

“The Flying Machine” by Ray Bradbury

(Study Guide by Chris Pepple)

From his position of safety, an emperor looks into the sky and sees something no one in 400 A.D. has ever seen before—a man flying high about the land. So begins Ray Bradbury’s short story titled “The Flying Machine.”

Who is Ray Bradbury?

Ray Bradbury is an American author who wrote across many genres and incorporated rich imagery and imaginative details in all of them. During his lifetime, he published novels, short stories and poetry. His works are filled with a combination of delight and horror, fantasy and adventure, and references to space and technology that make us question our own ideas of what is possible and what is good. His works also make us question the power figures in our society, especially those who seek absolute power. Above all, Bradbury writes to make his readers think.

Bradbury was born in Illinois in 1920 and died in California in 2012. During his childhood, he became fascinated with horror films and early science fiction. Along with the works he read, Bradbury says he was also influenced by a carnival worker he met when he was 12 years old. This worker introduced him to magic and to the ideas of the supernatural and reincarnation. After seeing the magician’s tricks and returning to talk to him about his life and his work, Bradbury decided to put down his thoughts on paper. He started writing within a few days of meeting the

carnival worker and never stopped, writing something every day of his life from that point forward.

In 1937, three years after his family moved to Los Angeles, Bradbury decided to connect with other writers. He joined the Los Angeles Science Fiction League and soon after published his first short story. He then traveled to New York to the first World Science Fiction Convention where he connected with editors and other professionals in the publishing world. By the 1940s, Bradbury was well-known for his writings which appeared regularly in national magazines with large followings and in smaller, genre-specific fan magazines.

Bradbury's works have been required readings throughout high schools across America for several generations. He is best known for his novel *Fahrenheit 451* and for other writings such as *The Martian Chronicles* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Bradbury received many honors for his works including a special citation for a distinguished career given by the Pulitzer Prize Board, an Emmy, and the National Medal of Arts. He was even honored by being chosen to be a consultant who contributed ideas for the United States Pavilion for the 1964 World's Fair.

“The Flying Machine”

“The Flying Machine” was one of Bradbury's many short stories published during his career. This story tells the tale of a Chinese emperor who wakes up one morning to find that one of his subjects has invented a machine that lets humans fly for the first time. Rather than being delighted with this invention, the emperor is filled with worry over thoughts that this machine

will fall into the hands of his enemies who will use the flying machine to bring down the Great Wall of China and bring harm to all of his subjects. His fear leads him to execute the inventor and destroy the machine, making all who have seen it take an oath of silence.

This story can be read for entertainment purposes only, as can most literature. Read it for fun and walk away. Bradbury, however, is asking his readers to do much more. What is Bradbury asking his readers to think about in this tale?

- Bradbury opens the door for the discussion on the ethical uses of technology. Should people invent a new device without considering its effects on all humans? Does human greed cloud our judgement and lead us to create something that leads to our own destruction? Bradbury asks us to consider not what we *can* create, but rather what we *should* create. The inventor in this tale sees the good in his creation. He can fly over the land and explore all of the beauty his country has to offer. The emperor, however, sees the negative aspect of the creation. He pictures what could happen if a flying machine falls into the hands of someone with evil intentions. He sees the beauty in his own creation—a machine which he controls that brings beauty without the chance of harm.
- Bradbury also asks his readers to ponder this ethical question: does the need of many outweigh the need of the few? The emperor executes the inventor, sacrificing his life in an act that the emperor hopes will save the lives of all of his other subjects. The emperor is terrified of the tragic possibilities that the inventor's knowledge and creations could bring upon others. Was this a just act? Bradbury leaves that answer for his readers to think through.

- Bradbury also uses this tale to question the morality of absolute power and who can define justified versus unjustified fears. Were the fears of the emperor justified based on a real threat to his realm or did his fears arise from his own personal insecurities? If other people were consulted in the empire, would they have seen the good in the creation and spared the life of the inventor? This empire was ruled by someone with absolute authority whose actions were not questioned by his servant or a farmer who witnessed the flight by the inventor. Bradbury does not portray the emperor as evil, however. He seems kind in the beginning of the tale, talking politely to his servant and admiring the lands before him. He also seems to truly care about the people he is serving, yet he orders a horrific execution without feeling remorse or considering the family of the inventor. Bradbury leaves the final judgement of the emperor to the readers.

Style

Bradbury used many literary devices to engage the reader. True to his style, Bradbury weaves vivid imagery throughout this short story. He also uses similes and metaphors to enrich the details and engage the senses of the readers. Bradbury describes the taste of the tea, the feel of and the smell of the air, the sounds of the birds, and the beauty of the land. By these descriptions, Bradbury creates a calmness in the reader, breaking this feeling only with the horror of the execution.

Bradbury also uses several similes to bring the story to life for the readers. He describes the dragon as being colored like the sun and the grass. He shows the beauty of the invention as it seen through the eyes of its creator. The readers are first given a positive feeling about what is

being seen. Bradbury complicates this emotion, however, by using the metaphor of a dragon to describe the flying machine. This metaphor ties the invention to the culture of the story. Ancient China is seen as a land of dragons. The dragon, however, represents both beauty and terror. It can delight the one who sees it with its uniqueness and its strength, yet that very strength can be used for harm. Bradbury juxtaposes beauty and danger, the natural world and the mechanical world, throughout this tale. The reader is left to decide where beauty ends and danger begins. Bradbury also gives the reader rich sound effects to engage the senses. For example, he uses the phrase “splendid snake of stones” to describe the Great Wall, representing both alliteration and consonance. The audience can hear the hissing of the snake and sense the importance of the wall in the empire.

Questions for Further Thought

- What technological advances do we have today that some view as helpful while others view as harmful?
- Who decides if technological or medical advances are ethical?
- Who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist in this short story? Could those roles be reversed depending on who you think made the ethical choices in this tale?
- Who is telling this story? Does the narrator take a neutral position in this tale?
- What’s the climax of the plot? How does Bradbury lead up to this climax? Is the climax surprising to the reader?
- Are the fears of the emperor justified?
- What’s the setting of this story? How does the setting set the tone for the plot?