in the clash of social and political interests and national hostility, be it from ideological or religious incompatibility. All that was the case, and even now many still claim that this past—which has not been overcome—is an immutable pattern. However, parallel with the process of wars, hostility, and alienation of peoples and countries, another process, just as objectively conditioned, was in motion and gaining force: The process of the emergence of a mutually connected and integral world.

Further world progress is now possible only through the search for a consensus of all mankind, in movement toward a new world order. We have arrived at a frontier at which controlled spontaneity leads to a dead end. The world community must learn to shape and direct the process in such a way as to preserve civilization, to make it safe for all and more pleasant for normal life. It is a question of cooperation that could be more accurately called “co-creation” and “co-development.” The formula of development “at another's expense” is becoming outdated. In light of present realities, genuine progress by infringing upon the rights and liberties of man and peoples, or at the expense of nature, is impossible.

The very tackling of global problems requires a new “volume” and “quality” of cooperation by states and sociopolitical currents regardless of ideological and other differences.

Of course, radical and revolutionary changes are taking place and will continue to take place within individual countries and social structures. This has been and will continue to be the case, but our times are making corrections here, too. Internal transformational processes cannot achieve their national objectives merely by taking “course parallel” with others without using the achievements of the surrounding world and the possibilities of equitable cooperation. In these conditions, interference in those internal processes with the aim of altering them according to someone else’s prescription would be all the more destructive.
for the emergence of a peaceful order. In the past, differences often served as a factor in pulling away from one another. Now they are being given the opportunity to be a factor in mutual enrichment and attraction. Behind differences in social structure, in the way of life, and in the preference for certain values, stand interests. There is no getting away from that, but neither is there any getting away from the need to find a balance of interests within an international framework, which has become a condition for survival and progress. As you ponder all this, you come to the conclusion that if we wish to take account of the lessons of the past and the realities of the present, if we must reckon with the objective logic of world development, it is necessary to seek—and then seek jointly—an approach toward improving the international situation and building a new world. If that is so, then it is also worth agreeing on the fundamental and truly universal prerequisites and principles for such activities. It is evident, for example, that force and the threat of force can no longer be, and should not be instruments of foreign policy. [...]

The compelling necessity of the principle of freedom of choice is also clear to us. The failure to recognize this...is fraught with very dire consequences, consequences for world peace. Denying that right to the peoples, no matter what the pretext, no matter what the words are used to conceal it, means infringing upon even the unstable balance that it has been possible to achieve.

Freedom of choice is a universal principle to which there should be no exceptions. We have not come to the conclusion of the immutability of this principle simply through good motives. We have been led to it through impartial analysis of the objective processes of our time. The increasing varieties of social development in different countries are becoming an ever more perceptible feature of these processes. This relates to both the capitalist and socialist systems. The variety of sociopolitical structures which has grown over the last decades from national liberation movements also demonstrates this. This objective fact presupposes respect for other people’s vies and stands, tolerance, a preparedness to see phenomena that are different as not necessarily bad or hostile, and an ability to learn to live side by side while remaining different and not agreeing with one another on every issue.

The de-ideologization of interstate relations has become a demand of the new stage. We are not giving up our convictions, philosophy, or traditions. Neither are we calling on anyone else to give up theirs. Yet we are not going to shut ourselves up within the range of our values. That would lead to spiritual impoverishment, for it would mean renouncing so powerful a source of development as sharing all the original things created independently by each nation. In the course of such sharing, each should prove the advantages of his own system, his own way of life and values, but not through words or propaganda alone, but through real deeds as well. That is, indeed, an honest struggle of ideology, but it must not be carried over into mutual relations between states. Otherwise we simply will not be able to solve a single world problem; arrange broad, mutually advantageous and equitable cooperation between peoples; manage rationally the achievements of the scientific and technical revolution; transform world economic relations; protect the environment; overcome underdevelopment; or put an end to hunger, disease, illiteracy, and other mass ills. Finally, in that case, we will not manage to eliminate the nuclear threat and militarism.

Such are our reflections on the natural order of things in the world on the threshold of the 21st century. We are, of course, far from claiming to have infallible truth, but having subjected the previous realities—realities that have arisen again—to strict analysis, we have come to the conclusion that it is by precisely such approaches that we must search jointly for a way to achieve the supremacy of the common human idea over the countless multiplicity of centrifugal forces, to preserve the vitality of a civilization that is possibly the only one in the universe. [...]
started by elaborating the theoretical concepts of restructuring; we had to assess the nature and scope of the problems, to interpret the lessons of the past, and to express this in the form of political conclusions and programs. This was done. The theoretical work, the reinterpretation of what had happened, the final elaboration, enrichment, and correction of political stances have not ended. They continue. However, it was fundamentally important to start from an overall concept, which is already now being confirmed by the experience of past years, which has turned out to be generally correct and to which there is no alternative.

In order to involve society in implementing the plans for restructuring it had to be made more truly democratic. Under the badge of democratization, restructuring has now encompassed politics, the economy, spiritual life, and ideology. We have unfolded a radical economic reform, we have accumulated experience, and from the new year we are transferring the entire national economy to new forms and work methods. Moreover, this means a profound reorganization of production relations and the realization of the immense potential of socialist property.

In moving toward such bold revolutionary transformations, we understood that there would be errors, that there would be resistance, that the novelty would bring new problems. We foresaw the possibility of breaking in individual sections. However, the profound democratic reform of the entire system of power and government is the guarantee that the overall process of restructuring will move steadily forward and gather strength.

We completed the first stage of the process of political reform with the recent decisions by the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet on amendments to the Constitution and the adoption of the Law on Elections. Without stopping, we embarked upon the second stage of this. At which the most important task will be working on the interaction between the central government and the republics, settling relations between nationalities on the principles of Leninist internationalism bequeathed to us by the great revolution and, at the same time, reorganizing the power of the Soviets locally. We are faced with immense work. At the same time we must resolve major problems.

We are more than fully confident. We have both the theory, the policy and the vanguard force of restructuring a party which is also restructuring itself in accordance with the new tasks and the radical changes throughout society. And the most important thing: all peoples and all generations of citizens in our great country are in favor of restructuring.

We have gone substantially and deeply into the business of constructing a socialist state based on the rule of law. A whole series of new laws has been prepared or is at a completion stage. Many of them come into force as early as 1989, and we trust that they will correspond to the highest standards from the point of view of ensuring the rights of the individual. Soviet democracy is to acquire a firm, normative base. This means such acts as the Law on Freedom of Conscience, on glasnost, on public associations and organizations, and on much else. There are now no people in places of imprisonment in the country who have been sentenced for their political or religious convictions. It is proposed to include in the drafts of the new laws additional guarantees ruling out any form or persecution on these bases. Of course, this does not apply to those who have committed real criminal or state offenses: espionage, sabotage, terrorism, and so on, whatever political or philosophical views they may hold.

The draft amendments to the criminal code are ready and waiting their turn. In particular, those articles relating to the use of the supreme measure of punishment are being reviewed. The problem of exit and entry is also being resolved in a humane spirit, including the case of leaving the country in order to be reunited with relatives. As you know, one of the reasons for refusal of visas is citizens’ possession of secrets. Strictly
substantiated terms for the length of time for possessing secrets are being introduced in advance. On starting work at a relevant institution or enterprise, everyone will be made aware of this regulation. Disputes that arise can be appealed under the law. Thus the problem of the so-called “refuseniks” is being removed.

We intend to expand the Soviet Union’s participation in the monitoring mechanism on human rights in the United Nations and within the framework of the pan-European process. We consider that the jurisdiction of the International Court in The Hague with respect to interpreting and applying agreements in the field of human rights should be obligatory for all states.

Within the Helsinki process, we are also examining an end to jamming of all the foreign radio broadcasts to the Soviet Union. On the whole, our credo is as follows: Political problems should be solved only by political means, and human problems only in a humane way. […]

Now about the most important topic, without which no problem of the coming century can be resolved: disarmament. […]

Today I can inform you of the following: The Soviet Union has made a decision on reducing its armed forces. In the next two years, their numerical strength will be reduced by 500,000 persons, and the volume of conventional arms will also be cut considerably. These reductions will be made on a unilateral basis, unconnected with negotiations on the mandate for the Vienna meeting. By agreement with our allies in the Warsaw Pact, we have made the decision to withdraw six tank divisions from the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, and to disband them by 1991. Assault landing formations and units, and a number of others, including assault river-crossing forces, with their armaments and combat equipment, will also be withdrawn from the groups of Soviet forces situated in those countries. The Soviet forces situated in those countries will be cut by 50,000 persons, and their arms by 5,000 tanks. All remaining Soviet divisions on the territory of our allies will be reorganized. They will be given a different structure from today’s which will become unambiguously defensive, after the removal of a large number of their tanks. […]

By this act, just as by all our actions aimed at the demilitarization of international relations, we would also like to draw the attention of the world community to another topical problem, the problem of changing over from an economy of armament to an economy of disarmament. Is the conversion of military production realistic? I have already had occasion to speak about this. We believe that it is, indeed, realistic. For its part, the Soviet Union is ready to do the following. Within the framework of the economic reform we are ready to draw up and submit our internal plan for conversion, to prepare in the course of 1989, as an experiment, the plans for the conversion of two or three defense enterprises, to publish our experience of job relocation of specialists from the military industry, and also of using its equipment, buildings, and works in civilian industry. It is desirable that all states, primarily the major military powers, submit their national plans on this issue to the United Nations.

It would be useful to form a group of scientists, entrusting it with a comprehensive analysis of problems of conversion as a whole and as applied to individual countries and regions, to be reported to the U.N. secretary-general, and later to examine this matter at a General Assembly session.

Finally, being on U.S. soil, but also for other, understandable reasons, I cannot but turn to the subject of our relations with this great country. … Relations between the Soviet Union and the United States of America span five and a half decades. The world has changed, and so have the nature, role, and place of these relations in world politics. For too long they were built under the banner of confrontation, and sometimes of hostility, either open or concealed. But in the last few years, throughout the world people were able to heave a sigh of
relief, thanks to the changes for the better in the substance and atmosphere of the relations between Moscow and Washington.

No one intends to underestimate the serious nature of the disagreements, and the difficulties of the problems which have not been settled. However, we have already graduated from the primary school of instruction in mutual understanding and in searching for solutions in our and in the common interests. The U.S.S.R. and the United States created the biggest nuclear missile arsenals, but after objectively recognizing their responsibility, they were able to be the first to conclude an agreement on the reduction and physical destruction of a proportion of these weapons, which threatened both themselves and everyone else.

Both sides possess the biggest and the most refined military secrets. But it is they who have laid the basis for and are developing a system of mutual verification with regard to both the destruction and the limiting and banning of armaments production. It is they who are amassing experience for future bilateral and multilateral agreements. We value this.

We acknowledge and value the contribution of President Ronald Reagan and the members of his administration, above all Mr. George Shultz. All this is capital that has been invested in a joint undertaking of historic importance. It must not be wasted or left out of circulation. The future U.S. administration headed by newly elected President George Bush will find in us a partner, ready—without long pauses and backward movements—to continue the dialogue in a spirit of realism, openness, and goodwill, and with a striving for concrete results, over an agenda encompassing the key issues of Soviet-U.S. relations and international politics.

We are talking first and foremost about consistent progress toward concluding a treaty on a 50 percent reduction in strategic offensive weapons, while retaining the ABM Treaty; about elaborating a convention on the elimination of chemical weapons—here, it seems to us, we have the preconditions for making 1989 the decisive year; and about talks on reducing conventional weapons and armed forces in Europe. We are also talking about economic, ecological and humanitarian problems in the widest possible sense. [...] 

We are not inclined to oversimplify the situation in the world. Yes, the tendency toward disarmament has received a strong impetus, and this process is gaining its own momentum, but it has not become irreversible. Yes, the striving to give up confrontation in favor of dialogue and cooperation has made itself strongly felt, but it has by no means secured its position forever in the practice of international relations. Yes, the movement toward a nuclear-free and nonviolent world is capable of fundamentally transforming the political and spiritual face of the planet, but only the very first steps have been taken. Moreover, in certain influential circles, they have been greeted with mistrust, and they are meeting resistance.

The inheritance of inertia of the past are continuing to operate. Profound contradictions and the roots of many conflicts have not disappeared. The fundamental fact remains that the formation of the peaceful period will take place in conditions of the existence and rivalry of various socioeconomic and political systems. However, the meaning of our international efforts, and one of the key tenets of the new thinking, is precisely to impart to this rivalry the quality of sensible competition in conditions of respect for freedom of choice and a balance of interests. In this case it will even become useful and productive from the viewpoint of general world development; otherwise; if the main component remains the arms race, as it has been till now, rivalry will be fatal. Indeed, an ever greater number of people throughout the world, from the man in the street to leaders, are beginning to understand this.

Esteemed Mr. Chairman, esteemed delegates: I finish my first speech at the United Nations with the same
feeling with which I began it: a feeling of responsibility to my own people and to the world community. We have met at the end of a year that has been so significant for the United Nations, and on the threshold of a year from which all of us expect so much. One would like to believe that our joint efforts to put an end to the era of wars, confrontation and regional conflicts, aggression against nature, the terror of hunger and poverty, as well as political terrorism, will be comparable with our hopes. This is our common goal, and it is only by acting together that we may attain it. Thank you.

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev hoped to keep the Soviet Union intact as a communist state while introducing reformist policies.

Introduction to Mikhail Gorbachev

Although he had been a member of the Communist Party since the early 1950s, Mikhail Gorbachev differed in many important ways from the hardliners who preceded him as leaders of both the Soviet Union and the Party prior to 1985. Born in a small village in southeastern Russia in 1931, Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev was not only decades younger than his immediate predecessors, Konstantin Chernenko and Yuri Andropov, he also governed for the most part with a pragmatic approach. Gorbachev hoped to keep the Soviet Union intact as a communist state while introducing reformist policies known as glasnost and perestroika that would liberalize its social and economic fabric, respectively. Although some of these reforms were largely cosmetic, there is little disagreement that Gorbachev radically altered the course of the Soviet Union, a fact that is perhaps best confirmed by the degree of resistance he faced during his leadership from the “old guard” of communists who saw his overtures of peace and cooperation with the West as treasonous.

Gorbachev’s speech to the United Nations in December 1988 exemplifies his simultaneous desire to end the destructive and economically unsustainable rivalry with the United States, while also maintaining the Soviet Union’s status as a society rooted in the principles of communism derived from Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. He idealistically sought an end to the Cold War that did not also require the demise of the Soviet Union. He did not get his wish, as the U.S.S.R. was dissolved late in 1991, following the largely peaceful overthrow of nearly all the communist governments of its Eastern European “client states.”

Gorbachev’s Address at the UN General Assembly: Summary and Analysis

Three years into his tenure as leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev was far more popular outside the Soviet Union than within it. His far-reaching efforts at social and economic reform not only flew in the face of decades of fairly rigid policies by the ruling Communist Party, but also were slow to show noticeable results for ordinary Soviet citizens. Such skeptics were left wondering whether disturbing the nation’s undisputed—if also rapidly deteriorating—status as a communist superpower was a worthwhile risk to take in exchange for greater freedoms and economic cooperation with countries that had been described as sworn enemies and as a grave existential threat for the better part of four decades. In his address to the UN General Assembly in New York late in 1988, Gorbachev
In his address to the UN General Assembly in New York in 1988, Gorbachev laid out his vision of the Soviet Union’s ongoing role in the world.

laid out his vision of the Soviet Union’s ongoing role in a world in which “[t]he de-ideologization of interstate relations has become a demand.”

Gorbachev begins his speech by invoking the onset of a “new world order” in which “progress will be based on the interests of all mankind.” Like Nehru and Kennedy before him, he insists that the changed nature of “global problems” in the nuclear age “requires a new ‘volume’ and ‘quality’ of cooperation by states and sociopolitical currents regardless of ideological and other differences.”

Perhaps to soothe the concerns of his fellow Soviet citizens, Gorbachev insists that such cooperation does not mean “giving up our convictions, philosophy, or traditions,” including Marxist-Leninist communism as the political core of the country he represents. He insists that the free exchange of ideas and goods by nations representing a variety of political perspectives would be an “honest struggle of ideology,” as long as it is not carried out “through words or propaganda alone, but through real deeds as well.” Gorbachev makes clear that, despite the “truly revolutionary…process of restructuring” that the Soviet Union has undertaken during Gorbachev’s time in office, communism remains the country’s guiding principle because it “has turned out to be generally correct.” He goes on to enumerate the specific constitutional changes that the Soviet Union plans to implement in order to build “a socialist state based on the rule of law.”

In the next section of his speech, Gorbachev announces his dual intention to reduce the size of the Soviet military and to withdraw Soviet forces from a number of Eastern European countries. He insists that this act is a gesture “aimed at the demilitarization of international relations,” and commits furthermore to a wide-ranging study of the economic feasibility of transforming the Soviet economy from one dependent on military spending to one that uses its human, industrial, and natural resources for other peaceful purposes.

Gorbachev concludes his speech by acknowledging both of the U.S. presidents with whom he has shared the global stage—Ronald Reagan and the newly elected George H. W. Bush. He offers his hopes for continued cooperation and further developments, while also acknowledging that a few years of relatively warm relations have not undone the “the existence and rivalry of various socioeconomic and political systems.” He closes by insisting that “one of the key tenets of the new thinking, is precisely to impart to this rivalry the quality of sensible competition” instead of a nuclear-armed showdown between mortal enemies.

Even though much of Gorbachev’s high-flown rhetoric was undermined in reaction to the sudden collapse of Eastern European communist governments in the years after his speech, the idealistic and collaborative tone it struck was a marked difference from the rest of the Cold War, even the years of détente. Whether spurred primarily by genuine political humanism or by the messy realities of the Soviet economy, Gorbachev’s interventions helped hasten the relatively peaceful end of both the Cold War and the Soviet Union, even if only the first of these was his intent.
Glossary

**black humor** – Although the definition of this term varies somewhat within different national traditions and during different time periods, critic Mary Ann Rishel’s description of it works well as both a comprehensive summary of the form and of its particular use in Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*: “Grotesque humor, also known as black humor, makes us laugh at the same time it repulses and shocks. By combining bizarre imagery with chilling topics like war, death, or disease, it has two purposes: to make fun of sentimental, prejudiced, and conformist thought; and to voice a moral hopelessness for our meaningless, irrational life.”266

**brinksmanship** – Generally, this is a term used disparagingly to describe the risky practice of testing the patience of an opponent. Within the context of the Cold War specifically, this is a process of predicting and carefully managing the extent to which actions such as supporting a rebellion in a state friendly to one’s enemy, placing missiles or conducting war games near an enemy’s borders, or spying on a government’s most sensitive activities provoke a response that escalates the military tension further. John Foster Dulles, the U.S. Secretary of State during the Eisenhower presidency, famously defined this practice as follows in a 1956 interview: “You have to take chances for peace, just as you must take chances in war.... The ability to get to the verge without getting into the war is the necessary art. If you cannot master it, you inevitably get into wars. If you try to run away from it, if you are scared to go to the brink, you are lost.”267 The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and the Able Archer war games of 1983 were two of the most notable moments in which especially incendiary acts of brinksmanship seemed capable of triggering a nuclear war between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

**client state** – Although the term can be used to refer to any nation that is strongly under the military or economic control of another country at a particular moment in history, it has especially strong resonance within the context of the Cold War because of the long reach that both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. attempted to exert in conducting their ideological conflict. In the years immediately following World War II, Germany and Japan were client states of the victorious allies simply because of their status as militarily occupied nations. However, the term is more frequently employed during the Cold War to refer to nations in which either the U.S. or U.S.S.R. had helped to install and/or maintain a regime that was inherently dependent on economic or military aid for its survival, thereby offering an assurance of ideological sympathy and cooperation. Along with most of the Eastern European countries that signed on to the Warsaw Pact of 1955 (which were sometimes also called “satellite states” of the U.S.S.R.), other notable Soviet client states included North Korea (after 1948), Cuba (after 1958), Mozambique, and Angola (both after 1975). Significant client states of the U.S. included South Korea (after 1948), Iran (from 1953 to 1979), South Vietnam (from 1955 to 1975), Chile (after 1973), and several of the smaller nations of Latin America. Whether or not Israel should also be considered a client state or an independent ally of the U.S. during the Cold War is a longstanding debate among historians.

**containment** – a political strategy originating from George Kennan’s “Long Telegram” of 1946 that advocated for an active, but measured resistance to Soviet expansionism; although Kennan intended containment to be a predominantly diplomatic and economic effort, many of those who subsequently invoked the term did so to advocate for limited military interventions. In either case, containment was generally viewed as a politically effective compromise that allowed demonstrable opposition to the spread of communism while minimizing the risk of direct military conflict.

**détente** – Originally used earlier in the twentieth century to describe attempts at easing political tension between rivals, the term is now overwhelmingly associated
with the period from the late 1960s until 1979, during which relations between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were better—albeit often only superficially—than in any other sustained stretch of the Cold War.

**deterrence** – a military strategy that involves amassing an arsenal powerful enough to reduce or even to eliminate an enemy’s notion of initiating a military conflict by assuring that the retaliation even for a successful first strike would be devastating and, thus, not worthwhile; the concept predates the Cold War, forming the foundation of the “balance of power” philosophy that dominated the diplomacy of much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the U.S.S.R. ended the U.S.’s monopoly on nuclear weapons in 1949, the so-called “balance of terror” between the nuclear stockpiles of the two superpowers became a central premise in Cold War diplomacy.

**dystopia** – a subgenre of literature closely related to, but not necessarily the opposite of, utopia; whereas utopia focuses on the possibility of creating a perfect society, dystopia instead focuses on the costs that accompany such an effort, generally judging them beyond justification. Although it was a globally prominent genre during the Cold War and has remained popular in the decades since, there are still three exemplary novels—one Russian and two British—that have come to define the form: *We* (1924) by Yevgeny Zamyatin, *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell.

**escalation** – one of the central aspects of deterrence as a military strategy; escalation theory argued that total commitment of nuclear arsenals was not necessarily the inevitable outcome of a direct conflict between the superpowers. Instead, such strategists argued that there were distinct levels of commitment, each of which would require combatants to decide whether to cease hostilities or to escalate to the next level. Critics of this theory pointed out that both human psychology and military history suggested that there would be little incentive for either side not to continue rapidly escalating up to complete commitment.

**Iron Curtain** – British statesman Winston Churchill is often credited with coining this term in a famous 1946 speech at a small college in central Missouri, but it appears earlier than that in numerous contexts, including anti-Soviet Nazi propaganda during World War II and in Churchill’s own comments at the Potsdam conference of 1945. His speech at Westminster College less than a year after the end of World War II, though, brought the phrase prominently into the vocabulary of the growing postwar rivalry between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Churchill analyzed the increasing separation of postwar Europe in terms that clearly blamed the U.S.S.R. for attempting to consolidate its power in the areas it occupied after the war:

> A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory. Nobody knows what Soviet Russia and its Communist international organisation intends to do in the immediate future, or what are the limits, if any, to their expansive and proselytising tendencies.... From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent..... Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow.... Whatever conclusions may be drawn from these facts—and facts they are—this is certainly not the Liberated Europe we fought to build up. Nor is it one which contains the essentials of permanent peace.268

This metaphor of the iron curtain separating West from East became increasingly literal after 1946, as the borders along the line that Churchill laid out were closed and, in many cases, defended with fortifications such as barbed wire, minefields, armed watchtowers, and walls (the most famous of which isolated West Berlin within East Germany).

**metafiction** – a form of literature that intentionally frustrates the reader’s ability to forget or to ignore the fact that they are reading a work of fiction (a phenomenon also known as “suspension of disbelief”); many exemplary metafictional works feature an intrusive author-narrator who interrupts their story in order to comment—sometimes even by addressing the reader directly—on some aspect of the construction or meaning of the text at hand.

**mutually assured destruction (MAD)** – This cornerstone term of Cold War nuclear policy is generally attributed to military strategist Donald Brennan, whose intentions seem to have contained an element of dark comedy:

Brennan—an analyst at the conservative Hudson Institute, who was making the case for ballistic missile defense—used the acronym MAD to ridicule the idea that in a nuclear war, or even a large conventional conflict, each side should be
prepared to destroy the other’s cities and society.
Of course, this objective was not sensible, but MAD proponents argued that was the point: The outcome would be so dreadful that both sides would be deterred from starting a nuclear war or even taking actions that might lead to it.²⁶⁰

During the course of the Cold War, the doctrine of mutually assured destruction was used to justify the massive expenditure required to build and to maintain tens of thousands of nuclear weapons by both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. Developments such as anti-ballistic missile (ABM) systems or President Ronald Reagan’s proposed space-based missile defense lasers (mockingly called “Star Wars” by opponents) threatened to undermine the uncomfortable equilibrium achieved by the doctrine. The logic of MAD is questioned in the novels Red Alert (1958) by Peter George, Level 7 (1959) by Mordecai Roshwald, and Fail-Safe (1962) by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler (which was made into a popular film in 1964), as well as Stanley Kubrick’s film Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964).

Non-Aligned Movement – Originating significantly from a pair of international meetings in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 and in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1961, this collective political grouping represented the most significant departure from the polarized international relations of the Cold War. The organizational structure of the movement was put in place by the heads of Yugoslavia, India, and Egypt in 1956 with the intention of creating a pathway for countries—particularly but not exclusively those in the decolonizing Third World—to exert a political will that was independent not only of the dominant superpower rivalry between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., but more generally of any neocolonial enterprises. As such, it was specifically designed to help countries avoid becoming client states or having their own disputes escalate into proxy wars through the interference of external powers. Although its influence on global politics during the Cold War was often limited to symbolic gestures of solidarity (and neither of the superpowers felt especially beholden to its agenda), the Non-Aligned Movement offered some measure of self-determination to states that at least officially wanted to avoid having to choose a side.

parody – a form of literary representation that relies on its audience to recognize an imitation of a preexisting model, often a particular person or another literary text of some kind; for example, the character of Austin Powers is a deliberately comical parody of the cinematic superspy James Bond. Likewise, the television show Saturday Night Live frequently includes actors impersonating prominent political figures. Parody generally tends to amplify particularly identifiable characteristics of its models, often—but not necessarily—using such exaggerations to conveys a satirical criticism through its imitations.

proxy war – Another term that originates outside the historical context of the Cold War, this refers to relatively localized conflicts in which external nations offer military and/or economic support to the combatants as a way of exerting political or ideological influence without directly confronting their enemy. In the case of the Cold War, these were usually civil wars that arose in the wake of decolonization or other situations in which sudden power vacuums helped cause a situation in which both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. perceived a need to intervene. The Greek Civil War of 1946–49, the Korean War of 1950–53, the Cuban Revolution of 1953–58, the Vietnam War of 1955–75, the Angolan Civil War of 1975–91, the civil war in Mozambique of 1977–92, and the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979–89 were all prime examples of proxy wars indirectly and/or directly involving the U.S. and U.S.S.R. during the Cold War.

red scare – Originally referring to a period of intense cultural paranoia in the U.S. from 1917 to 1920, this term also generally applies to such periods of public anticommunist hysteria as Senator Joseph McCarthy’s televised hearings during the early 1950s or the Nixon-Kennedy presidential campaign of 1960. Whereas the first red scare had been a result of fear that the Russian Revolution, which had toppled the Romanov dynasty in 1917, would spread beyond Russia to the United States, the Cold War’s various red scares are largely attributable to the frequently invoked belief that communism and the U.S.S.R. were completely incompatible with American values. In such a cultural climate, the threat of invisible communist infiltration was a powerful bogeyman for politicians to invoke, and such generally overblown worries gained additional credibility with the discovery of such Soviet spies as Klaus Fuchs, Alger Hiss, and the Rosenbergs.

satire – a form of artistic representation that conveys moral or ethical criticism by revealing the flaws, absurdities, and/or failings in the subjects toward which it is directed; for example, the folktale of “The Emperor’s New Clothes” is intended to satirize both the vanity of the emperor, who fails to recognize that
his supposedly marvelous new outfit actually leaves him entirely exposed to the world, and the cowardice of his courtiers and subjects, all of whom pretend to see the splendid clothes out of fear of offending their monarch. Although satire frequently uses parody as a means of directing its scorn toward a particular target, the two terms are not synonymous.

**superpowers** – Even though it has occasionally been applied retroactively to describe empires that ruled relatively large areas for lengthy periods of time, this term specifically arose during the latter years of World War II as politicians and scholars began debating the possible forms of the postwar world. Great Britain was frequently numbered among the would-be superpowers in these early uses of the term, but by the late 1940s, it became clear that only the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. had emerged from the war with the economic and military might to impose their respective political wills in the manner of a superpower. While China and the Non-Aligned Movement both represented significant wrinkles in the international relations of the Cold War, the description of the conflict as a two-sided superpower rivalry persists to this day.
Notes

3. George Kennan, “861.00/2 - 2246: Telegram, 17.”
7. Loth, p. 203.
10. Although each of these individuals was eventually found guilty of espionage, there were at the time significant questions, especially in regard to the Rosenbergs, about the manner in which the cases against them were built. Documents declassified after the end of the Cold War have largely confirmed that each of them was involved to some extent in collaborating to pass secret information to the Soviets, but the politically charged atmosphere of the late 1940s doubtlessly also influenced the manner in which justice was served.
13. In response, the Soviets and many of their allies boycotted the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.
20. The term predates the development of the atomic bomb and has nothing inherently to do with nuclear power or nuclear weapons, but the irony of its usage during the Cold War has been noted by numerous scholars and commentators.
24. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 12.
26. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 92.
27. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 91–92.
31. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 6.
33. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 13–14.
37. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 1.
38. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 1.
40. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 172.
41. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, n.p.
42. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 17.
43. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 67–68.
44. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 41.
45. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 68.
47. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 84.
48. Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, 156.
The film focuses on the arrival of an extraterrestrial visitor named Klaatu. This emissary warns humanity beyond their own planets. The title of Jonath’s book echoes that of the 1951 science-fiction film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The film focuses on the arrival of an extraterrestrial visitor named Klaatu. This emissary warns humanity that continuing in its aggressive ways will result in destruction by a race of robots who eradicate hostile species to ensure that they cannot spread beyond their own planets.
There is some potential for confusion among the three versions of the story that exist. The original Collier's version of the story is set in 1985 and places the catastrophic war within the much more recent past. This helps explain, for example, why the house still has a supply of groceries on hand with which to prepare meals, as well as why the family dog is still alive and able to beg for entry into the house. The version first published in The Martian Chronicles in 1950 not only removes two initial paragraphs that describe the five years between the house’s construction and the story’s post-apocalyptic present, but also specifies that the story takes place in 2026, with a previous chapter describing the nuclear war on earth as having happened in 2005. In preparation for a 1997 reissue of the book, Bradbury moved the dates of the war and the house’s collapse to 2036 and 2057, respectively, but made no other changes to the text. This change suggests that he believed that the end of the Cold War did not invalidate the story’s concerns about the dehumanizing potential of technology.

Bradbury, 205.  
Bradbury, 205.  
Bradbury, 210–211.  
Bradbury, 211.  
Bradbury, 208.  
Bradbury, 206–207.  
May, 8.  
158 Ballard, 244.

The spelling of the atoll’s name was officially changed to Enewetak in 1974.

Ballard, 246.  
Ballard, 248.  
Ballard, 250.  
Ballard, 257.  
Ballard, 262.  
Ballard, 264.  
Ballard, 264.  
Lifton and Mitchell, 335.  
Ballard, 247.  
Ballard, 245–246.  
Ballard, 244.  
Ballard, 248.  
218. Dylan, eighth verse.
219. Dylan, ninth verse.
220. Dylan, tenth verse.
221. Dylan, eleventh verse.
222. Dylan, thirteenth verse
244. Nehru, 5.
245. Nehru, 7.
246. Nehru, 8.
247. Theodore Roosevelt had been a few months younger than Kennedy was in November 1960 when he assumed office following the assassination of William McKinley in September 1901.
248. Kennedy, section I, paragraph 4.
250. Kennedy, section II, paragraph 3.
251. Kennedy, section III, paragraph 1.
252. Kennedy, section VIII, paragraph 5.
253. Kennedy, section III, paragraph 5.
256. Kennedy, section III, paragraph 9.
258. Gorbachev, paragraph 5.
259. Gorbachev, paragraph 3.
260. Gorbachev, paragraph 6.
261. Gorbachev, paragraph 10.
262. Gorbachev, paragraph 12.
263. Gorbachev, paragraph 17.
264. Gorbachev, paragraph 23.
265. Gorbachev, paragraph 31.


Gorbachev, Mikhail. “Address by Mikhail Gorbachev at the UN General Assembly Session (Excerpts)” 7 Dec. 1988, paragraph 10; on the Woodrow Wilson Center Digital Archive website, online at <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116224>.


Kennan, George F. “861.00/2 - 2246: Telegram.” The Charge in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State.” National Security Archive at George Washington University, online at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>.


Lehrer, Tom. “So Long, Mom (A Song for World War III).” Track 8 on That Was the Year That Was, Reprise Records, 1997, compact disc.

---. “We Will All Go Together When We Go.” Track 23 on Songs & More Songs by Tom Lehrer, Rhino Records, 1997, compact disc.


Schulz, Max F. Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A


