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Sara Teasdale’s “There Will Come Soft Rains”: How a Lyric Poet Inspired a Science Fiction Story

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Abstract

Sara Teasdale is an American lyric poet who produced collections of poetry in romance, melancholy and unrequited love. However, she left a mark in World War II poetry. Her famous poem “There Will Come Soft Rains” is her most famous work in that genre. It is popular to this day because of Ray Bradbury, the famous science fiction writer. It inspired a short story of his, making Sara Teasdale’s poem the groundwork of a totally different genre. This paper will explore the poem, the short story and how both are linked together through themes of war, destruction and the power of nature.

Keywords: Sara Teasdale; Lyric Poetry; Nature; War Poetry; Ray Bradbury; Science Fiction; Nature versus Mankind.



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1. Introduction

Across the American poetry scene, there is an overlooked and underrated American poetess famous for her lyrical poetry and whose poems inspired musical pieces. Her name is Sara Teasdale. Most of her poems were poems about love, melancholy, and romance. How did such a lyric poet inspire science fiction with a single poem? Sara Teasdale's poem "There Will Come Soft Rains" inspired Ray Bradbury's short story of the same name through themes of nature versus mankind, nature versus technology and anti-war sentiments.

Lyric poetry is a form of poetry that invokes musicality. It is defined as "a verse or poem that is, or supposedly is, susceptible of being sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument (in ancient times, usually a lyre) or that expresses intense personal emotion in a manner suggestive of a song" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998). A poem in this genre expresses the poet's powerful feelings and emotions of the poet and invokes those of the readers.

2. Sara Teasdale

Sara Teasdale (1884-1933) was one of the lyric poets of the modernist age. Her poetry is musical. She mostly wrote poems about love, melancholy, unrequited love, and sadness, including "This Kiss" and "Debt." Her life may have contributed to this style. Born in St. Louis, MI, she did not attend school until the age of nine due to mysterious health problems. Throughout her adult life, she had many suitors. Eventually, she accepted the offer of marriage from Ernst Filsinger. She and her husband moved to New York in 1916, but the marriage did not last. They divorced in 1929, at her request since her husband was constantly traveling. Since the divorce, she had health problems that continued to plague her for the rest of her life.



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Nonetheless, she continued her poetic career. However, it is believed that her health struggles drove her to commit suicide in 1933. She was 48 years old.

The Columbia Poetry Prize was awarded to Teasdale before it was renamed the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, making her the first recipient of this award. Her collection *Love Song* won her that prize in 1918. It also won her the Poetry Society of America Prize in the same year. However, she was somewhat overlooked and was not revisited nor recognized until 1994, when she was inducted into the St. Louis Walk of Fame. To this day, she is considered a very important part of the history of American poetry. She is noted for her distinguished style, and her poetry is characterized by simplicity, accessibility, and musicality. It is simple, yet intense. It is short, yet emotionally powerful. The themes of her poems range between romance, the beauty of nature, unrequited love, melancholy, and anti-war sentiments. She wrote anti-war poems expressing her stance on the issue. Some explicitly expressed her distaste, while others, forcefully, were implicit. Her poem “There Will Come Soft Rains” is her most famous anti-war poem, which had a great impact on the poetry scene but, most importantly, on the genre of science fiction.

“There Will Come Soft Rains” was published in 1918, during World War I (WWI) and the Spanish flu. During this time, the United States of America enacted the Sedition Act of 1918, which states the following:

Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully utter, print, write or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States or the Constitution of the United States, or the military or naval forces of the United States, or the flag of the United States, or the uniform of the Army or Navy of the United States into contempt, scorn, contumely, or disrepute...shall be punished by



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a fine of not more than \$10,000 or the imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both. (*The Sedition Act of 1918 (1918) | the American Yawp Reader, n.d.*)

This act was not repealed until 1920, and that was when Teasdale added the subtitle “War Time.” The poem was first published in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*. It was later included in her 1920 poetry collection *Flame and Shadow* with the addition of the aforementioned subtitle. The poem addresses how the beauty, grandiosity, and power of nature will prevail forever over mankind and its destructive ways. The themes of nature, war, and humanity dominate the poem. It indirectly describes how war and destruction will not change or erase the peacefulness of nature. It will still be there, thriving, even after humans destroy each other.

3. There Will Come Soft Rains

The poem starts with the same line as the title: “There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground, / And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;” (Teasdale, 1918, lines 1-2). The opening paints a peaceful scenery. The implied sound of soft rain and the smell of the soil causes a strong sensory effect on the reader, bringing serenity. The sound of the “swallows” flying around with their song brings music to the reader’s ears. The scenery continues in the second stanza: “And frogs in the pools singing at night, / And wild plum trees in tremulous white;” (lines 3-4). Teasdale describes how the frogs’ croaking is like singing in the night. The plum trees are white with blossom. Then comes the stanza “Robins will wear their feathery fire / Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;” (lines 5-6), which shifts the scenery a little. The use of robins showcases the utmost beauty of nature. Robins are beautiful birds because they have the color of “fire.” Their red color contrasts starkly with the greenery. Teasdale’s use of the word “fire” is the first connotation of war. Then, she immediately describes what these beautiful birds are doing. They are perched on a “low fence-wire.” This is a reference to the trenches in the war



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and the barbed wires that were used. Again, this is a nod to nature's power and position. It is above man's destruction and cannot be reached. In the next stanza, "And not one will know of the war, not one / Will care at last when it is done" (lines 7-8), Teasdale finally uses the word "war." She emphasizes that nature will not recognize its existence or destruction. She again stresses how "not one" of nature's creatures will care about the duration of the war or the conclusion of it. Teasdale provides two examples in the following stanza: "Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree / If mankind perished utterly;" (lines 9-10). Trees and birds are two significant examples of nature. She is giving a measure of the scope of nature. Every creature on the ground or in the sky would be indifferent to the demise of human beings in this war. The concluding stanza "And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn, / Would scarcely know that we were gone" (lines 11-12) uses a personified spring. Spring would wake up at the dawn of the day and would not be concerned with the fact that humans have perished. Teasdale uses the season of spring to symbolize rebirth or a new beginning—a new life. This is to further cement her conviction that nature will prevail. It will still be here, even amongst the ongoing destruction that mankind inflicted on it and on each other.

To this day, this poem is the most popular out of Teasdale's poems, mainly because of the famous science fiction short story it inspired. Ray Bradbury was impacted by this poem. The genre of science fiction guarantees its timelessness.

4. Science Fiction

Science fiction is defined as a "form of fiction that deals principally with the impact of actual or imagined science upon society or individuals" (Sterling, 2023). Marshall B. Tynm (1985) gave an extensive description of this genre in his article "Science Fiction: A Brief History and Review of Criticism":



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Science fiction is a literature which prepares us to accept change, to view change as both natural and inevitable. And since change is fast becoming one of the few constants in our society, the attractiveness of this genre is both understandable and encouraging. Add the popular appeal that science fiction has as pure entertainment, and it becomes clear why this literature is attracting vast numbers of readers of all ages and from all stations of life. (Tymn, 1985, p. 41)

The sci-fi genre dates all the way back to ancient times. Tymn (1985) states that science fiction “has its beginnings at least as early as the 2nd century with a Greek named Lucian who satirized his own society through the device of an imaginary moon voyage” (p. 41). This genre became known as early as the 18th century. It was not until the beginning of the Industrial Revolution “with its vision of a future altered by technology, that science fiction could exist as a viable literary form.” (Tymn, 1985, p. 42). An example of an early science fiction work is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). Many consider Shelley to be one of the genre’s pioneers. Tymn (1985) explains that later in the 19th century, the scene was different, since people were fascinated with science and progress and were very optimistic (p. 42). Jules Verne and H. G. Wells dominated that scene. However, it was during Wells’ active years that the genre “began to take form and direction, becoming more a medium of ideas than a variety of adventure” (Tymn, 1985, p. 43). His works in this field include the classics *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898).

However, there is a difference between science fiction pre-war and post-World War II. Tymn (1985) explains that “While pre-war science fiction had concentrated on the technical wonders suggested by scientific advances, writers in the post-World War II period began to examine the human consequences of these advances and the fear that we might become the victims of our own creations” (p. 46). It is evident that World War II became a turning point for



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literary work in general and science fiction in particular. Moreover, it was during the 1950s, that the genre flourished. It experienced a “new direction of growth as the social sciences became important subjects for writers in the 1950s and 1960s. The dystopian future became a staple plot of 1950s pulp science fiction” (Tymn, 1985, p. 46). Ray Bradbury was one of this genre’s leading authors who cemented his position during this decade and up to this day and age. In his article “Symbolic Settings in Science Fiction: H. G. Wells, Ray Bradbury, and Harlan Ellison,” Joe Patrouch (1988) said that Bradbury and Wells “used SF as a way of discussing, criticizing, allowing us to see more clearly the societies and times in which each wrote” (p. 41).

5. Ray Bradbury

Ray Bradbury (1920-2012) was an American science fiction writer. He was also a screenwriter. He became popular in the science fiction genre with his classic *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Bradbury became fascinated with fantasy and magic after a memorable visit to a carnival when he was 12 years old. He encountered a magician called Mr. Electrico, who intrigued him and told him that he was the reincarnation of a WWI friend of his. Of this special moment in his life, Bradbury said in an interview:

I felt changed. He gave me importance, immortality, a mystical gift. My life was turned around completely. It makes me cold all over to think about it, but I went home and within days I started to write. I’ve never stopped...When he came to me, he touched me on the brow, and on the nose, and on the chin, and he said to me, in a whisper, ‘Live forever.’ And I decided to. (*The Art of Fiction No. 203, 2010*)

Although Bradbury is most famous for being a sci-fi writer, he did venture into other genres. According to the American Writers Museum (2021), he wrote literary fiction, crime stories, fantasy, essays, screenplays and poetry and many more. Interestingly, Bradbury did not consider



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science to be integral to his fiction. He was “not very interested in how science would advance to meet the expectations of the stories he set in the future. He was more concerned with how humans reacted to certain situations, and used science fiction as a way to comment on problems of the time” (American Writers Museum, 2021).

6. The Science Fiction Story

In 1950, Bradbury published a short story inspired by Sara Teasdale’s poem above. He gave it the same title. The story is about an abandoned technologically advanced house. It is set in the aftermath of a nuclear war. No human beings are around, for they perished. The house has a voice that reverberates through the walls. There are automated machines and smart appliances. Bradbury uses the automated voice to set the time and place. In the first few lines, Bradbury writes, “‘Today is August 4, 2026,’ said a second voice from the kitchen ceiling, ‘in the city of Allendale, California’” (Bradbury, 1950, p.1). This promptly sets the tone for the reader. It indicates to the reader that what is about to come would be in the future. Things may be futuristic or unheard of for the reader during the 50s and for readers today. The author then demonstrates that there is no one inside or around the house at all. The voice is “repeating and repeating its sounds into the emptiness” (p. 1). Bradbury showcases how technology was advanced at the time of this story. For example, there are “electric eyes,” “tiny robot mice,” “mechanical rain,” “electrical wind,” and “blind robot faces” with “faucet mouths”. The house keeps calling for the residents, but there is silence: “no doors slammed, no carpets took the soft tread of rubber heels” (p. 1). However, it keeps doing what it does every day, from chores to cooking and cleaning. The aftermath of this nuclear or radioactive war is further detailed with what happened to humanity.



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The first indication of the whereabouts of the house owners is mentioned through a vivid description:

The entire west face of the house was black, save for five places. Here the silhouette in paint of a man mowing a lawn. Here, as in a photograph, a woman bent to pick flowers. Still farther over, their images burned on wood in one titanic instant, a small boy, hands flung into the air; higher up, the image of a thrown ball, and opposite him a girl, hands raised to catch a ball which never came down. (Bradbury, 1950, p. 2)

Bradbury paints a macabre picture of the demise of that family. He uses the aspects of “silhouette” to demonstrate a fleeting presence. Yet, he juxtaposes it with the use of “photograph” and “images burned on wood,” which cements the family’s prior existence. That wall with their silhouettes is like a grave or a tombstone for the family. The picture, or the circumstances of how they were during the catastrophe, seems to be that of a happy family. It was a family that met their unfortunate death without warning. Their dog is the only creature who makes an appearance upon visiting the house. Bradbury uses the dog to demonstrate the ending of creatures. It shows up, starving. It runs upstairs, “hysterically yelping to each door,” upon realizing that the house is empty. It finally succumbs to its own death, having “spun in a frenzy, and died.”

Nature makes its first appearance, on the first page, with Bradbury describing that it “was raining outside.” Rain can symbolize calmness, purity, or even rebirth. Yet, in this instance, it can signify dark or ominous times. This is proven when the author writes later that the “sun came out from behind the rain.” Towards the end, Bradbury writes, “Dawn showed faintly in the east,” casting light and brightness on a house standing “alone in a city of rubble and ashes.” The type of war is indicated by the author writing, “At night the ruined city gave off a radioactive glow.”



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This confirms to the reader that it was a nuclear war. Then, the house is ablaze after a strong wind causes a tree to fall on the house, crashing through the kitchen and leading to a shattered bottle of a cleaning solvent over the stove. The fire inevitably engulfs the house. The robots are unable to extinguish the fire, failing in return to save the house. Bradbury personifies elements of nature when he writes, “But the fire was clever.” In this way, Bradbury emphasizes how nature is far more intelligent than what mankind can create. During the chaos, the voice “with sublime disregard for the situation, read poetry aloud in the fiery study,” Teasdale’s poem ringing through the house. At the end of the ordeal, nature triumphs over technology by having dawn come up faintly. It is the sign of a new day with only one wall of the house left standing.

Conclusion:

Strong common themes are apparent in the two works: nature versus mankind, nature versus technology, and anti-war sentiments. In both literary works, nature is seen as a formidable force that will withstand the test of time. Nothing will stand in the way of nature: not wars, not mankind, nor technological advances brought on by mankind. Teasdale emphasizes how war can start and stop, but nature will not. Bradbury emphasizes that, however far humans reach in technology or however long they live, nature will prevail. Even though the authors used different genres, they both shared the same outlook—that when it comes to nature versus mankind, nature will triumph in the end.



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