

The Last Night of the World



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAY BRADBURY

Ray Bradbury was born in Waukegan, Illinois in 1920 to Leonard and Esther Bradbury. Bradbury and his family moved to Los Angeles in 1934. While attending Los Angeles High School, Bradbury began writing short stories and sold his first story to a magazine called *Super Science Stories* in 1941. *The Martian Chronicles*, published in 1950, established Bradbury as a science fiction author, though he frequently defined himself as more of a speculative fiction author. Despite being a prolific short-story author, Bradbury is best known for his 1953 novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, which grapples with censorship, literature, social order, and technology. In 1947, Bradbury married Marguerite “Maggie” McClure—the only woman Bradbury ever dated—and the couple was married for fifty-six years, until Maggie’s death in 2003. When Bradbury died in 2012 at the age of 91, he had penned six hundred short stories, eleven novels (many of which were fashioned out of his existing short stories), and even children’s books, film scripts, and poems.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“The Last Night of the World” was originally published in 1951, six years after the end of World War II, four years into the Cold War, and one year into the Korean War. Written in the midst of such an unstable political climate, it makes sense that “The Last Night of the World” is concerned with fear, death, and the inescapable end of the world. The first version of the story, published in *Esquire* in 1951, is set in February of 1951, placing it in the same unstable political climate during which the story was written. The woman’s fear about atomic and hydrogen bombs in the story directly reflect the deep-rooted anxiety and very real threats that colored this time period. Later that year, Bradbury published “The Last Night of the World” in his short story collection titled *The Illustrated Man*. In this version, Bradbury changed the setting to October 1969—the future—unknowingly placing it in the midst of the Vietnam War.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

“The Last Night of the World,” like Bradbury’s short story “The Other Foot,” offers a picture of the Earth and humanity on the brink of collapse. Both stories also directly point to war as the reason for the end of the Earth. However, in “The Other Foot,” humans have the ability to migrate to Mars, whereas in “The Last Night of the World,” no such option exists. While “The Last Night of the World” provides a glimpse of what life is like leading up to the end of the world, “There Will Come Soft

Rains,” which Bradbury published in 1950, offers a post-apocalyptic view of the Earth after humans have already become extinct. The story attributes mankind’s demise to nuclear war, which is yet another instance of Bradbury linking war with mass destruction—part of an ever-growing tradition of post-apocalyptic literature. Emily St. John Mandel’s 2014 apocalyptic novel, *Station Eleven*, also details humanity’s sudden demise. In *Station Eleven*, however, humanity is only 99% destroyed, and the culprit is disease rather than war and self-absorption.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Last Night of the World
- **When Written:** 1947-1951
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles
- **When Published:** 1951
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Science Fiction; short story
- **Setting:** Earth
- **Climax:** When the husband and wife both realize that it is, in fact, the last night of the world.
- **Antagonist:** Death
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

As Seen in *Esquire*. “The Last Night of the World” was originally published in 1951 in *Esquire* magazine, which is still a thriving men’s magazine to this day. Throughout his career, Bradbury wrote and published twelve short stories specifically for the magazine.



PLOT SUMMARY

Pouring himself a cup of **coffee**, a man asks his wife what she would do if she knew that it was “the last night of the world.” He can hear his two little girls playing with blocks in the parlor. His wife says she hasn’t really thought about it, and he tells her to start thinking. Anxiously, she asks if it’s war, a nuclear bomb, or germ warfare. He says it’s none of these—more of a “closing of a book.” He has a “feeling” about the end of the world, which sometimes frightens him and sometimes makes him feel at peace.

The man admits that four nights ago, he had a dream in which a voice told him that the world was about to end—that “things would stop here on Earth.” At work later that day, he saw a coworker named Stan Willis gazing out the window. When the

man asked Stan what was the matter, Stan told him about a peculiar dream he had the night before. As it turns out, both men had the exact same dream—as did many other people in the office. The woman asks her husband if she actually believes that the dream is true, and he is certain that it is. She asks when the world will stop, and he says that the world will stop in the middle of the night for them, but it will take a full twenty-four hours for it to stop everywhere. The man asks his wife why she's accepting everything he's saying and not arguing. She tentatively says that she also had the dream last night. Earlier today, she heard the women in the neighborhood talking about the same dream, but she thought it was just a coincidence.

The man asks his wife if she's scared, and she says she's not, which is surprising because she "always thought" she would be. The man wonders why there seems to be no "spirit of self-preservation," and his wife suggests that when circumstances are logical, there's no point in getting worked up about them. She says that considering the way they've lived, "nothing else but this could have happened." The man doesn't think they've been all that bad, but his wife reminds him that they also haven't been "enormously good." They've been focused on themselves while the rest of the globe was grappling with "lots of quite awful things."

The couple hears the girls laugh from the other room. The man says the only thing he'll really miss is his daughters and his wife, along with a few simple pleasures. He says he's never really liked his job or the city, so he won't miss those. He asks his wife how they're able to calmly discuss the end of the world, and she says there's nothing else they can do. He agrees, claiming that "if there were, we'd be doing it." They wonder how other people are spending their last night and figure that people are watching television, playing cards, and going to sleep "like always." The woman thinks this ability is something to be proud of.

The man asks why the world has to end on this particular night—why couldn't it have ended last century or even ten centuries ago? His wife suggests that maybe it's because it's never been October 19, 1969 until today. Now that it is, and things are exactly as they are all around the world, the world must end. The man says that at this very moment, there are bomber aircrafts flying overseas that will never reach land. His wife says that's partially why the world is ending.

For the rest of the evening, the couple carries on like normal. They wash the dishes, though they put them away with "special neatness," and say goodnight to their daughters. They leave the girls' bedroom door ajar, so they can see the light coming through. The woman wonders if the girls know about the end of the world, but her husband thinks that's impossible. The couple spends a few hours listening to the radio, reading the paper, and sitting by the fire.

At 11:30 P.M., the two get ready for bed. The man kisses his wife, and she tells him, "We've been good for each other,

anyway." He asks if she wants to cry, and she says she doesn't think so. They both get up and turn off the lights around the house. When they finally get into bed, they comment about how "clean and nice" the sheets are.

Suddenly, the wife jolts out of bed and leaves the room. When she returns moments later, she tells her husband that she had left the faucet running in the kitchen and just went to turn it off. Her husband starts laughing, and so does she, "knowing what it was that she had done that was so funny." They settle back into bed and hold hands, and each say goodnight.



CHARACTERS

The Man / Husband – The unnamed man, one of the short story's protagonists, is a middle-aged, white-collar worker living in 1969. He and his wife, the story's other protagonist, have two young daughters. One night, the man has a strange dream in which a voice tells him that the end of the world is coming in a mere matter of days. However, the voice adds, the end won't be violent or intense—it will simply be "the closing of a book." Although the man thinks little of the dream at first, he soon realizes that everyone at work has had the same exact dream, including his coworker Stan Willis. Realizing the veracity of the dream, the man keeps the news to himself for four days before finally bringing it up to his wife. Although she pretends to be startled by the news of the end of the world, she eventually reveals that she, too, has had the dream. The man fluctuates between fearful anticipation and peaceful acceptance of the end. However, as the evening unfolds, the man comes to fully accept the end, which allows him to face the night bravely and calmly. He remains committed to his routine even in such dire circumstances, as he and his wife spend their final hours reading the paper, drinking **coffee**, listening to music on the radio, and sitting by the fireplace. While spending his evening "like always" shows the man's bravery and calm acceptance of his fate, it also suggests that he is narrowly focused on his own life and comfort. Like many other people, the man is preoccupied with his immediate reality instead of being conscious of the state of the Earth and the global community—something the story suggests is the very reason for the world's sudden end.

The Woman / Wife – The woman is one of the story's protagonists. She leads a quiet suburban life in 1969 with her husband and two daughters, all of whom go unnamed. Like her husband, the woman has an ominous dream about the end of the world. Even though she soon realizes that the other women in the neighborhood had the same exact dream, she outwardly considers it a coincidence. Deep down, however, the woman knows the dream is true, and that the end is fast approaching. Once she finally lets go of her fear and denial, the woman is able to talk openly about the end with her husband and come to terms with it. Like her husband, the woman remains faithful to

her routine even in her final hours, as she spends the evening washing dishes, drinking **coffee**, and watching television. This shows how accepting one's fate, though frightening, can actually lead to a deep sense of peace and understanding. However, the woman points out that spending the evening "like always" may be part of the reason the world is ending—people have been too concerned about their own lives to care about the terrible things happening on other parts of the globe.

Stan Willis – Stan Willis is one of the man's coworkers and is the only named character in the story. One day, Stan confides in the man about his strange, apocalyptic dream. When the man reveals that he had the same exact dream the night before, Stan relaxes and seems unsurprised. His reaction is one of the many illustrations in the story of how accepting one's reality, rather than living in denial or anxious speculation, leads to a sense of peace—but also complacency.

The Girls / Daughters – The man and woman's two young daughters are likely in their toddler years, since they are seen playing with blocks and sleeping with the door ajar (implying a childlike fear of the dark). The man and woman speculate that the girls know nothing of the impending end—and try to keep it that way—though the story leaves open the possibility that the girls also had the apocalyptic dream but are too young to process its meaning and impact.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FEAR AND BRAVERY

In Ray Bradbury's short story "The Last Night of the World," set in 1969, a husband and wife talk over **coffee** about a mysterious dream they each had, which announced that the world would end sometime that night. At first, the woman is fearful—as seen by her denial and anxious speculation—which hinders her from being able to accept reality. However, once she finally faces the circumstances and is honest with herself and her husband about her own apocalyptic dream, the woman is able to let go of her fear and face the impending end with bravery and poise. Using the husband and wife as examples, the short story asserts that bravery doesn't have to be big and bold. Instead, bravery can simply be a calm acceptance of one's fate.

The short story shows that fear, often marked by speculation and denial, keeps people from fully facing the situation at hand. Even though the woman has already had the same end-of-the-world dream as her husband (and seemingly every other adult

on Earth), she still pleads ignorance when her husband abruptly asks her one night what she would do if she knew it was "the last night of the world." Bewildered, she answers, "What would I do? You mean seriously? [...] I don't know. I hadn't thought." It seems that the woman is too fearful to admit the reality of the situation, which consequently stalls her conversation with her husband and keeps them from speaking openly with one another. When the woman realizes that her husband is serious about the end of the world, she turns to speculation, asking if the world is ending because of war, "the hydrogen or atom bomb," or "germ warfare." Because she's fearful and in denial about her apocalyptic dream, she anxiously turns to other explanations for why the world might be ending. Of course, this is largely unhelpful, and her speculation keeps her from having an honest, open conversation with her husband about the reality at hand.

Only when one acknowledges the reality of their situation, the story suggests, can their turn fear into bravery. At work, the man notices his coworker Stan Willis gazing out the window, with something clearly troubling him. Stan opens up about his dream, and when the man admits that he had the same dream the night before, Stan "didn't seem surprised. He relaxed, in fact." By affirming that he had the same dream, the man confirms the reality of the situation. This confirmation allows Stan to let go of the anxiety and speculation he was presumably experiencing while staring out the window. A few days later, when the man asks his wife why she's not protesting to his claims that the world will end that night, she hesitantly reveals that she also had the same dream the night before, but she "didn't want to say anything." Her reluctance to speak openly about the end of the world illustrates her fear, but now that she has finally accepted the circumstances, she and her husband can figure out how to bravely face their fate. Once the woman opens up about her dream, the man asks her if she's scared. She replies, "No. I always thought I would be, but I'm not." It seems that letting go of her denial and fear allowed the woman to realize that she is capable of extraordinary bravery. The man wonders why people aren't "screaming in the streets at a time like this," but his wife points out that people "don't scream about the real thing." Once again, her comment shows how acknowledging reality—realizing this is "the real thing"—leads to bravery.

However, the story is quick to point out that bravery doesn't have to mean being loud and bold. Being brave can mean being calm in the face of a terrifying situation. For example, the man thinks that most people will spend their last night "like always" by watching television, listening to music, playing card games, and putting themselves and their children to bed—the same way the husband and wife spend their last night. His wife suggests, "In a way that's something to be proud of—like always." The woman points out that for many people, staying calm and committed to normalcy is actually a major act of

bravery because it takes significant strength and poise. Similarly, in what are presumably their last moments, the husband and wife simply lie in bed holding hands and say “Good night” to one another. The story cuts off at this moment and possibly the world does too. The couple’s final words are simple but significant, as they courageously say goodnight and goodbye to one another without traces of anxiety, fear, denial, or speculation. Their simple goodbyes bravely mirror the husband’s earlier claim that the end of the world will not be violent or intense—instead, it will be like “the closing of a book.”



DENIAL AND ACCEPTANCE

In “The Last Night of the World,” a husband and wife come to terms with the impending end of the world—which, according to an ominous dream they

both had, will happen that very night. The husband and wife initially give in to denial, obviously not wanting the dream to be true. However, this coping mechanism proves unproductive, unsatisfying, and even isolating, as it keeps the couple from being able to grapple with the situation together. Charting the husband and wife’s evolution, the short story argues that although acceptance is often scary, it ultimately can lead to a sense of peace.

Using the husband and wife as examples, the story shows that denial is an unproductive and unsatisfying way to handle problems. Even though she, too, has had the ominous dream about the end of the world, the woman feigns innocence when her husband asks her, “What would you do if you knew that this was the last night of the world?” At first, she asks her husband if he’s serious, and when he confirms that he is, she lies and says, “I don’t know. I hadn’t thought.” The woman is in denial that her dream is true, and she also denies that she’s given the end of the world any thought. This only stalls the conversation and keeps the couple from being able to talk openly about the end and what they mean to one another. In addition, because the husband doesn’t immediately tell his wife about his dream (which he experiences three days before she does), the wife doesn’t realize the significance of her own dream when it happens. This means that her own suspicions go unconfirmed for several days, keeping her from actually grappling with the dream’s implications.

In addition, denial only increases fear and makes people feel isolated. Not wanting to believe her dream—and confirm its validity by bringing it up to her husband as a serious concern—the wife is forced to turn to the other women in the neighborhood instead of her own husband. Even then, the woman thinks “it was only a coincidence” that other women on the block had the same dream. The woman is quick to deny the truth of the situation, which also keeps her from engaging deeply with the other women and talking about the implications of the dream.

Ultimately, the story argues that accepting one’s situation,

though frightening, can actually bring a sense of peace, and with it the ability to move forward. When the man tells his coworker Stan Willis that he had the same dream, Stan “didn’t seem surprised. He relaxed, in fact.” For Stan, there is comfort in knowing that his coworker had “the same dream, with no difference,” because it confirms the reality of the situation and allows him to come to peace with it. A few days later, the wife tells her husband, “You don’t get too excited when you feel things are logical. This is logical. Nothing else but this could have happened from the way we’ve lived.” Like Stan, once the woman fully confronts the indisputable reality of the situation, she feels calm and assured rather than frantic. When the woman asks her husband how he thinks everyone else will spend their last night, he says, “Go to a show, listen to the radio, watch television, play cards, put the children to bed, go to bed themselves, like always.” This is exactly how the husband and wife spend their last night—knowing that there is nothing they can do to change the course of events, the couple accept their fate and manage to have a quiet, pleasant, otherwise-normal evening.

In “The Last Night of the World,” Bradbury highlights how denial is unproductive and isolating, whereas acceptance can be freeing. In this way, Bradbury encourages his readers to face their challenges head on. Even though accepting the reality of one’s problems may seem scary and daunting, denying that the problem exists only exacerbates anxiety.



SELF-ABSORPTION VS. GLOBAL AWARENESS

In Bradbury’s “The Last Night of the World,” a husband and wife prepare for the rapidly approaching end of the world. According to a strange dream they both had—along with seemingly everyone on Earth—the world is going to end that very night. Instead of “screaming in the streets,” however, the husband and wife maintain their quiet nighttime routine, sipping **coffee** and washing dishes. The short story suggests that, while this may be an act of personal bravery, the couple’s commitment to their routine also reflects a larger problem that may have catalyzed the end of the world in the first place. As the couple’s routine demonstrates, humans are often preoccupied with their own lives, comfort, and immediate communities and consequently fail to do their part as global citizens. The short story argues that individuals must let go of their selfish impulses and do everything in their power to ensure the Earth is a safe, healthy place.

As the story unfolds, it seems like husband and wife are noble and brave for sticking to their routine on the last night of the world. The man thinks that most people will spend their last night “like always” by watching television, listening to music, playing card games, and putting themselves and their children to bed. His wife suggests, “In a way that’s something to be proud of—like always.” Sticking to routine in the midst of what

could be chaos shows extraordinary composure and calmness. After putting their daughters to bed, the husband and wife read the newspaper, listen to music, and sit by the fireplace. The only real divergence from their routine is when they put the newly washed dishes “away with special neatness.” It seems that preserving their routine—and even moving through their routine with special effort and care—is an act of quiet bravery and acceptance.

While they may be brave and poised for sticking to their routine, the story implies that this is actually part of the problem, as humans are too focused on their own lives and immediate communities to care about the problems inflicting the world at large. The husband asks his wife, “We haven’t been too bad, have we?” The word “we” refers to the husband and wife as individuals, but it also refers to humanity as a whole. His question, then, is if humans brought the end of the world upon themselves. His wife responds, “No [we haven’t been too bad], nor enormously good. I suppose that’s the trouble—we haven’t been very much of anything except us, while a big part of the world was busy being lots of quite awful things.” She suggests that, in the past, people have been all too focused on their own problems instead of doing their part to help the larger community. Prior to stating that humankind hasn’t been “enormously good,” the wife says that “Nothing else but [the end of the world] could have happened from the way we’ve lived.” In this way, the wife implies that humankind’s selfish, narrow focus formed a direct cause-and-effect relationship with the end of the world. When the husband lists off things he’ll miss about life on Earth, he claims that, besides his family, he’ll really only miss “the change in the weather, and a glass of ice water when it’s hot, and [...] sleeping.” Although it’s charming—and somewhat profound—that the man will miss simple pleasures as much as he will his own family, it also reflects a narrow focus on himself. The husband’s list of things he’ll miss implies that he was preoccupied with his own comfort during his lifetime and turned a blind eye to the problems plaguing other parts of the globe, or even his own country or town.

The story argues that, instead of narrowly focusing on their own lives and immediate communities, people should do everything they can to ensure the Earth as a whole is a peaceful and livable place. When the woman tells her husband that there’s nothing they can do to stop the end of the world, he says, “That’s it, of course; for if there were [something we could do], we’d be doing it.” It seems the man has a newfound realization that humans need to do everything in their power to protect and nurture their planet. The realization comes too late for the couple, but not for the reader. Through “The Last Night of the World,” Bradbury implores readers to act not just as individuals dedicated to themselves or their families but as global citizens committed to helping the planet and their larger communities however they can.



FAMILY

It’s the evening October 19, 1969—mere hours before the world is about to end. In Bradbury’s “The Last Night of the World,” a husband and wife come to terms with the rapidly approaching end of the world, which, according to a haunting dream they both had, will be like “the closing of a book.” Over **coffee**, the couple looks back on their lives. Through their reflections, the story suggests that family is the most important thing in life, because it has the capacity to make people feel emotionally fulfilled and connected. In addition, as they look forward to the terrifying night ahead, the couple’s words and actions show that family is also important because it can provide comfort in chaotic, scary times.

The husband and wife’s reflections suggest that family is one of the most important things in life, because a healthy family makes people feel loved, connected, and fulfilled. The man tells his wife, “Do you know, I won’t miss anything but you and the girls. I never liked cities or my work or anything except you three.” Looking back on his life, the man realizes that his family was the most satisfying, joyful part of his existence. Things that were ostensibly supposed to fulfill him, like his white-collar career or living in a bustling city, pale in comparison to the depth and emotional fulfillment of family bonds. Similarly, lying in bed on their last night, the woman turns to her husband and says, “We’ve been good for each other, anyway.” According to the dreams, the end of the world will happen sometime during the night, and it is 11:30 P.M. by the time the couple gets in bed. Thus, with the end of the world presumably happening any minute, what matters most to the wife is looking back on her relationship with her husband.

As the night continues, the story shows how family can provide a sense of comfort in frightening times. When the man puts his young daughters to bed, he asks his wife if she thinks the girls will want the door “shut all the way” or “left a little ajar so some light comes in.” The man and his wife assume their daughters do not know about the end of the world, so by leaving the door “open just a trifle,” the man attempts to comfort his daughters in the face of their likely fear of the dark. Likewise, with the end of the world fast approaching, the couple falls asleep with “their hands clasped” and “their heads together.” Their physical closeness reflects the way that they provide each other with comfort and solidarity in the face of a potentially terrifying end.

Through the couple’s reflections, Bradbury points out how much in life is arbitrary—including impressive careers and big cities—and what matters most to many people is family. In “The Last Night of the World,” a husband and wife come to this conclusion, emphasizing how family can provide a sense of emotional fulfillment, support, and comfort. In this way, Bradbury urges readers to reevaluate their priorities and nurture their own family bonds.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



COFFEE

The man and woman spend their last night on Earth sipping coffee, which symbolizes the way that small pleasures can be a source of comfort, joy, and stability. Considering the world is going to end in a matter of hours, it seems strange that the couple would spend their time chatting and idly sipping coffee. However, the husband eventually tells his wife that, besides his family, the only things he'll really miss on Earth are "the change in the weather, and a glass of ice water when it's hot, and [...] sleeping." With this, the man points to how small, simple pleasures can be a significance source of happiness. In addition, the couple spends their evening "like always," which includes reading the newspaper, drinking coffee, and watching television. For the couple, drinking coffee provides a semblance of stability and normalcy to what would otherwise be an anxiety-inducing, chaotic evening.

husband and wife both had the same dream, albeit a few days apart, in which a voice announced the impending end of the world. Here, then, it's clear that the wife is in denial and pretending to not know what the husband is talking about. Later, when the wife has fully come to terms with the end, she admits that she's not scared, even though she "always thought" she would be. This contradicts her statement in this passage that she "hadn't thought" about the end of the world before—clearly she has. Her initial denial is unproductive and stalls what will turn out to be an extraordinarily important conversation.

☝ "Sometimes it frightens me, sometimes I'm not frightened at all but at peace. [...] I dreamed that it was all going to be over, and a voice said it was; not any kind of voice I can remember, but a voice anyway, and it said things would stop here on Earth."

Related Characters: The Man / Husband (speaker), The Woman / Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the man explains his apocalyptic dream to his wife, in which a voice explained how and when the world will end. This moment is the story's only invocation of a God figure or higher power. It seems that the voice belongs to an all-knowing being, considering that the voice relays the details of how and when the world will end. Since the voice authoritatively asserts that things will "stop here on Earth"—and has the power to make sure every adult on Earth experiences this dream—it also seems like the voice belongs to an all-powerful being who will be the one to carry out the end of the world. The man's difficulty in remembering the specifics of the voice also suggests that the voice belongs to an ineffable divine being. Perhaps this is, in part, why the man eventually believes his dream wholeheartedly. Since the news of the end comes from a seemingly all-powerful, all-knowing being, that news is not easily argued.

In addition, this passage points out that the end of the world will be gentle. The world won't blow up violently; things will just "stop." This seems to alleviate some of the man's anxieties, as he doesn't have to anxiously wonder how the world will end—he can simply accept that things will, in fact, end.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon and Schuster edition of *The Illustrated Man* published in 1981.

The Last Night of the World Quotes

☝ "What would you do if you knew that this was the last night of the world?"

"What would I do? You mean seriously?"

"Yes, seriously."

"I don't know. I hadn't thought."

"Well, better start thinking about it."

Related Characters: The Woman / Wife, The Man / Husband (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

This passage contains the opening lines of the short story. Invoking the story's title, the unnamed man asks his wife what she would do if she "knew that this was the last night of the world." As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the

☞ “Where’s that spirit called self-preservation they talk so much about?”

“I don’t know. You don’t get too excited when you feel things are logical. This is logical. Nothing else but this could have happened from the way we’ve lived.”

Related Characters: The Man / Husband (speaker), The Woman / Wife

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

Here the man asks his wife why everyone is simply accepting the end of the Earth. He refers to the “spirit called self-preservation,” which is the animal instinct to protect one’s self from danger and death. Even though the man has since accepted his fate, he wonders why he is able to go against his animal instincts to protect himself. His wife points out that the end of the world is logical—and perhaps should have been expected—which overrides that impulse for self-preservation and makes acceptance easier.

In addition, the woman claims, “Nothing else but this could have happened from the way we’ve lived.” It seems like she’s gesturing at mistakes that the global community has made in taking care of the planet and one another—Bradbury’s underlying warning to the reader.

☞ “We haven’t been too bad, have we?”

“No, nor enormously good. I suppose that’s the trouble—we haven’t been very much of anything except us, while a big part of the world was busy being lots of quite awful things.”

Related Characters: The Woman / Wife, The Man / Husband (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the man asks his wife if humans have been “bad,” and if that’s why the world is ending. The woman suggests that though humans generally haven’t been “too bad,” they also haven’t been “enormously good,” and this indifference is the bulk of the issue. In saying that “we haven’t been very much of anything except us,” the woman highlights how most humans are self-absorbed and care

only about their immediate lives and environments. In this way, even though the husband and wife (and other humans) haven’t been “too bad,” they’ve also turned a blind eye to the “big part of the world [that] was busy being lots of quite awful things.” This cause-and-effect relationship that the woman points out stands in opposition to the man’s earlier affirmation that the end of the world isn’t necessarily deserved, and “it’s just that things didn’t work out.” Unlike her husband, the woman is able to understand that humans did, in fact, play a key role in the end of the world because of their narrow-mindedness and self-interest.

☞ “Do you know, I won’t miss anything but you and the girls. I never liked cities or my work or anything except you three. I won’t miss a thing except perhaps the change in the weather, and a glass of ice water when it’s hot, and I might miss sleeping.”

Related Characters: The Man / Husband (speaker), The Girls / Daughters, The Woman / Wife

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the man reflects on his life and tells his wife that the only things he’ll miss are family and simple pleasures. His repeated claim, “I won’t miss a thing,” is ironic because once the world ends, he really “won’t miss a thing.” Presumably, the man will no longer exist either and will therefore not have the capacity to miss anything about life on Earth.

Regardless, the man’s list of things he’ll miss is telling. The rapidly approaching end of the world gives him the clarity to look back on his life and discern what was really important to him. He considers family the thing he’ll miss the most, in contrast to his job or his life in the city. This suggests that wealth, prestige, and one’s career are actually less fulfilling than the strong emotional bonds of a family.

☞ “I wonder what everyone else will do now, this evening, for the next few hours.”

“Go to a show, listen to the radio, watch television, play cards, put the children to bed, go to bed themselves, like always.”

“In a way that’s something to be proud of—like always.”

Related Characters: The Woman / Wife, The Man /

Husband (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the man suggests that everyone on Earth will stick to their routine in their final hours. The man lists off activities that align with the way he and his wife end up spending their final hours as well. In this way, it seems that the man assumes that everyone lives exactly like he does and will consequently spend their final hours in the same way that he plans to. This reflects the man's somewhat self-absorbed nature, as he is too focused on his immediate reality (and in this case, his routine) to think about the world at large.

However, the woman's assertion that sticking to one's routine is "something to be proud of" also holds some truth. Instead of "screaming in the streets" in panic, the couple courageously commits themselves to preserving as much normalcy and calm as they can in their final hours of existence. Certainly, their ability to be so calm is "something to be proud of," and reflects a quiet kind of bravery.

☞ "Why do you suppose it's tonight?"

"Because."

"Why not some other night in the last century, or five centuries ago, or ten?"

"Maybe because it was never October 19, 1969, ever before in history, and now it is and that's it; because this date means more than any other date ever meant; because it's the year when things are as they are all over the world and that's why it's the end."

Related Characters: The Woman / Wife, The Man / Husband (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

The woman suggests that the end of the world is happening on this particular night because it is the first time that "things are as they are all over the world." With this, the woman reveals that the world is in a sadder state than ever before, perhaps politically, environmentally, and socially.

"The Last Night of the World" was published in 1951, so for Bradbury, 1969 was a not-so-distant future. In this way, Bradbury unknowingly places the couple in the midst of the Vietnam War. At the time of his writing, however, the world was still recovering from World War II. In addition, 1951 was a few years into the Cold War and one year into the Korean War, so the woman's comment about how "things are as they are all over the world" likely refers to the widespread death and destruction that war causes.

☞ "There are bombers on their schedules both ways across the ocean tonight that'll never see land."

"That's part of the reason why."

Related Characters: The Woman / Wife, The Man / Husband (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the man realizes that there are bomber aircrafts that will still be in flight when the world ends. This is one of the only times that the man looks outside of his immediate life and demonstrates a small amount of global awareness. Meanwhile, the woman's assertion that the bombers are "part of the reason why" the world is ending is yet another suggestion that war is at least partially responsible for the end.

It's possible that the woman's response ("That's part of the reason why") also refers to the man's observation that the bombers are midflight and will "never see land." In this way, the woman suggests that the world needs to end while war is somewhat suspended in midair. This aligns with the man's earlier assertion that, according to his dream, the end of the world will not be violent or chaotic. Instead it will be like the gentle "closing of a book." Thus, the perfect time for the world to end gently is while bombers are en route to their destinations but before they "see land."

☞ "I wonder [...] If the door will be shut all the way, or if it'll be left just a little ajar so some light comes in."

"I wonder if the children know."

"No, of course not."

Related Characters: The Woman / Wife, The Man / Husband (speaker), The Girls / Daughters

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

The man has just put his daughters to bed and asks his wife if she thinks they'd like the door open or closed. The man's wording is somewhat odd, suggesting that he's not just referring to the girls' bedroom door. In wondering whether "the door will be shut all the way" or if "some light comes in," it seems that the man is really asking about how the end of the world will unfold. Although he's accepted that the end is coming, and that it will be gentle like "the closing of a book," he's curious about what that actually means. He wonders if humans and the Earth will be suddenly plunged into darkness—that is, if the door "will be shut all the way"—or if there will be "some light" and people can sense what is happening.

●● "I left the water running in the sink," she said.

Something about this was so very funny that he had to laugh. She laughed with him, knowing what it was that she had done that was funny.

Related Characters: The Woman / Wife, The Man / Husband (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

The man and woman have just gone to bed, when the woman springs out of bed to turn off the kitchen faucet that she accidentally left running. The couple laughs because it doesn't matter if the sink is still running—the world is ending. The woman's urgency in jumping out of bed to turn off the sink is another example of how the couple is committed to their routine. She is unable to do something she usually wouldn't do—leave the water running in the sink—even on such an otherwise extraordinary night.

The couple's ability to laugh at this moment also seems to show the extent of their acceptance and bravery in the face of their fate, although Bradbury's sparse language leaves the actual thoughts behind their laughter open to interpretation. They may be laughing out of a sense of hopelessness or denial, but they may also be handling the terrifying night with strength, poise, and a light heart.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE LAST NIGHT OF THE WORLD

A man asks his wife the question, “What would you do if you knew that this was the last night of the world?” The woman pauses, asking her husband if he’s serious. When he confirms that he is, she says that she doesn’t know, as she hasn’t given it much thought. The man pours himself a cup of **coffee**, listening to his two daughters playing with blocks in the parlor. The smell of the coffee is “easy” and “clean” in the evening air.

The man tells his wife that she “better start thinking about it.” Shocked, the woman says that surely he doesn’t “mean it.” He nods. She asks if he’s referring to a war, an atomic bomb, or germ warfare, but he says it is none of those things. Slowly stirring his **coffee**, the man says, “But just, let’s say, the closing of a book.”

The woman is confused, and the man says he’s not sure what to think either. He has a “feeling” about the end of the world, which scares him sometimes. At other times, though, he feels at peace with it. Glancing at his two little blonde girls, the man tells his wife that “it first happened about four nights ago,” but at the time, he chose not to tell her.

The man explains that he had a dream in which a voice told him that “things would stop here on Earth.” The following day, the man didn’t think much about his dream until he went to work and noticed his coworker Stan Willis staring out the window. Concerned, the man asked Stan what he was thinking about, and Stan replied that he had a peculiar dream the night before. Before even hearing about Stan’s dream, the man knew that their dreams were the same.

The short story begins with a casual conversation that’s almost like a game. However, since the title is immediately invoked, the man’s question takes on additional weight, suggesting that it may not be purely speculative. The sound of the girls playing in the background immediately invokes the theme of family, and also adds to the factors involved in what the “end of the world” would mean for the couple.



Strangely, the woman takes the man’s claim seriously, suggesting that she has reason to believe it’s true. It is later revealed that the story is set in 1969, but the woman’s speculations about atomic bombs and germ warfare point to the anxieties that colored 1951, the year this story was published. The man’s assertion that the end of the world will be like “the closing of a book” seems both ominous and almost peaceful, and he appears oddly calm.



The man’s calm attitude makes more sense with the detail that he’s sometimes terrified and sometimes calm—a more normal, fluctuating response to trauma. His choice to shield his wife from whatever “it” was that happened several nights ago illustrates the way that fear can be isolating, and keeps people from being able to openly deal with their problems or accept help from others.



Stan unknowingly confirms the veracity of the man’s dream. This moment is crucial, as it allows the man to begin to come to terms with the reality of the situation. Interestingly, Stan Willis is the only named character in the story—but he is also the one that sets in motion the protagonist’s struggles with fear, bravery, denial, and acceptance.



Stan told the man about his dream. When the man revealed that he, too, had the same dream the night before, Stan seemed unsurprised and even “relaxed.” The two of them wandered around their office building and noticed many of their other coworkers “looking at their desks or their hands or out windows.” Stan and the man talked to several of their coworkers, and all of them revealed they had the “same dream, with no difference.”

Likewise, the man is able to confirm the veracity of Stan’s dream. This actually makes Stan feel more “relaxed,” which suggests that there can be comfort and peace in accepting one’s reality instead of denying it or anxiously speculating about it. The fact that everyone else in the office has had the same dream suggests that perhaps everyone on Earth did, too. This raises the question of if the man’s wife had the dream and is in denial about it, or if she was somehow exempt from it.



The woman asks her husband if he actually believes in the dream, and he asserts that he has “never been more certain” of anything before. She asks when the world will stop, and he tells her that the world will end in the middle of the night for them, but for other people around the world, it will happen later. It will take a full twenty-four hours for everything to end.

The husband’s assertion that he’s “never been more certain” shows that he has let go of his initial denial and accepted the end of the world in full. As the story unfolds, this will allow him to approach the end with bravery and poise rather than panic.



The woman asks her husband if they “deserve” the end of the world, but he assures her that it has nothing to do with “deserving.” The world is ending simply because “things didn’t work out.” He asks his wife why she hasn’t tried to argue with his claims about the end of the world, and she says that she has a reason of her own. He asks if her reason is “the same one everyone at the office had,” and she slowly nods.

The man frames the end of the world as if it were a breakup, casually claiming, “it’s just that things didn’t work out.” His extraordinary calmness seems to come from the way he’s accepted the reality of the situation. This also reaffirms that the end of the world will be gentle rather than intense and chaotic. In addition, the man asks his wife something the reader also perhaps wants to know: why she is simply accepting his farfetched claim about the end of the world. Her response suggests that she was in denial about her own dream.



The woman reveals that her dream happened just the night before, and that she didn’t want to say anything to her husband about it. In chatting with the other women in the neighborhood, she realized that they had the same dream too, but at the time, the woman thought it was just a matter of coincidence. She wonders why the newspaper doesn’t say anything about the end of the world, but her husband says that, since everyone already knows about the end of the world, there’s no need to tell everyone about it.

The woman reveals that she, too, was hesitant to tell her husband about her dream. It seems that, for the woman, bringing up her dream to her husband would have confirmed that it was something that worried her and that she took seriously. Once again, fear and denial isolates people from one another and keeps them from productively dealing with the situation at hand.



The man asks his wife if she’s scared, and she insists that she’s not, even though she “always thought” she would be. Her husband asks where the “spirit of self-preservation” is, and his wife speculates that people don’t get as worked up when they know their circumstances are logical. She says that this is one of those times—“Nothing else but this could have happened from the way we’ve lived.”

Now that the woman has accepted that the end of the world is coming, she’s able to feel surprisingly at peace, just like her husband does. Her assertion that the end of the world is logical sets up a cause-and-effect relationship that can’t be argued, perhaps bolstering her acceptance of the impending end.



The man asks his wife if she thinks they've been "bad." She says no, but they haven't been "enormously good," either. She thinks that's the root of the problem: "we haven't been very much of anything except us, while a big part of the world was busy being lots of quite awful things."

Listening to the little girls laughing in the other room, the husband says that he always assumed that people would be "screaming in the streets" once they knew for sure that the end of the world was approaching. The woman suggests that people "don't scream about the real thing."

The man tells his wife that the only thing he'll really miss is his family—and seasonal changes, drinking ice water in hot weather, and sleeping. He admits he's never even liked his work or living in the city. He abruptly asks his wife how they can sit calmly and talk about the end of the world, and she tells him that there's nothing else they can do. The man says that she must be right, "for if there were, we'd be doing it."

The woman wonders how everyone else in the world will spend their last night. Her husband guesses that people will spend their time "like always" by watching television, playing cards, and putting their kids to bed. The woman thinks that spending the night "like always" is actually "something to be proud of."

Following up on her comment that the end of the world is the result of a logical cause-and-effect relationship, the woman suggests that the cause was humankind's self-absorption. People have been so focused on themselves that they've failed to be good global citizens and do what they can to help the planet and their larger communities thrive—their selfishness and apathy have allowed evil and suffering to flourish.



So far, the daughters have only been in the background in the story, but this seems to imply that they're always at the back of the man's mind. Meanwhile, the woman's comment that people "don't scream about the real thing" also underscores the idea that acceptance brings peace rather than fear and anxiety.



In hindsight, the man realizes that the two most satisfying things in his life were his family and simple pleasures. However, his comment about simple pleasures also shows that he's been preoccupied with his own comfort and, like many other people, has turned a blind eye to the bigger things going on in the world. His affirmation that "if there were [something we could do about the end of the world], we'd be doing it" suggests a newfound understanding that humans should have been doing everything in their power to nurture the planet and the global community.



The woman suggests that preserving some semblance of normalcy and routine in a time like this takes exceptional bravery. However, considering her earlier assertion that humans have been too self-absorbed, it seems that spending the evening "like always" is yet another reflection of people being concerned with only their immediate lives. Likewise, the couple is so preoccupied with their own routine that they assume everyone else spends their time similarly.



Pouring another cup of **coffee**, the man asks his wife why she thinks the end of the world has to be tonight. She simply answers, “Because.” He wonders why it couldn’t have happened one, five, or even ten centuries ago. She says that maybe the world has to end tonight “because it was never October 19, 1969 ever before in history.” This day must be important because it’s the exact moment in which “things are as they are all over the world.” She says this is why the world must end tonight. The man realizes that there are bomber aircrafts flying over the ocean right now, and that those planes will never reach land. His wife says, “That’s part of the reason why.”

Abruptly, the man asks his wife if they should wash the dishes now. The two do so and put them away with “special neatness.” At 8:30 P.M., they put the girls to bed, leaving their lamps on and the door to their room cracked open. Afterward, the man asks his wife if she thinks the girls would want the door shut completely or “left just a little ajar so some light comes in.” The woman wonders if the girls know about the end of the world, and her husband is sure that they don’t.

Before they go to bed, the husband and wife listen to music, read the newspaper, and sit by the fireplace. They think about how other people in the world are spending their last night, “each in his own special way.” The man kisses his wife, and she says, “We’ve been good for each other, anyway.” He asks if she wants to cry, and she says no.

At 11:30 P.M., the two turn off all the lights in the house and begin getting ready for bed. When they get into bed, they remark that the sheets feel “clean and nice,” and that they are both extremely tired. Moments later, the wife jumps out of bed and goes to the kitchen. When she returns, she explains to her husband that she realized she left the water running in the kitchen sink and went to turn it off. The man laughs, and the woman does too, “knowing what it was that she had done that was funny.”

Drinking coffee stands out as another simple pleasure and a way for the couple to preserve their routine in the midst of a dire situation. Meanwhile, the woman’s comment about the end of the world needing to be on this specific night seems somewhat fatalistic and simplistic. However, she also identifies bombers as part of the problem, suggesting that besides (or maybe because of) humankind’s self-absorption, war is a major component in the end of the world. It’s important to remember that the story was written in 1951—six years after World War II, four years into the Cold War, and one year into the Korean War.



Putting the dishes away with “special neatness” is the couple’s one deviation from their regular routine. Instead of giving into anxiety, fear, or chaos, the couple actually act calmer and more intentional than usual, highlighting their quiet bravery. The man’s question about if the door should be shut completely or left “ajar so some light comes in” shows that he is trying to be a source of comfort for his girls, who likely don’t know about the end of the world but may be afraid of the dark.



The couple thinks that everyone on Earth is spending their last night “each in his own special way,” but earlier, they assumed that everyone was spending the evening like them—watching television and listening to the radio. Once again, this shows the couple’s inability to look beyond their own immediate lives and think of people besides themselves.



When the wife jumps out of bed to turn off the sink, it’s humorous to her husband because they are hours or even minutes away from the complete end of existence, so it doesn’t matter that the faucet is on. The couple’s ability to laugh at this also shows their wholehearted acceptance of and bravery in the face of reality.



When their laughter dies down, the husband and wife lie in bed together, with “their hands clasped” and “their heads together.” After a quiet moment, they each say goodnight.

In their final moments, the husband and wife intertwine their fingers, illustrating the importance of family bonds. In saying a final goodnight, the couple also says goodbye and calmly welcomes their approaching fate, as Bradbury ends the story on an ambiguous and suspenseful note. It is never made clear if this night really is “the last night of the world” or not.





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