

How do the writers of  
the red room and the  
whole town's sleeping



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Many things create fear. Loneliness, isolation, the supernatural, and darkness are just a few of the major causes. All of these are branches of one thing, the unknown; the absence of knowledge or the denial of what may happen. No one has done everything and nor does anyone know everything. But most importantly, no single individual can explain everything because many things are out of their control and just cannot be rationalised. This leads to the imagination of an individual presuming what the unknown object is, leading to an increase in the creation of feelings making him/her more vulnerable.

There are some people who worry about their fears and some who ignore them, in the process paying the price for their ignorance. H G Wells and Ray Bradbury have both expressed these messages in the form of their protagonists in their stories " The Red Room" and " The Whole Town's Sleeping" respectively. " The Red Room" was written in 1896 by then young scientist H G Wells. Its genre is horror. It draws on elements of gothic literature, a specific type of horror that is based on darkness and ghosts.

It has glances of supernatural elements and has a very old, traditional and ancient setting; all of these elements are of gothic literature. In this text, the protagonist is in the form of a young man aged twenty-eight, who is a typical Victorian of his time. The first sentence of the text that is "' I can assure you,' said I, ' that it will take a very tangible ghost to frighten me. '" itself shows his arrogance and how he wants to rationalise everything. This is ironic, as the outcome of the story shows us that it wasn't even a ghost that scared him, but it was the unknown and indescribable that created fear in him.

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We are then introduced to the other characters in this text, an old woman, and two old men, one of which is distinctive because of his withered arm. Their wisdom is immediately displayed when the old woman replies to the young man- " There's a many things to see, when one's still but eight-and-twenty. " Immediately a conflict is set up between the old and the young, or even the inexperience and the wisdom. " The Whole Town's Sleeping" was written in 1950 and is a part of the fear or thriller genre. It draws on cinematic characteristics, typical of its time.

It contains many elements of science fiction, and is filled with mystery, which keeps the reader engrossed. In this text the protagonist is a maiden aged thirty-seven called Lavinia Nebbs. She too is a typical female of her time, brave and manly, which can be seen throughout the text. We are also introduced to her friend Francine, and later another friend called Helen. The title acts as a precursor in both the texts and immediately gives the reader clues as to what they might be experiencing in this text. In " The Red Room", the colour red is a metaphor for danger and death.

This title has immediately established the most important and significant location in the text, thus again supporting my earlier point of the importance of the title. In " The Whole Town's Sleeping", the whole title acts as a metaphor for ignorance. The diction " Sleeping" links to night and darkness, when people are most vulnerable. In this assignment, I will be comparing these two texts, one written in the 19th century and the other written during the 20th century, and looking at how their cultural context has influenced the writers.

At the same time of referring to important elements that build tension and how and when it rises, I will be highlighting effective diction and important sound devices, syntax, imagery and the properties of their endings.

Atmosphere is essential to create a better effect, and I will be looking at how both writers have achieved their goals in enveloping the readers into their respective stories. Cultural context is the time and setting of the text, and how it influences the writer. In both "The Red Room" and "The Whole Town's Sleeping", it is eminent that the writers have both been affected by their generations.

I will be comparing the elements that highlight how Wells and Bradbury have been affected, and I will be contrasting the key differences in both texts. "The Red Room" was written during an era known famously as the "Victorian Era", the period of paradox. Science emerged greatly during this time and the younger generations especially thought rationally and were very cynical. People were more educated, and mankind in general began to feel superior. The protagonist, who is also a young, well-educated man seems very ignorant and believes a lot in his personal abilities, has personified the ethos of this era.

His arrogance is highlighted right at the beginning when it seems as if H G Wells has placed himself in the boots of the young man, as he too was a scientist who believed in a sceptical way of living. This was also a time when technology was at its peak of advancement; there was a revolution in mechanisation. This led to mankind building a trust in machines, which is also displayed in this text. There was also a rebirth in the interest of other beliefs, and superstition arose at the same time.

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Thus creating a conflict between these old superstitious beliefs, and the new upcoming scientific beliefs, which has also been personified by the characters in the text. "The Whole Town's Sleeping" was written in 1950, a time known particularly for the "Cold War", a time when mankind viewed a very competitive arms race between Russia and the USA. There was a great paranoia towards communism in America, where people became insane and began to accuse the innocent to be followers of communism to such an extent that they even accused their own friends and family.

This extreme paranoia was known as McCarthyism, created after the then American leader McCarthy. An example of this paranoia is the phrase "Reds under the bed", in which the "Reds" are representing communists. This phrase emphasised the insane belief that friends/family members are law-breakers if they are communists. The notion of "The enemy within" added to these narrow-minded beliefs, as again it links to members of your own household being your own enemies. This period was also a time when gender roles were set, and women were believed to be domestic people, and men were meant to work.

This triggered a revolution, in which women arose and fought for equality and freedom. Women were beginning to be more male-like and became more courageous. Cinema played an importance during this time, and along with science fiction, created the queerest titles. Even the title of "The Whole Town's Sleeping" has an air of eeriness in it, making it cinematic. The location is critical to a short story. The writer needs to give his story a carefully considered and appropriate backdrop.

A short story works through its location, characters, and setting in time and language. These are the ingredients that tie it together and make the mixture complete. "The Red Room" is set in a castle known as Lorraine Castle. A ghost story in a castle is not a new idea and although it is a rather unoriginal location, it is very appropriate. The old people who inhabit the place cannot use most of it to live in because they are afraid of the red room. This keeps them well away from that section of the castle.

A castle is such an appropriate location and here what we do not know is far more frightening than what we do know. As it is full of rooms, corridors and stairs, the unknown is what scares the inhabitants of the castle, rather than a particular location and the fact that the room is located in a very isolated part creates even more fear. For instance, an effective metaphor is used when the young man makes his way through the "long, subterranean passage" to the room. The phrase "germinating darkness" expresses how his irrational fear is growing.

The darkness is a metaphor for illogical fear in this text, and you can clearly see that he is experiencing so much fear terror even before he has entered the room. The room is very gothic, and the darkness in it creates more fear than any thing else. The room is red-walled, and this virtually envelops the visitor in it. "The Whole Town's Sleeping" uses the main setting of the ravine that cuts path through the middle of the town which itself is situated in the middle of Illinois to create a fearsome place. The ravine is depicted as a harsh isolated place in the middle of an isolated town.

It is called a “ dynamo that never stopped running”, which is an effective metaphor as it is described to be a generator of fear it has throughout been associated with “ deepness, moistness and dark” which creates a separate atmosphere when someone passes through it and its mystery is also emphasised with the phrase “ there was a great moving hum among the secret mists”. Atmosphere has been created with the help of some sensual imagery in this text, and a good example of this is when the ravine is referred to be having “ odours of a rank greenhouse”.

This descriptive language builds tension when the ravine is brought up in the text, and its isolation and darkness creates exactly the same effect as the room in the other text, building fear because of the unknown. This location creates more fear during the night as its darkness seems “ huge about her (Lavinia)” when she passes through it. There were other creatures in the depth of this place, “ black crickets and dark green frogs” just emphasise the moistness of the place. Both narratives have a linear structure, which means that they both include events as they are happening and involve no flashbacks or future visions.

They both show how their respective protagonists cause their own unrest and create their own fear. Tension is created right at the start of each text. In “ The Red Room”, the protagonist is daring to stay in the room just to prove his courage and boost his ego. He is very critical of the older people, who eventually turn out the wiser. He describes them as “ grotesque custodians” in which he expresses their old fashioned ways and how disrespectful he is toward them as he places himself well above their standards.

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He also feels “ uncomfortable” near them, just showing how narrow-minded and full of arrogance he is. The “ man with the withered arm”, warns the young man that “ it’s your own choosing”, but he paid no attention to this. The repetition of “(‘ This night of all nights! ’ said the old woman) acts as a negative precursor and build up interest while it suggests the mysterious importance of this particular night. We never find out why that night is important but it gives the reader a ‘ red herring’ question.

Although we are going to find out when we read on; we want to have answers and this continues our interest into - “ why was that night important? ” The brackets have been used to further emphasise its significance, but still the young man ignores this foreboding warning, yet again showing how determined he is to prove them wrong. This conflict comes to a stand still as the young man accepts the challenge and makes his way to the room. In “ The Whole Town’s Sleeping”, the strange and weird beginning begins to immediately have an effect on the reader, building his/he interest.

Straight away a juxtaposition of “ warm summer” and “ night” is used to emphasise its obscurity. The section that follows creates a sense of atmosphere and is extremely strange- “ There were tow moons: a clock moon with four faces in four night directions above the solemn black courthouse, and the real moon that was slowly rising in vanilla whiteness from the dark east. ” The phrase “ solemn black” emphasises the importance of darkness, and the phrase “ vanilla whiteness” is sensual and contrasts with the black.



This may be a way by which Bradbury is comparing two places, the ravine and the town, or even the un-explained or irrational and the rational. The bizarre atmosphere is further described when there is a personification- "fans whispered", which suggests that there is an air of something peculiar. More questions are created in the readers mind when the phrase "In the rococo shade of porches, invisible people sat" suggests that the persons were meant to be there, but for some reason they weren't. Another personification of the "dry lawns and trees" supports my earlier point of how sensual the opening is.

Colours and smells are used to describe Francine, Lavinia's friend, who in the "smell of zinnias and hibiscus" makes her way wearing "snow white", again making this section very vivid. Mystery is at a high when suddenly we are introduced to a temporary used character "Grandma Hanlon", who warns the two maidens that she wouldn't be "out on no night like this". This acts as a precursor as it suggests that they are more vulnerable if outside and in the dark in the night, and then she mentions the main villain of this text, "the Lonely One".

Notice that the "Lonely One" is in capital letters, emphasising the importance of the character, and the fact that this villain's sex hasn't been mentioned adds to the suspense. The old woman also says that she would be in with her gun, this is also typical of the 1950's when women began to move ahead in society and began to establish themselves in the working class. This conversation links with the H G Wells's story, as again the wisdom of the aged is advising the rather ignorant, younger generation and also because in both texts, the characters have a trust in technology.

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In "The Whole Town's Sleeping", the old woman holds a gun to protect her from the Lonely One and in "The Red Room", the young man "held his revolver" showing how he uses the weapon to assure him safety. This symbolises violence, which in turn leads to conflict and tension. A very sensual bit of imagery is used in the beginning, which also acts as a precursor- "The heat pulsed under your dress and along your dress and along your legs with a stealthy sense of invasion." This links to the Lonely One as it's as if he/she is creeping up behind his victim, set to attack.

This imagery is very sensual and sexual, and links to an earlier piece of personification when Lavinia feels the "warm breath of the summer night". This again makes us feel as if someone were very close to her, and again gives clues pointing towards the Lonely One. In "The Red Room", there is a slow and definite progression in tension in this text, as the young man experiences a journey from arrogant self-assurance to irrational terror and then finally to awareness. They play around with the reader's emotions, and manipulate the rise and fall of the tension.

A good example of this progression in this text is from his beginning attitude- "it will take a very tangible ghost to frighten me", to his imagination leading him to insane measure of personifying the shadows -"the shadows I feared and fought against returned, and crept in upon me", to understanding and awareness in the end- "There is neither ghost of earl nor ghost countess in that room, there is no ghost there at all; but worse, far worse-". In "The Whole Town's Sleeping", there is a cinematic rise and fall in tension, which leads up to huge peak of tension at the end.

This high rise at the end is effective because of the manipulation of the reader's expectation that is done by Bradbury. There are sudden moments of tension in the text, which are followed by moments of ease. For example, when Lavinia and Francine discover Eliza Ramsell's body in the ravine, they freeze at the moment. Their hearts stop, and they feel extremely scared. Evidence for this sudden terror that took them over is how chilly they both feel. This is followed by a light moment when they are teased by the children about the murder for a joke.

In "The Red Room", Wells uses many precursors, but they all lead towards the event in which the young man would face the legendary spirit. But the ending goes against this myth and is to some extent unexpected, as the young man's imagination was playing with him, and he fell into his own trap of ignorance, leading to mental and physical damage. When he is in the room, he begins to visualise the shadows as being alive- "The shadow in the alcove at the end in particular had that undefinable quality of a presence, that odd suggestion of a lurking, living thing, that comes so easily in silence and solitude. "

Again, this shows us how darkness is far more frightening than being able to see and knowing what is there. Tension is built by how the young man expresses his feelings. To conquer his fear of the unknown the man places a candle in an alcove in the corner of the room- "At last, to reassure myself, I walked with a candle into it, and satisfied myself that there was nothing tangible there. I stood that candle upon the floor of the alcove, and left it in that position. " Here he is referring to the opening line about having to find a

ghost that can be seen and is touchable. Then the first candle goes out, casting a black shadow on the wall.

The second candle goes out and the tension in the story is boosted as there is uncertainty about why the candle went out. This does provide evidence as to there may have been a ghost present in that room. Although the man does not feel any breeze, he claims that it was a draft that blew it out. He tries to reassure himself and rationalise the situation by lying to himself although he has a deeper feeling inside him that he may not be alone. He has to dismiss this from his mind otherwise he would become the victim of his own fears and get eaten away by his own imagination.

As he goes over to re-light the candle, it goes out, then another and another. Then one is extinguished in front of him while he is looking at it. " Shadows seemed to take another step towards me" Light symbolizes truth. Without light, there is no truth. If the light goes out he has no way of finding out what is in the red room and therefore can't assure himself that he was right. The darkness creates the tension and fear, and when it is dark all your senses are in operation. In light, we can see and therefore rationalise everything but when it is dark we cannot see and therefore tension and fear is everywhere.

When the man says that the shadows take another step towards him, he is saying that the dark, or the ghost, is closing in on him and as it does, he is been drawn away from the truth. Panic comes as the room plunges into shadows and darkness, with him racing around the place trying to keep up with the candles as they go out. Approaching the epiphany, the tension is further highlighted, as the sentences become shorter. Clumsily he knocks his

thigh against the table. His downfall begins. From here on he loses control. It is as if he is in sinking sand, and the rope stopping him from sinking completely snaps.

He loses his quest for the truth as he tries to light the fire with the last candle. He runs into something and knocks himself out. For me this is the high-tension point of the text, as he totally loses control over himself, both physically, as he is unconscious, and mentally, as he imagines an evil power taking over him. Then there is a gap of time, after which we see the young man being treated by the old people because of the blows he had received on the previous night. He is much more philosophical and understanding after the lesson he learnt in the room, and describes the ghost as mankind's worst enemy-Fear.

This just shows how he has realised his arrogance, and has turned into a much more aware person, no more narrow-minded or critical of the old people. The wisdom of the aged is also expressed when the old man gives us his view and describes the ghost in the room as "black Fear". The use of the colour black represents darkness and evil, and the fact that "fear" is in capitals, shows us the importance of this feeling and how much an effect it can have on humans. In "The Whole Town's Sleeping", the ending seems quite inevitable when she and her friends Francine and Helen are at the druggist store before a movie, which is called "Welcome Danger".

This is ironic, as it links to Lavinia's crass behaviour as it seems as if she is inviting danger onto herself by ignoring warnings and not taking advice. The druggist is called up by a young mysterious man, who asks about Lavinia,

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and the druggist in turn replies to his questions, and he even gives away the maiden's address. On return he says, " Sorry, guess I didn't think", which creates a sense of inevitability. His awareness of the danger that Lavinia is facing is expressed when he doesn't charge them for the peppermints they purchased, and Helen reacts with " You're next! "

But then the reader questions Lavinia's reaction, and I think she highlights her flippancy when she says " If I'm the next victim, let me be the next victim", and she seems very overconfident when she says " You've got to feel like murdering people you know. " She definitely seems very courageous in front of her friends, and seems fearless and thinks very positively and optimistically. Yet, the reader does feel that she is irresponsible about herself, maybe because of the revolution occurring in society in which women were changing their gender roles from being just domestic people.

We feel as if she is asking for trouble. But when on herself, we see a totally different Lavinia Nebbs, a woman with an absolutely dissimilar form of her. On her way back, she had to walk through the ravine, and she took upon this challenge despite offers from her friends to stay with them. She thinks positively, and tries to rationalise the time it will take her to get across when she says, " Nothing can happen in just one hundred and eighty seconds. " She began speaking to herself, and nervously recited to her steps the number of steps she had passed.

There is a repetition of " deep" and " black" in reference to the ravine, yet again emphasising the darkness inside it. The phrase, " the world was gone, the world of safe people in bed. ", emphasises on her vulnerability s now she

was in a danger zone. She then recalls a story, in which she imagines the Lonely One in her house, and then she shrieks out loudly. At this point there is a manipulation of syntax by Bradbury, as he uses very short and jumpy sentences such as “ She stopped, she froze, she clung to the wooden banister. Her heart exploded in her. ” Here you can see the proliferation of commas and the short sentence at the end.

This follows by a one-lined paragraph, which highlights the state of fear she is in - “ Her heartbeats faded. ” Then she begins to regret her decision to walk through the ravine lone, when she says- “ Oh I am a fool. ” Then there is a series of one-lined paragraphs, in which he imagines that she is being stalked, and when she says “ Every time I take a step, they take one. “, we can see how this strong woman is being eaten away by her big fears and her running imagination. There is a repetition of “ faster” that follows, which describes her movements down the steps.

Then we get a glimpse of some more cinematic material in the text in the section- “ She heard music. In a mad way, a silly way, she heard the huge surge of music that pounded at her”. This links to when in films, the background music plays a part in creating an atmosphere for the viewers, just like over here the music is used to express her insanity and how she is feeling. She then begins to plead the God for her safety and to insure that she reaches home safely, as she equates her house with safety and the ravine with danger. There is a proliferation of exclamation marks in this section, and a repetition of “ God” as she flees to her house.

Then her challenge to open her house door amongst her fear and nervousness is highlighted by another series of very short, one-sentenced paragraphs that highlights her desperation. Instead of normally closing the door, she “ Slams” it and immediately locks it “ tight”. There is lots of repetition here; the tension is at its peak. She enters her house, and she expresses her feelings of safety and relief when she repeats the word “ safe” several times in a paragraph. Tension reduces for this moment, as we see her feeling secure and assured that home is where you are most safe.

But when she says to herself, “ Home’s the really good warm safe place, the only place to be”, it turns out to be ironic, as she gets proven wrong in the open-ended ending of this text when she discovers that “ Behind her, in the black living-room, someone cleared his throat. ” In my view, “ The Whole Town’s Sleeping” had a more tense and climactic ending, because of the shock that the reader receives when Lavinia’s belief of equating home with safety goes against her. The tension levels were high on her way home, but when entering the safety zone, she calmed down because she was certain that “ this is the place to be.

But then the tension levels soar to its peak, as she discovers that she is not alone, and an unexpected and certainly unwanted guest was with her. The text also ends with an ellipsis, which adds to the reader's interest as it leaves the ending abrupt and enables the reader to create his/her own ending. But, “ The Red Room” managed to create a much tenser atmosphere with some very effective adjectives and good manipulation of syntax used by Wells. For instance, on his way to the room- “ The long, draughty, subterranean



passage was chilly and dusty, and my candle flared and made the shadows cower and quiver.

The passage above is rich with adjectives and we feel the isolation that the young man is facing and we experience the ancient castle and its remoteness. He personifies the shadows, just to show that the amount of fear in the room is so high, that even the shadows are scared. A very effective extract can be spotted when the young man is in the room- " my candle was a little tongue of light in its vastness, that failed to pierce the opposition end of the room, and left an ocean of mystery and suggestion beyond its island of light.

The imagery in this extract suggests his increasing feelings of insecurity and vulnerability and his sense of danger. The effective juxtaposition of diction " little" with the " vastness" of the room and the darkness creates a sense of his incompetence. He feels out of his depth, which is a marked contrast to his earlier cynical and ignorant attitude. Darkness has been used as a metaphor for irrational fear throughout this text, and even in this phrase, you can see that the " mystery" is caused by the darkness itself.

He is feeling isolated and abandoned in his little lighted area, which is equivalent to an island in between a vast ocean. He feels the same way as a shipwrecked person, who would be petrified and extremely anxious to know what lies around him. Almost the whole room is hidden under a blanket of darkness, and he fears the unknown part of it. " The Red Room" and " The Whole Town's Sleeping" were two stories in which two individuals, both

preachers of their time, experienced a journey from ignorance, overconfident and flippant attitudes, to awareness and understanding.

They both ask for trouble, but when facing it, they break down into totally different people, who are nervous, panicky, frightened, and eventually their imagination leads them to becoming crazy. The morals of both of these texts are that one should always take advice and not be so narrow-minded, and that nothing actually exists if one doesn't believe it exists. In H G Wells's text, the young man personifies fear with the red room. He has had a fight with his fear and in the end his fear wins. For me, the red room symbolizes one's own fear. Nothing is actually in the room except what one believes is there.