

SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY LITERARY ANALYSIS WITH PRIMARY SOURCE—MLA



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Course/Date—
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Dr. Charles Wolfe

English 1020

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“They knew how to live with nature and get along with nature”:

The Martian Secret to a Successful Civilization

Title—centered

Attention-getter
opens the essay

Twentieth-century Americans witnessed stunning scientific discoveries, such as the atomic bomb and the space age, frightening political maneuvering stemming from America’s sense of superiority and the Cold War, and continued social strife in racial tension and religious intolerance. These scientific, political, and social phenomena clearly influenced Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*. The development of the V-2 weapon, capable of reaching heights of 100 miles, during World War II marked the beginning of the space age. After the war ended, rocket-powered weapons development led naturally to space exploration programs (“History”). In addition, the Cold War arose from the rivalry and weapons buildup between the United States with its Western allies and the Soviet Union with its communist supporters (Snead). In *The Martian Chronicles*, Bradbury takes rocket technology and space exploration, combines them with the power struggle between the atomic-weapon-wielding superpowers, and imagines potential consequences played out in both the Earth and Martian arenas. Although the novel treats a variety of social and political ills, often bizarrely juxtaposed, a discernible story arc emerges regarding the relationship between successful civilizations, living in harmony with the environment, and careful management of technology.

Thesis statement

Marginal annotations indicate

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content

In *The Martian Chronicles*, Bradbury moves from the Martians' harmonious coexistence with nature and technology through mankind's destructive and self-destructive disregard for such harmony to the final realization that humans must adopt the Martian philosophy in order to survive and succeed as a civilization.

Author provides a blueprint to what will be discussed throughout the paper. Notice that she presents these ideas in the order they will be presented later in the paper.

Topic sentence—tells the reader that this section of the paper will be focused on this main idea.

The standard for living in harmony with nature and science is established in the second chapter, "Ylla," in which the lifestyle of a typical Martian couple is described. The description of the house evokes a serene, peaceful environment of fruit-bearing walls and creek-inlaid floors.

Everything about the house has been designed to complement the Martian climate. For example, being farther from the Sun than Earth, the Martians have found a way to get as much sunlight as possible: The house "turned and followed the sun, flower-like" throughout the day, but to withstand the cold of night, it "clos[ed] itself in, like a giant flower, with the passing of light" (Bradbury 2, 5). Because the climate is also mostly dry, the Martians have invented ingenious ways to harness their limited water supply to provide necessary humidity: Within the home, a "gentle rain sprang from the fluted pillar tops, cooling the scorched air, falling gently on [Ylla]. On hot days it was like walking in a creek. The floors of the house glittered with cool streams" (Bradbury 2-3). The Martians have remained in control of their technology, using their impressive technological advances to enhance their harmonious relationship with nature. They sleep on clouds of chemicals that support and conform to their bodies overnight and

Quotation as evidence. Note how the quotation marks and parenthetical are constructed.

Observe how the author has used multiple quotations from the novel to support her analysis.

gently lower them down to the floor in the morning. Books are fashioned from durable metal, eliminating the need for wasteful, polluting paper production. One of Mr. K's books sings of "ancient men [who] had carried clouds of metal insects and electric spiders into battle" (Bradbury 2), which reveals that at one time, Martian history had resembled that of war-prone Earth. However, at some point, Martians took control of their destiny, and the civilization as a whole endured successfully as indicated by the fact that the Ks' ancestors had lived in that same house before them for the past ten centuries.

Unlike their Martian counterparts, few Earth men appreciate the advantages of a peaceful, natural existence as illustrated in chapter seven, "—And the Moon Be Still as Bright." After three failed missions before them, the fourth expedition lands on Mars only to find a dead planet. The crew's cavalier attitude clearly shows the typical Earthman's, or more specifically, the typical American's, insensitivity to the loss of life or culture as long as their goal is achieved. They revel in their success despite the discovery that a nearby Martian city's population was decimated as recently as a week ago. Crewmember Biggs especially lacks respect for Mars or its lost civilization: he pollutes a canal by throwing wine bottles into it and later vomits the effects of that wine all over the beautiful ancient tile in the Martian city the team investigates. Of the sixteen surviving crewmembers, only Spender and Captain Wilder understand the reverence that Mars deserves.

The author uses a transitional sentence at the end of one paragraph to lead to the topic sentence in the next.

Spender, an archaeologist, is keenly interested in learning as much as possible about the Martians and their culture. His mind reels at the news that the Martians were senselessly destroyed by chicken pox:

Chicken pox, God, chicken pox, think of it! A race builds itself for a million years, refines itself, erects cities like those out there, does everything it can to give itself respect and beauty and then it dies. . . . [I]t has to be chicken pox, a child's disease, a disease that doesn't even kill *children* on Earth! It's not right and it's not fair. . . . It doesn't fit the architecture; it doesn't fit this entire world! (Bradbury 51)

Having rejected the mission, Spender wanders off to study the Martian artifacts on his own and begins to feel a connection with them. Through his research, he discovers the key to the Martians' way of life and the point at which the Mars and Earth philosophies diverge:

They knew how to live with nature and get along with nature. . . . Man had become too much man and not enough animal on Mars too. And the men of Mars realized that in order to survive they would have to forgo asking that one question any longer: *Why live?* Life was its own answer. Life was the propagation of more life and the living of as good a life as possible. . . . They quit trying too hard to destroy everything, to humble everything. They blended religion and art and science because, at base, science is

Long quotation used as evidence. Note how the author has introduced the quote with her own words and how she followed the MLA requirements for a long quotation.

no more than an investigation of a miracle we can never explain, and art is an interpretation of that miracle. They never let science crush the aesthetic and the beautiful.

(Bradbury 66-67)

Spender recognizes the value of living in harmony with nature and science. He anticipates and loathes the effect colonists from Earth will have on Mars, knowing that they will destroy Mars just as they have been destroying and continue to destroy Earth.

Even though Capt. Wilder understands Spender's argument, he feels more responsibility to the mission and adopts a more optimistic attitude about Earth's relationship with Mars. He openly hopes that Earth will learn from Mars and use the knowledge to improve its civilization:

"[O]ne day Earth will be as Mars is today. This will sober us. It's an object lesson in civilizations. We'll learn from Mars" (Bradbury 55). His doubt and inner struggle become apparent, however, during his pursuit of Spender through the Martian wilderness. During their temporary truce-protected discussion, Spender tries to sway Wilder to his point of view, but Wilder keeps his focus on the mission. Nevertheless, he swears to do all he can to provide future archaeologists with adequate opportunity to investigate thoroughly the Martian ruins in order to preserve the culture as much as possible. Apparently, he does try to keep his promise because in chapter 24, it is revealed that Wilder had been shipped off to Saturn,

The author consistently uses her own words before she incorporates quotations as supporting evidence.

Neptune, and Pluto for the twenty years following the fourth expedition to prevent his interference in the colonization program on Mars.

Following the success of the fourth expedition, colonization of Mars begins in earnest, confirming the Earthmen's insistence on molding the environment to suit them instead of learning to adapt to their surroundings. In chapter nine, "The Green Morning," colonist Benjamin Driscoll, having fainted upon arrival because of the thin air, vows to fight "a private horticultural war with Mars" (Bradbury 75) and plants thousands of tree seeds and sprouts. By doing so, he effectively changes the climate of Mars, adding rich oxygen to the atmosphere. The next chapter, "The Locusts," finds 90,000 colonists "beat[ing] the strange world into a shape that was familiar to the eye, . . . bludgeon[ing] away all the strangeness" (Bradbury 78). The transformation of Mars to adhere to Earth standards is evident in chapter 13, "Interim," in which Tenth City, built of imported Oregon pine and California redwood, so accurately resembles a replica of an Iowa town that one might believe "a whirlwind twister of Oz-like proportions had carried the entire town off to Mars to set it down without a bump" (Bradbury 88). Spender's prophecy that "We'll rip [Mars] up, rip the skin off, and change it to fit ourselves" (Bradbury 54) has been fulfilled; Earthmen have changed the face of Mars.

The physical landscape is not the only item on the Earthmen's agenda; soon, their ideology takes over as well, further emphasizing their

Note how the author does not just give a summary of the story; she uses her descriptions of the story to support the topic sentence of the paragraph, which also ultimately supports the thesis statement of the essay.

disharmony with their new surroundings. They begin with the basics—renaming towns with familiar Earth names:

The old Martian names were names of water and air and hills. They were the names of snows that emptied south in stone canals to fill the empty seas. . . . And the rockets struck at the names like hammers, breaking away the marble into shale, shattering the crockery milestones that named the old towns, in the rubble of which great pylons were plunged with new names . . . , all the mechanical names and the metal names from Earth. (Bradbury 102-03)

This renaming of places had also been predicted by Spender: “[W]e’ll give them new names, but the old names are there, somewhere in time, and the mountains were shaped and seen under those names. The names we’ll give to the canals and mountains and cities will fall like so much water on the back of a mallard” (Bradbury 54). After the renaming is accomplished and Mars becomes comfortably familiar, officials arrive to impose the same laws and regulations that govern Earth’s society. The Earthmen take complete control of Mars despite the existence of real Martians as confirmed by sporadic sightings of a few who have survived the Disease (chicken pox epidemic). In this way, amid the frenzy of colonization, the Martian culture is eradicated by the settlers from Earth.

The Earthmen’s vision dominates Mars; however, an occasional settler understands the uniqueness of Mars and feels a natural harmony

Look carefully at how the author sets up the long quotation and then the shorter one. Longer quotations do not have quotation marks and end with a period followed by the citation information. Short quotations end with the citation information and then a period.

with it. Pop, the gas station owner in chapter eleven, “The Night Meeting,” embraces his strange new home:

We’ve got to forget Earth and how things were. We’ve got to look at what we’re in here, and how *different* it is. I get a hell of a lot of fun out of just the weather here. It’s *Martian* weather. Hot as hell daytimes, cold as hell nights. I get a big kick out of the different flowers and different rain. . . . I’m just experiencing. If you can’t take Mars for what she is, you might as well go back to Earth. Everything’s crazy up here, the soil, the air, the canals, the natives . . . Well, that’s Mars. Enjoy it. Don’t ask it to be nothing else but what it is. (Bradbury 79)

Pop’s acceptance of Mars is so rare that it is not equaled again until the end of the book. Before then, however, the colonists witness the distant explosions and depart en masse for Earth, leaving a few individuals stranded. Genevieve Selsor, introduced in chapter 23 (“The Silent Towns”), willfully chooses to stay behind. She finds solace in her isolation on deserted Mars—she can eat whatever and whenever she wants without facing society’s criticism for being overweight. Eventually, Genevieve meets Walter Gripp, who was left behind unintentionally. Although he is desperately lonely, Walter cannot accept Genevieve—the last woman on Mars—as a companion and opts instead for a life of isolation. By the time Capt. Wilder returns in chapter 24 (“The Long Years”), Walter has

become so acclimated to Mars that he refuses passage back to Earth. Capt. Wilder encounters another forgotten colonist, former crewmember Hathaway from the fourth expedition. Even though Hathaway cannot bear the loneliness of his existence and creates a robotic family to keep him company, he chooses to live in the Martian wilderness instead of in the town built by the Earthlings. This handful of individuals represents the very small minority of people who accept Mars for what it is.

Finally, one family rejects Earth values permanently and embraces the Martian way of life unequivocally. They have seen the destruction caused by letting technology get out of control in the form of atomic war on Earth: The desolation following the Great War is depicted in Chapter 25, “There Will Come Soft Rains,” which coincides with the family’s emigration. This family determines to shed all vestiges of Earth—its technology, laws, and ideals—and start a new and improved civilization on Mars. They choose an authentic ancient Martian city in which to dwell and start their new lives. The father symbolically burns his important papers from Earth (government documents, religious doctrines, financial records, war propaganda, and world map) as he explains to his young sons what went wrong with Earth:

I’m burning a way of life. . . . Life on Earth never settled down to doing anything very good. Science ran too far ahead of us too quickly, and the people got lost in a mechanical wilderness, like children making over pretty

The author continues to follow the blueprint she gave at the end of the introductory paragraph.

things, gadgets, helicopters, rockets; emphasizing the wrong items, emphasizing machines instead of how to run the machines. Wars got bigger and bigger and finally killed Earth.

. . . [T]hat way of life proved itself wrong and strangled itself with its own hands. (Bradbury 179-80)

Their capitulation to the Martian way of life is complete when the children ask their father when they will see real Martians, and he poignantly shows them their own reflections in the canal.

In *The Martian Chronicles*, Ray Bradbury explores the future of mankind if it were to follow its current course of space exploration, the development of atomic weapons, and international power struggles. His fictional hypothesis emphasizes the destructive tendencies of humans and warns them of the disastrous outcome that is likely to occur. He does offer a glimmer of hope, however, suggesting that by learning to live in harmony with the environment, effectively blending nature and science, mankind may yet save itself.

Note how the author ends her essay with both a short summary and her own prediction based on Bradbury's work.

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2. Do not forget to alphabetize the list of sources.
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