

A PIECE OF WOOD by Ray Bradbury

Put these paragraphs into the right order

The sergeant, a former student of physics and metallurgy, claims to have made an invention, a machine the size of a cigarette package, which can make all weapons rust within a range of 900 miles (2110). The sergeant's disclosures, though first met with scorn, begin to alarm the official. He orders the soldier to report immediately to the doctor of the post. But the young man says that he is leaving the post and walks out of the office.

An army official has summoned a young sergeant to his office. Alluding to some rumours about the sergeant's "nervousness", he suggests a transfer to "some other War Area". But the sergeant has his doubts. He would prefer to see all weapons rusted overnight so that he can live in peace.

When he wants to take out his service pistol, the official only finds a pile of brown rust in the holster. Cursing wildly, and with the leg of a smashed chair as a weapon, he rushes out of his office in pursuit of the sergeant.

Abstractedly the official answers the doctor's phone call to report about the sergeant's delusion, the effect of "a Sixteen-Year War" (21 37), as he thinks. Discovering that his ball-point pen has been turned into yellow rust, he asks the doctor to get off the line. He dials the Station Guard and orders him "to stop, to shoot down and kill" the sergeant if necessary (22 14). But the guard retorts ambiguously that he can't shoot anybody. In a shocking vision the official pictures a heap of rusting weapons outside his office. Hysterically he orders the guard "to choke, to beat and kick" the sergeant "to death" (22 35).

After the official has made a first attempt to put a stop to what he calls the sergeant's "idealistic chatter" (19 17), he is confronted with the (apparently theoretical) question of how people would react to a sudden worldwide destruction of all weapons. The official carefully argues that something like this would only lead to mass panic, with each nation blaming its enemies for the disaster. The official sees himself forced to make a longer statement concerning people's natural disposition to mutual destruction. When he finishes by advising him to "put (his) rust away" (2014) and to forget about the idea, the soldier surprises him with the announcement that he might "start the Rust tonight" (2019).

Fill in: aggression - alliance - concerned – deprived - exploring – force - get rid of - invention - necessity – rejects - reveals – stubborn - survive -
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"A Piece of Wood" is a science fiction story which _____ the writer's deep distrust of man's technical intelligence. Here, it has combined with human aggression to trap the human race in the no-win situation of eternal warfare — a situation not unlike that in Orwell's 1984. Conformity and an unquestioning acceptance of the _____ for war seems to be the only way an individual can _____ (cf. 20 11-14). Bradbury does not seem to be too _____ with the technical details of the young man's

invention, or with the plausibility of a war dragging on for so long in an age in which nuclear weapons are, at the very least, available (cf. 21 13). He is more concerned with _____ some theoretical consequences of the unholy _____ between human aggression and technology.

Ironically, it takes a technological innovation in the form of the young man's _____ to defeat technology. The position with regard to aggression is somewhat similar. In defence of their respective positions, both soldiers resort to the use of force. For the official, a _____ military executive, there seems to be only one thing that matters: to _____ this disquieting young trouble-maker as quickly as possible — if necessary, by killing him.

The young man, though he obviously _____ violence as a solution to human conflicts, himself sees no other way of putting an end to violence except by an act of _____. At the end of the story, military technology does seem to be defeated. Human _____, however, still remains. The official's own reaction seems to support the view of human nature he expressed earlier in the story (20 1-7). But even if this is Bradbury's own view, he at the same time raises the question whether it might not be desirable for such murderous creatures to be _____ of their advanced military technology: with a piece of wood one can do considerably less damage than with an atom bomb.

Unit I

Setting, Structure, Characters

1. The setting

Where and when does the story take place?

2. The structure of the narrative

How many parts would you divide the story into?

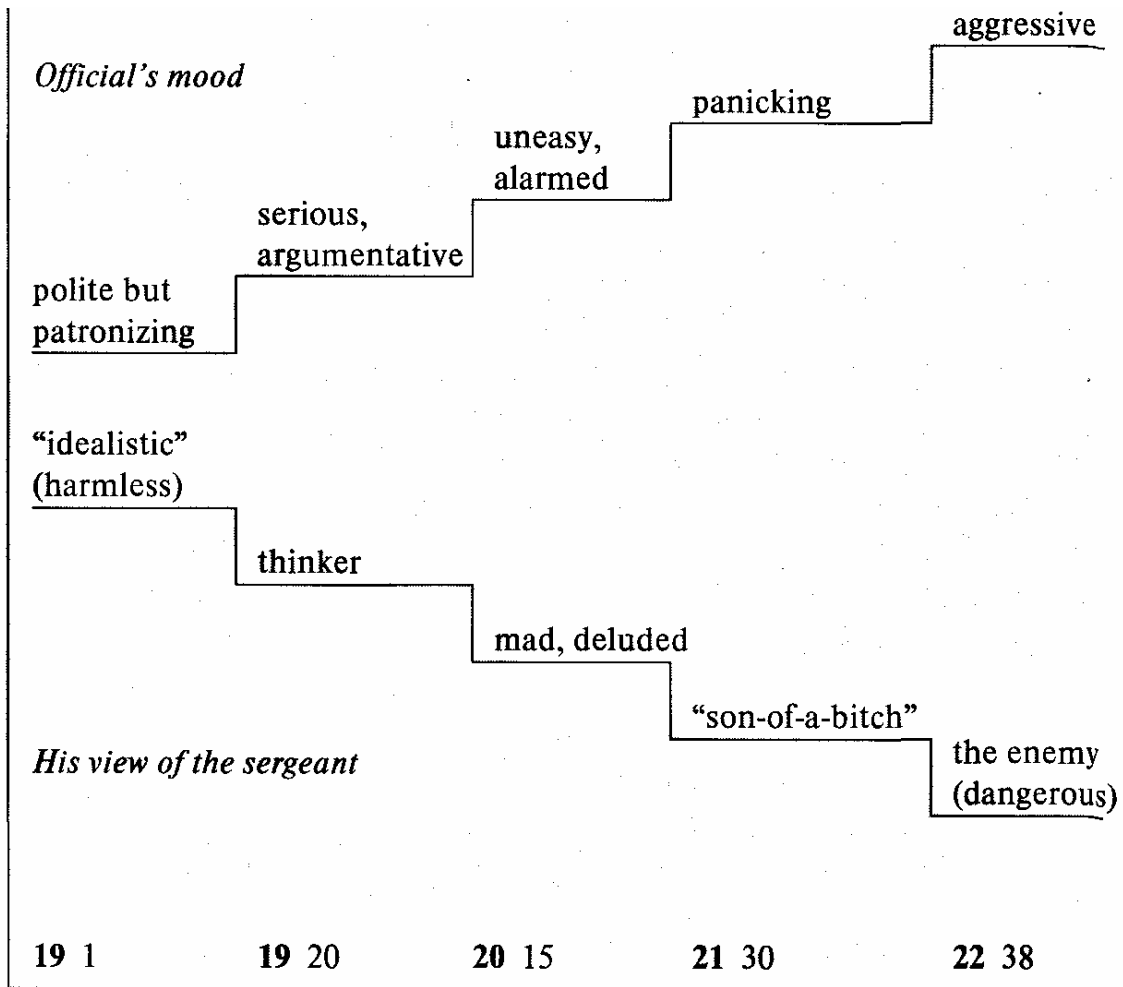
- One simple approach might be to follow Bradbury's division into 'scenes' through the entry or exit of characters. Accordingly, this would lead to a division of the story into four sections:

- Another approach would be to follow the easily discernible changes in the official's mood, with which his final eruption is prepared: (5 sections)

- A third, more sophisticated approach would be to work oneself along the idea "rust" which keeps running through the whole story as a leitmotif. The essential facts of the action would then have to be built round this key word and its connotations (**19** 12; **20** 14, 19, 26; **21** 10, **22** 8-9, 27,28,39; for indirect references see **19** 22,20 32-33). This would justify three main divisions:

3. The characters

How do the official's changing moods relate to his view of the sergeant?



Is the official's view of the young man correct? Explain what impression you get of both men — and why.

The official's reactions to the sergeant tell us more about himself than about the young man. He may be characterized as

The young man seems to be

4. Narrative technique

How do you get to know what the characters are like?

Our judgement of both characters is based mainly on what we hear them say. There are a couple of minor 'interpretations' of what the official is thinking (19 23, 22 26, 23 1), but the overall point of view is that of a neutral (invisible) observer, or 'camera eye'.

Unit II

The Central Conflict

1. War and human nature

Comment on the official's and the sergeant's attitudes towards war.

Which view of human nature do you think is correct? How would you explain the existence of war and aggression?

2. Technology and warfare

How do the two characters see the role of technology?

Do you think the author is siding with any one view?

3. The ending of the story

What — if anything — is proved by the official's behaviour at the end of the story? ;

Unit III

The Functions of Fantasy

1. A science fiction story

What kind of a story would you say Bradbury's "A Piece of Wood" is?

In what way is fantasy about scientific possibilities different from fantasy about magic or supernatural powers?

What has Bradbury's story got to do with the 'real world' as we know it?

Biography

Ray Bradbury, American novelist, short story writer, essayist, playwright, screenwriter and poet, was born August 22, 1920 in Waukegan, Illinois. He graduated from a Los Angeles high school in 1938. Although his formal education ended there, he became a "student of life," selling newspapers on L.A. street corners from 1938 to 1942, spending his nights in the public library and his days at the typewriter. He became a full-time writer in 1943, and contributed numerous short stories to periodicals before publishing a collection of them, *Dark Carnival*, in 1947.

His reputation as a writer of courage and vision was established with the publication of *The Martian Chronicles* in 1950, which describes the first attempts of Earth people to conquer and colonize Mars, and the unintended consequences. Next came *The Illustrated Man* and then, in

1953, **Fahrenheit 451**, which many consider to be Bradbury's masterpiece, a scathing indictment of censorship set in a future world where the written word is forbidden. In an attempt to salvage their history and culture, a group of rebels memorize entire works of literature and philosophy as their books are burned by the totalitarian state. Other works include *The October Country*, *Dandelion Wine*, *A Medicine for Melancholy*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, *I Sing the Body Electric!*, *Quicker Than the Eye*, and *Driving Blind*. In all, Bradbury has published more than thirty books, close to 600 short stories, and numerous poems, essays, and plays. His short stories have appeared in more than 1,000 school curriculum "recommended reading" anthologies. Mr. Bradbury's eagerly awaited new novel, *From the Dust Returned*, will be published by William Morrow at Halloween 2001. Morrow will release *One More For the Road*, a new collection Bradbury stories, at Christmas 2001.

Ray Bradbury's work has been included in four Best American Short Story collections. He has been awarded the O. Henry Memorial Award, the Benjamin Franklin Award, the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement, the Grand Master Award from the Science Fiction Writers of America, the PEN Center USA West Lifetime Achievement Award, among others. In November 2000, the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters was conferred upon Mr. Bradbury at the 2000 National Book Awards Ceremony in New York City.

Ray Bradbury has never confined his vision to the purely literary. He has been nominated for an Academy Award (for his animated film *Icarus Montgolfier Wright*), and has won an Emmy Award (for his teleplay of *The Halloween Tree*). He adapted sixty-five of his stories for television's *Ray Bradbury Theater*. He was the creative consultant on the United States Pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair. In 1982 he created the interior metaphors for the *Spaceship Earth* display at Epcot Center, Disney World, and later contributed to the conception of the *Orbitron* space ride at Euro-Disney, France.

Married since 1947, Mr. Bradbury and his wife Maggie live in Los Angeles with their four beloved cats. They have four daughters and eight grandchildren.

On the occasion of his 80th birthday in August 2000, Bradbury said, "The great fun in my life has been getting up every morning and rushing to the typewriter because some new idea has hit me. The feeling I have every day is very much the same as it was when I was twelve. In any event, here I am, eighty years old, feeling no different, full of a great sense of joy, and glad for the long life that has been allowed me. I have good plans for the next ten or twenty years, and I hope you'll come along."