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Her Body Sparks with More Than Electricity: A Battle of Wits Between Whitman and Bradbury

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Her Body Sparks with More Than Electricity: A Battle of Wits Between Whitman and Bradbury

Whitman argues in his piece, "I Sing the Body Electric," that the living, breathing physical form of a human remains tied to one's soul, and it is the combination of body and soul that makes a person truly remarkable. In his story, "I Sing the Body Electric," Bradbury invites his reader to reconsider the importance of a body to a person's soul. Both Whitman and Bradbury challenge the idea of connection between physicality and spirituality and relate it to what makes humans feel and love.

Whitman explores the connection between the body and soul. He remarks the body is perfect because of its expression: "That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect. / [...] but the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face, / It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists" (Whitman 1.2.2). The body can articulate and represent the soul. A reflection of the soul is found on the body, and Whitman tells his reader how magnificent it proves to have a connection between the two.

Connection between people makes the body essential: bodies serve as vessels for human contact. Whitman shows that a physical tie between people, whether it be casual touch, hugging or sex, fills the soul: "There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well, / All things please the soul, but these please the soul well" (4.2.1-2). Breaking the bubble of isolation between the senses of two different people affects the psyche in a way that purely verbal contact cannot.

Whitman treats women as reflections of nature and gives them credit for the creation of all new bodies and souls. As Whitman says, nature resembles the ethereal beauty of a woman's being, and therefore all humans' beauty: "As I see my soul reflected in Nature, / As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty, / See the bent head and arms folded over the breast, the Female I see" (5.5.20-22). A woman's body has not just the essential ability to reproduce and carry a child, but proves beautiful in its form, showcasing Whitman's appreciation for more than function. The poet writes: "It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction, / I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than a helpless vapor, all falls aside but myself and it [...]" (1.5.3-4). The poet does not condemn women for not being men, but praises them for their ability to hold life and their alluring form.

The male form holds no less amazement for Whitman, but the poet appreciates their differences. Whitman remarks: "The male is not less the soul nor more, he too is in his place, / He too is all qualities, he is action and power, / The flush of the known universe is in him [...]" (6.1.1-3). Whitman praises men for the power they hold and resemble. Later, he contemplates the beauty found in similarities between all people: "Have you ever loved the body of a woman? / Have you ever loved the body of a man? / Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?" (8.2.4-6) Gender and race do not prove detrimental to Whitman's adoration of the human race. The contrast between men and women to Whitman is evident, but the way that they love, and the beauty in their souls remains equal.

Bradbury challenges Whitman's connection between physical body and soul by creating a character who seems to be human. The author immediately plays with the idea of birth: "We

knew we had, in a way, slapped her alive. She was born, she was *born!*” (Bradbury 166) Robot Grandma is everything one thinks a human would be. She seems to breathe, she laughs and loves from her soul, and she is born.

Morality does not apply to Grandma in the usual sense. She cannot physically die, because she does not live. But, when the children no longer need Grandma, she must go to the place where all robot grandmas go; and when that happens, her soul seems as if it will die just a little. Robot Grandma does not die, but ceases to fully live: “[...] that’s where I’ll be, with all the others like me, listening to what they’ve learned about the world and, in my turn telling how it was [...]” (Bradbury 188). Grandma comforts the children with the idea that her body and soul will not go, but fails to mention what it will lack without the love of Tom, Tim, and Agatha.

The lack of Grandma’s mortality means that she escapes an event that would have instantly killed what Whitman describes as a true human, one with “The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones, / The exquisite realization of health” (Whitman 9.5.9-10). Her lack of humanity saves her from death when a car hits her. Bradbury writes: “I mean, anyone else, hit like that, tossed like that. But, O my dear Agatha, not me. And now I see why you were afraid and never trusted me. You didn’t know” (Bradbury 186). Agatha believes Grandma to be just as any other human, she acts and feels like one, but the comfort that her physical immortality brings becomes immeasurable.

Both Whitman and Bradbury acknowledge that emotion goes beyond the soul. The body throbs with electric affliction. Emotion and memory reflect on the body. Scars and wrinkles all have stories behind them; marks of humanity on a figure are memories, too. Grandma’s body is important because, despite that it is not a true human body, it provides comfort for the children.

Souls love, but it is impossible for them to experience the feeling without a vessel. Whitman expresses the need for touch and intimacy, things inconceivable without the body. Grandma's presence still allows her to connect with people, supporting her case for humanity.

In many ways, Bradbury responds to Whitman's piece. The most obvious being his title: "I Sing the Body Electric." To Whitman, the body is electric because of its connection between body and soul; the two are related by sparks of energy woven between physical and spiritual being: "O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul, / O I say now these are the soul!" (Whitman 9.5.15-16) The function of the living, pumping body is mythical in itself for Whitman, and in many ways, Bradbury responds to that idea. Robot Grandma's mechanical body is actually a web of wires, an electrical body. Grandma may not be alive, but she too is made of joints and limbs and sounds:

Leg fibres, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under-leg,
Ankles, instep, foot-ball, toes, toe-joints, the heel;
All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or your body or of any one's body,
male or female [...] / The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting aloud. (Whitman 9, 19-22)

To the children, Grandma seems utterly human. Her first actions prove key aspects of Whitman's humanity. The first noise Grandma utters sounds human: she bursts with laughter: "And the first thing she said was: Laughter. [...] It was a good laugh, full and rich and hearty; it did not mock, it accepted" (Bradbury 166). Robot Grandma is human in the most important aspects. She loves, she expresses, she moves, she laughs. Bradbury continues Whitman's idea of humanity, but challenges his need for a body that reproduces.

In his perception of women, Whitman emphasizes their physical ability to bear children. For the poet, the beauty of a woman lies in her womb; she brings life. Whitman accentuates his idea about the biological nature of women:

Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity,
Womanhood, and all that is a woman, and the man that comes from woman,
The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter, weeping, love-looks, love-perturbations and
risings (Whitman 9.4.3-5)

It can be inferred that Robot Grandma cannot reproduce, as she is not a sexual being because she remains mechanical. Today, it seems the one difference between machines and humans concerns a human's ability to capture the imagination. Grandma treats the children with love, but never with bias. She seems almost too nice, an allusion to the idea that she does not fit Whitman's definition of human. Bradbury writes: "Clever beyond clever, human beyond human, warm beyond warm, love beyond love..." (Bradbury 174) Rather than completely ignoring the poet's notion of humanity and womanhood, Bradbury alludes to it in his own idea of humanity.

Understanding the allusion to Whitman's project helps the reader see the connection and reflection between both pieces. Bradbury does not reject Whitman's explanation of humanity, but he does challenge it by causing his reader to contemplate the humanity in Grandma. To the children and their father, Grandma, in many ways, proves human. She fills the gaping hole left by their mother's death. Bradbury alludes to Whitman's representation of humanity by creating a self aware Grandma. Robot Grandma understands that she is not physically human by Whitman's standards. Her kindness and morality makes her more than human and perhaps she appears too close to perfection to be human: "I do know: being mechanical, I cannot sin, cannot be bribed, [...] Sex does not run me rampant through the world" (Bradbury 181). However, Bradbury contradicts the idea that one must be living to love. Robot Grandma identifies herself of proving able to love: "I'll go on giving love" (Bradbury 181). If Robot Grandma remains capable of affection, of love, Bradbury argues, then she can be loved like any human.

The beauty of Bradbury and Whitman's works concerns how the pieces themselves resemble humanity. In many ways, Bradbury and Whitman agree that humans seem souls with vessels on Earth. The capability to love, to touch, to feel, makes a person a person. Bradbury's reflection of Whitman challenges the need for a living body. And this idea about physicality and spirituality cause the reader to redefine notions about humanity. Robot Grandma cannot reproduce; she is not sexual or lusting for power. She lacks the more complex aspects of the human race. However, she proves capable of love and affection; she can touch, laugh and run. She seems rather *human*. As philosopher and poet might agree, the notion of humanity resists being defined by only one thing, be it spiritual or physical. Both Whitman and Bradbury exhibit that the complex combination of form and psyche must be present for one to be deemed human, a definition that cannot be concrete. As modern society progresses, the debate will continue as Artificial Intelligence becomes increasingly blended into daily life—as machines continue to integrate themselves into humanity's necessities, the line will further blur.