

Dark They Were, and Golden Eyed



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAY BRADBURY

Ray Bradbury was a prominent speculative fiction author in the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps most famous for his novel [Fahrenheit 451](#), about a dystopia in which books are burned and knowledge is highly regulated, Bradbury was also a prolific writer of short fiction, essays, and screenplays for film and television. Bradbury was initially influenced by classic science fiction and horror stories and novels, as well as stories published in magazines such as *Amazing Science Fiction*. However, he soon developed a style of his own, and is often credited with bringing literary speculative fiction into the mainstream. Bradbury was a very productive writer, writing several novels and hundreds of short stories and other works, and had a habit of writing every day. He was the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including the National Medal of Arts and the World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story was written and published during the late 1940s, a period directly after WWII that saw rising cold war tensions as well as pervasive anxiety about nuclear war. This is reflected in the conflict that takes place behind the scenes on Earth in the story, as large sections of the planet are annihilated by nuclear war. The story's concern with history and memory also indicates a concern with the effect nuclear war might have not only on particular countries, but also on the planet and the human race as a whole. Bradbury's exploration of colonization and colonialism in the story further reflected growing world-wide concerns about empire and emancipation, as many former colonies in the global south began to resist the control of their former colonizers, and to instead establish themselves as independent countries.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Bradbury wrote many short stories exploring the lives of imagined settlers on Mars and other planets, as well as the uncanny ways in which perception and identity can shift over time. In doing so, he was influenced by earlier writers such as Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe, and H.G. Wells, as well as by more contemporary writers like Robert A. Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke. Many of Bradbury's own short stories deal with similar themes of planetary colonization, the uncanny, memory, and longing. "The Long Rain," for example, details the journey of a group of settlers who are stranded on Venus while constantly battling an unforgiving climate. "The Veldt," meanwhile, tells the story of a family whose children slowly become more and more

enmeshed in a nursery whose wallpaper recreates fantasies from their own minds; both stories were included in his collection *The Illustrated Man*. His short story collection *The Martian Chronicles* also contains many tales similarly set on the red planet.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Dark They Were, and Golden-Eyed
- **When Published:** 1949
- **Literary Period:** Post war
- **Genre:** Short story, science fiction, speculative fiction
- **Setting:** Mars
- **Climax:** Harry and his family leave their settlement for the Martian villas
- **Antagonist:** Mars, colonialism, nuclear war
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Namesake: A popular bookstore and comic book shop in London, which was in business from the 1960s to the 1980s, took its name from the story.

Alternate Names: The story originally appeared with the title "The Naming of Names."



PLOT SUMMARY

Harry Bittering and his family move from Earth to Mars to take part in a new colony. When they arrive via rocketship, however, Harry quickly feels that something is wrong with the Martian environment, and that it is already working gradual and insidious changes upon his family. Although they continue into town and set up a comfortable lifestyle in the new settlement, Harry cannot shake the feeling that something is wrong. His children, too, have a sense of unease concerning the old, long-abandoned Martian settlements and the planet as a whole.

After a few weeks have passed, the news comes that Earth has become embroiled in nuclear war and that no more rockets will arrive from the planet, effectively stranding the new settlers on Mars. While Harry is upset at this news, the others quickly accept the reality of their situation and settle more deeply into their lives on Mars. A few days later, Harry notices changes in the plants and animals that they have brought from Earth, which have shifted in color, scent, and taste. Even more upsetting, the physical characteristics of the settlers are changing: they are becoming taller, with dark skin and **golden**

eyes more suited to the Martian environment.

While Harry is horrified by this, the other settlers are, again, less bothered. Harry insists on beginning work on a **rocket** to return to Earth, but no one else volunteers to help him in his futile endeavor. Eventually, Cora persuades him to go for a picnic and a swim, and he gradually begins viewing the changes he and his family have undergone with more ambivalence than fear. They explore Martian villas in the mountains and reflect upon how pleasant and well suited the structures are to the environment. When he and his family eventually return to town, Harry loses steam on his rocket project, viewing it with less enthusiasm than before.

Harry sees other settlers packing up and learns that they are moving up to the Martian villas for the summer. His family persuades him that they should move as well, and they leave most of their possessions behind them as they do so. Harry's family, like the rest of the settlers, have gradually forgotten everything about their origins to the point that they no longer remember that they are from Earth at all. Instead, they happily inhabit the mountain villas and do not return to the abandoned settlement. Harry and Cora reflect on the "ridiculous" houses of the "ugly" Earth people, whom they're "glad" have gone.

Five years later, men from Earth arrive announcing that they've won the war. They're startled to realize that the settlement has been abandoned, and mistake the old settlers, who have completely forgotten their origins, for native Martians. As one of the men, a captain, begin plans to reconstruct and expand the settlement with new people from Earth, his Lieutenant seems not to listen, instead gazing into the misty Martian hills.



CHARACTERS

Harry Bittering – Harry Bittering is the protagonist of "Dark They Were, and Golden-Eyed." Harry is made uneasy by the Martian landscape from the start, expressing a desire to return to Earth upon first stepping foot on Martian soil. Harry is particularly attuned to the uncanny ambiance of the Martian environment, and frequently finds himself thinking that the new world he inhabits is suspicious and may even mean him and his family harm. In keeping with this, Harry is also very attached to Earth and relies on the ability to communicate with and travel to Earth to keep his fears about the Martian world in check. When the ties between Earth and Mars are severed by nuclear war, Harry is more deeply affected than both his family and the other settlers, going so far as to attempt to construct a **rocket** single-handedly in order to escape from Mars. However, as time goes by and all the settlers become more acclimated to the Martian environment—and begin to succumb to the physical and psychological changes it inflicts upon them—Harry, too, is changed. He gradually loses his anxiety over returning to Earth and abandons his project with the

rocket. Although Harry is the most resistant to the subtle changes wrought by Mars, he eventually gives into them like everyone else and ultimately moves with his family to the Martian villa. There, he forgets his attachment to Earth and Earthly things altogether, deeming Earth settlements "odd" and "ridiculous."

Cora Bittering – Cora Bittering is the wife of Harry Bittering and the mother of Dan, Laura, and David Bittering. Like Harry, she is at first very attached to objects and routines from Earth. However, she succumbs to the changes wrought by the Martian environment, both physical and mental, more quickly than her husband. She even helps persuade Harry to give up his obsession with Earthly things, encouraging him to eat food that has been grown on Mars and to forgo building his **rocket**. Cora helps Harry to accept the changes that he and his family have undergone, and to give up his futile desire to return to earth. By the end of the story, she, like Harry, has forgotten all her ties to Earth, effectively becoming a Martian.

Dan, Laura, and David Bittering – Dan, Laura, and David Bittering are the children of Harry Bittering and Cora Bittering. Out of all of Harry's family members, they are the most in tune with the Martian environment and accept its changes most quickly. Perhaps because they are so young, they have the fewest ties to Earth. They adopt Martian language and names first, and are also the first to encourage their parents to move away from the Earth settlement and into the Martian villas. Like Cora, they encourage Harry to accept the changes that are occurring to them rather than resist them.

The Captain – The unnamed captain and Lieutenant arrive at the end of the story, announcing that they have won the war and are there to rescue the settlers. Finding the settlement abandoned, however, they assume a plague wiped out the population and mistake the Earth people living in the villas for native Martians. In the story's final moments, the captain eagerly discusses resettling the Martian colony again and lists potential place names like the "Lincoln Mountains" and "Washington Canal," evidencing the American instinct towards colonialism.

The Lieutenant – The Lieutenant arrives on Mars via **rocket** at the end of the story with the captain, with the goal of rescuing the current settlers and expanding upon the American-built settlement. Like the captain, he is surprised to find the settlement deserted. As the captain rambles on about potential new place names, the Lieutenant appears to be lost in thought and gazes at the misty mountains in the distance—suggesting that he, too, will succumb to the pull of the Martian environment.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-

coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FAMILIARITY AND PERCEPTION

In “Dark They Were, and Golden Eyed,” the new settlers on Mars, including Harry Bittering and his family, are deeply unnerved by the Martian landscape, viewing it as alien and unnatural. In contrast, the familiar crops, architecture, and accessories they have imported from Earth are considered natural and therefore comforting. However, as their connection with Earth wanes, Martian influence gradually pervades every aspect of the Bitterings’ lives. What is Martian begins to seem natural to them, while their Earthly imports seem strange and out of place. By the conclusion of the story, the Bitterings have completely embraced a “Martian” lifestyle and the tension between the natural and the unnatural has been flipped on its head. Bradbury’s story thus suggests that conceptions of what is “natural” are not objective, but rather based squarely in place and perception. The landscape and atmosphere of a particular location will compel newcomers to assimilate, making what initially seems strange familiar.

One of the first things that Harry and his family notice changing on Mars are the crops and livestock. Even before these changes occur, however, Harry is ill at ease: “Mr. Bittering felt very alone in his garden under the Martian sun, anachronism bent here, planting Earth flowers in a wild soil.” Harry can already sense the inherent disconnection between plants brought from Earth and the Martian environment. Although the family has brought seeds and animals from Earth, the influence of the Martian environment gradually transforms them and makes them much different than their earthly counterparts. The crops are “Onions but not onions, carrots but not carrots. Taste: the same but different. Smell: not like it used to be.” The roses turn green and the grass turns purple, an even more obvious demonstration of the effect of the Martian environment upon imports from Earth. Harry initially perceives these changes as disturbing and alien because of their lack of similarity to Earthly vegetables and plants.

Faced with all of these examples of the strange and unexpected effects of the Martian environment, Harry is gripped with panic that he, too, will change. “If we stay here, we’ll all change,” he says. “The air. Don’t you smell it? Something in the air. A Martian virus, maybe; some seed, or a pollen.” And, indeed, he does change, as he begins to perceive his new environment with a sense of familiarity previously reserved for life on Earth. This again underscores how “natural” is a matter of subjective perception.

Physical objects and possessions also change in significance to the family throughout the story, with Earthly possessions

slowly becoming both less important and less familiar. When the settlers first arrive on Mars, they bring with them many things from Earth, both personal and practical. At first, they are very attached to these possessions, and cling to them as reminders of the planet that they left behind. Moreover, they feel that the Martian landscape poses an indeterminate threat to them. Harry, for example, worries that the Martian **wind** is wearing away at the house.

As they become more acclimated to the Martian environment, however, they lose their attachment to their earthly possessions. When they decide to relocate to the Martian villa, they leave behind most of their possessions, including furniture, fancy clothes, encyclopedias, and other once-treasured possessions. After summering in the mountains in the Martian villa, they decide not to return to the settlement, and instead to stay in their new home, with new furniture and possessions that better suit their new lifestyle. The more exposed they become to the Martian environment, the more they realize that the possessions and attitudes they brought from Earth are no longer relevant.

The tension between the natural and the unnatural is further exacerbated by the physical changes that the settlers themselves undergo. As the title indicates, their eyes change color, at first just subtly flecked with **gold** before gradually becoming entirely golden. Initially, Harry is disturbed by these changes, breaking the mirror that reflects his own gold-flecked eyes back at him. He is even more frustrated that those around him do not seem perturbed by the changes. When he asks his wife, “Cora, how long have your eyes been yellow?” she is puzzled and asserts that they always have been gold. However, as Harry himself becomes more acclimated to the Martian environment, he gradually loses the sense that the changes he, his family, and his surroundings are undergoing are in some way against the natural order of things. As his memories of Earth lapse, the golden eyes begin to seem natural, along with all the other subtle changes wrought by the Martian wind.

The settlers’ whole bodies are changed, as well—their skin darkening and limbs lengthening until they would no longer immediately be recognizable as “human” to someone on Earth. Instead, they are Martian, dark, tall, and golden-eyed, perfectly adapted to their new environment. As Harry comes to accept these changes, he no longer fights so hard against them: “A few tremblings shook him, but were carried off in waves of pleasant heat as he lay in the sun.”

By the time the new settlers arrive on Mars, they can no longer identify the former inhabitants of the settlement, and instead conclude that they are native Martians. One settler notes, “we found native life in the hills, sir. Dark people. Yellow eyes. Martians. Very friendly.” The settlers have become so changed by their environment that they are mistaken for native Martians. In the context of the story, this is not entirely inaccurate, as one way to be “native” is to fully embody the

place in which one dwells. In Bradbury's story, this takes on a literal significance, with the Martian atmosphere physically and mentally altering those who attempt to inhabit it. Having finally embraced (or succumbed to) the influence of Mars, the Bittering family and the rest of the settlers have truly become Martian—and left the familiarity of Earth behind.



MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND LANGUAGE

Throughout “Dark They Were, and Golden Eyed,” the new settlers gradually lose touch with their memories of Earth as they assimilate to life on

Mars. From the naming and renaming of Martian geography to the settlers' slow adoption of Martian language and physical characteristics, the story probes the extent to which change is potentially destructive toward identity. This is mirrored by the ubiquitous presence of the ruins of previous Martian civilizations, which are mysterious and seemingly without historical context. Bradbury casts this gradual loss of memory in an ambivalent light: while on the one hand Harry Bittering struggles to hold on to his memories of Earth, on the other hand many settlers embrace their new lives and willingly forget what it was like to live anywhere other than Mars. Ultimately memory is shown to be fragile and unreliable. At the same time, however, Bradbury suggests that both memory and language are essential to one's self-conception, and thus that their absence—cultural or personal—leads to the erasure of identity.

The more time they spend on Mars, the more the settlers forget their ties to Earth. As the characters physically change in the Martian environment, they begin to assume that this is simply how they have always been. Cora, for instance, insists that her eyes have “always” been **gold**. The characters also see no use for the physical items they've brought from Earth and wonder why they were once so attached to them. Having forgotten the purpose of their settlement and their ties to Earth, the settlers gradually abandon their identity as “Earth people” altogether. For all the inhabitants, the desire to return to Earth fades away along with their memories of Earth itself and their lives there. By the end of the story, Harry's family cannot remember their time on Earth at all and have in fact almost entirely forgotten who they once were. They look at the “odd” settlements of the “ugly Earth people” with detached disdain, highlighting the fragile and ephemeral nature of memory and how that loss of memory has led to a complete shift in the way they see themselves. Identity, then, is as fragile and malleable as memory itself.

Bradbury also notably links identity—and, it follows, memory—with language through his emphasis on names. For one thing, names are largely all that's left of the old Martian settlements. There is no surviving history of the previous Martians, just mysterious ruins and old names. Harry reflects, “Once Martians had built cities, named cities; climbed mountains, named mountains; sailed seas, named seas.

Mountains melted, seas drained, cities tumbled.” Everything that the Martians achieved has been forgotten to time, leaving behind only the mysterious remains of their past civilizations. Harry reflects on the “silent guilt” Earthmen felt “at putting new names to these ancient hills and valleys” despite the fact that nearly all traces of the old inhabitants were gone. Harry continues, “Nevertheless, man lives by symbol and label. The names were given.” The old Martian civilization forgotten, settlers felt emboldened to assert their own identity onto the empty Martian landscape.

Yet as they forget their ties to Earth, the settlers begin to embrace the former *Martian* names for geographical features instead of those imposed by the American settlers. This suggests a distinct rejection of American identity, and that only through remembrance of Martian identity—here signified through language—can they truly be Martian themselves. The settlers even begin to speak Martian instead of English, although the Martian language is supposed to be dead along with Mars' former inhabitants. Nevertheless, the settlers naturally begin picking up Martian words and eventually even adopting Martian names. Harry's son Dan, for instance, tells his father, “That's not my name. I've a new name I want to use.” A name is a marker of identity—the “label” by which “man lives”—and thus by rejecting Earth names in favor of Martian names, the settlers are effectively asserting their new identities as Martians.

Of course, though the settlers eventually become new Martians, there is a lack of continuity between their existence and the existence of previous Martians. There is no shared history, and any shared culture seems to be a product of the environment rather than any kind of preservation of memory. The new Martians seem to exist in an ahistorical state, one in which forgetting is recognized as a fundamental principle of existence. Forgetting, in this instance, has been a prerequisite for establishing a new identity. The inevitable, inexorable forgetting that takes place throughout the story has a melancholy tinge to it, but the story ends on a hopeful note. While the initial impulse of the settlers and those who follow after them is to look for old records and to keep and preserve their own history, the story recognizes the bittersweet futility of this approach. Instead, it offers up another option: to let things be washed away by the Martian **winds** and forgotten, which is not necessarily a loss but rather a different way of living and inhabiting the world.



CHANGE AND RESISTANCE

Throughout the story, the identity of the settlers of Mars, as well as the landscape itself, is constantly changing. At first, the settlers are resistant to these changes and cling to the remnants of their old lives and ties to Earth. However, the more time they spend on Mars and the further removed they become from their circumstances on

Earth, the less resistance they show against the encroaching landscape and accompanying changes—eventually going so far as to enjoy their new life and largely forget their origins on Earth. While change can have a destructive capacity, it is ultimately characterized as an inevitable and natural process, one that the settlers cannot resist even if they try. In fact, resistance to change tends to make the characters unhappier, as seen in Harry's frantic attempts to build a **rocket** back to Earth, and in his frustration and anger with the calm acceptance of the other settlers.

One of the first things that begins to bother Harry about the Martian environment is the changes undergone by the plants and animals. The changing characteristics of the crops and livestock they brought from Earth at first provokes fear and anger among the settlers before they grow accustomed to these changes. Although the crops originate from Earth, their changing characteristics ultimately make it difficult to associate them with their former identities. The roses may still be identifiable, but is a green rose still a rose? Is a violet lawn still grown from grass?

These questions at first deeply disturb Harry, but they begin to seem less pressing the more he becomes acclimated to the Martian environment. While the living things brought from earth have undergone changes, to the extent that they are sometimes no longer recognizable, they have not been violently severed from their former identities. Instead, they have undergone a process of change which, eventually, seems inevitable and natural. Harry at first refuses to accept these changes, even when they are entirely out of control, refusing to eat food unless it has been grown on Earth and stored in a deep-freeze.

The physical and mental changes to the settlers are in some ways the most disturbing, but they, too, are gradually accepted and even celebrated as resistance to a new, Martian identity fades with time. From the time he first steps foot on Mars, Harry feels as if his identity is being slowly leached away: "The **wind** blew as if to flake away their identities. At any moment, the Martian air might draw his soul from him, as marrow comes from a white bone. He felt submerged in a chemical that could dissolve his intellect and burn away his past." In this instance, Harry sees this dissolution of identity as complete and destructive, and so he is afraid of the influence that the Martian environment has upon him and his family, worrying that "If we stay here, we'll all change." The settler's gradual forgetting of their life on Earth, and their darkened skin and **golden** eyes, all make it seem to Harry as if they are becoming truly alien.

Harry's attitude toward change slowly shifts, however, the more acclimated he becomes to the Martian environment. When he goes swimming with his wife and children, he sinks to the bottom of the canal momentarily, reflecting, "If I lie here long enough [...] the water will work and eat away my flesh until the bones show like coral. Just my skeleton left. And then the

water can build on that skeleton—green things, deep water things, red things, yellow things. Change. Change. Slow, deep, silent change. And isn't that what it is up *there*?" For Harry, change may still be frightening, but it is now a more organic and necessary experience. It's no longer something that can be fought off forever, and he even recognizes it as something that can be potentially generative and produce new life.

As much as Harry Bittering tries to resist the changes that happen to him and his family, in the end he succumbs to the influence of the Martian landscape, and finds some measure of peace and happiness in his altered identity. Although he may not remember much of what has come before, he is no longer troubled by the shifts he has undergone, and is still able to retain aspects of his identity such as his relationships with family and friends. Similarly, while the Martian landscape may be named and renamed, settled and resettled, it retains a certain amount of its own fundamental character. While change may be constant and sometimes destructive, it is also generative, constantly moving towards the future without completely severing its ties to the past.



COLONIZATION, INDUSTRY, AND LEISURE

In "Dark They Were, and Golden Eyed," the settlers are initially industrious farmers, working the land and extracting resources from it. After their ties to Earth are severed, Harry Bittering works determinedly at constructing a **rocket** from scratch, despite the seeming futility of his plan. And when new settlers arrive years after the initial settlers have been altered by the Martian environment, they, too, begin setting up industrious plans to resettle and reclaim the area. This is all in stark contrast to the activities that the settlers adopt once they have been infected by Martian attitudes: activities that emphasize leisure, nature, and harmony with one's environment. Throughout the story, Bradbury links an unnecessary (and perhaps even harmful) sense of industry and natural exploitation with the colonizers, while associating those who have become acclimated to Mars with leisure and affinity with the natural world. While colonizers can perhaps only ever have an exploitative relationship with the land they settle, those who are indigenous or who become acclimated are able to foster a more authentic and less destructive relationship with the place they inhabit.

Initially, the settlers are industrious, constructing houses, farming, gathering resources, and building up a new civilization. Harry touts the accomplishments of the settlers, boasting, "Colonial days all over again [...] Why, in ten years there'll be a million Earthmen on Mars. Big cities, everything!" For Harry and the other settlers, this conquest of Mars is an accomplishment. Although they do not view Mars as home, they take pride in having subdued it. Even when their connection from Earth is severed, Harry still insists on industry

as the key to their continued relationship with themselves and their world. When his son asks him, ““Father, what will we do?” he replies, “Go about our business, of course. Raise crops and children. Wait.” Harry still sees the raising of Earthly crops and children on Martian soil as the only thing to do until contact with Earth resumes, emphasizing the way in which he relates to the Martian world as a space to control and colonize rather than as one to fully inhabit.

When travel to and from Earth is disrupted by nuclear war, Harry still insists on a fevered kind of industry as he builds his rocket. When he sees the men in town idling around after news of the nuclear war, he is frustrated by their lack of industry, wondering, “What are you doing, you fools!...Sitting here! You’ve heard the news—we’re stranded on this planet. Well, move!” Rather than relax and enjoy his days, as the other men seem to be doing, he obsessively focuses on the construction of a rocket that will tie him back to his planet of origin.

The longer Harry spends on Mars, however, the less urgent his plans for the rocket become and the more he adapts to a more natural Martian lifestyle. At the conclusion of the story, the rocket is entirely forgotten, a “flimsy rocket frame rusting in an empty shop.” Earthly industry has been replaced by Martian leisure, in part because the tie between Earth and Mars has been so violently severed by the war. Since they are stranded on Mars, they are no longer merely colonizers or settlers, but come to accept themselves as actual inhabitants.

The settlers who have acclimated to Mars have different priorities than they did when they still believed themselves to be colonizers. Eventually, they abandon their colonial settlement entirely, preferring instead to inhabit the scattered Martian villas that loosely populate the mountainous countryside. They now live in and around Mars itself, rather than in an artificially constructed, Earth-like settlement. They enjoy swimming in the canals and other leisure activities, such as playing music and weaving tapestries, and they no longer see the need to return to their settlement and resume working on rockets or tilling their fields.

When new colonizers arrive on Mars, they, too, begin to set up grand, industrious plans: “New settlements. Mining sites, minerals to be looked for. Bacteriological specimens taken. The work, all the work.” However, it is implied that they, too, will abandon these plans if given the opportunity to become acclimated to the Martian environment, and to inhabit it as natives rather than colonizers. The “blue color and the quiet mist of the hills far beyond the town” already captivate their attention and imply a different way of interacting with the Martian world.

While colonizers from Earth initially emphasize industry over leisure and productivity over enjoyment, as the Martian environment infects them they slowly begin to shift their priorities. Although Bradbury does not explicitly condemn the relationship that the colonizers initially have to their

environment, it is one that ultimately has a violent and unpleasant history. From the brutal conquest of the Americas that is obliquely referenced in the Native American and Presidential names of the Martian geography, to the more immediate references to nuclear weapons and constant warfare, the relationship of the colonizer to the colonized seems problematic as long as it is constantly underpinned by industry and exploitation. Bradbury transforms the original settlers into a “native” people, playing into both positive and negative racial stereotypes that characterize native peoples as darker skinned, more leisurely and less industrious, and more in tune with their natural environment. In contrast to their previous attitudes as colonizers, the new Martians adopt a different way of relating to the land and inhabiting the world, implying that a decolonized perspective might serve as a valuable correction to current attitudes.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



GOLD

Gold, featured in the title of the story and in the physical changes that the characters undergo, is one of the key representatives of the changes that the Martian environment imposes throughout the story. Once ties with Earth have been severed, Harry Bittering first notices changes that the settlers have undergone: they are darker skinned, their eyes are golden, and, most importantly, they are no longer concerned with being effectively stranded on Mars. When Harry berates the other settlers for not caring about returning to Earth, however, they encourage him to look at his own eyes, which have “little, very dim flecks of new gold captured in the blue.” Soon, all the settlers of Mars, including Harry, have completely golden eyes—shining and surreal yet somehow completely at home in the Martian landscape. In this way, their golden eyes signify their adaptation to and comfort in their newfound environment, underscoring their ultimate embrace of—rather than resistance to—change.

Similarly, Harry sees the bodies of the settlers as being like: precious but malleable, able to be shaped and imprinted by a new environment. He imagines how his own bones “shifted, shaped, melted like gold” during the night and that his children are “metallic in their beds.” Harry uses the titular line of the story to describe his own wife, Cora, whose skin has also been darkened to a golden hue by the Martian sun. This indicates the ways in which the golden color, however foreign or uncanny, eventually comes to be an integral part of those he loves most. Cora doesn’t even remember the original color of her eyes, insisting that they must always have been golden. And as Harry

grows to accept his new life on Mars, the color gold takes on more positive connotations. While exploring the Martian canals with his family, for instance, “he let himself sink down and down to the bottom like a golden statue and lie there in green silence. All was water-quiet and deep, all was peace.” Gold, then, ultimately signifies the potential ease and peace that comes with accepting inevitable change.



WIND AND MIST

From the beginning of the story, wind and mist are representative of the uncanny and the unknown on Mars. When he first disembarks onto the planet, Harry Bittering is immediately struck by the wind sweeping across the plains, reflecting that “the wind blew as if to flake away their identities. At any moment the Martian air might draw his soul from him, as marrow comes from a white bone.” Later, when connection with Earth has been severed by nuclear war, Harry is overcome by fear of the change that is embodied by the wind now that “Earth people” have been “left to the strangeness of Mars, the cinnamon dusts and wine airs.” He tries by any means available to escape back to Earth, worrying that “if we stay here, we’ll all change. The air. Don’t you smell it? Something in the air. A Martian virus, maybe; some seed, or a pollen.” Ultimately, the wind is representative of the Martian environment as a whole, something pervasive and inescapable that spreads gradual change.

The wind also symbolizes the effect that time has on history, slowly wearing away the civilization of former inhabitants until all that is left is empty buildings and sand. One of the Bittering children remarks, “I hear the wind. The sand hits my window. I get scared. And I see those towns way up in the mountains where the Martians lived a long time ago.” The wind brings not just change but slow annihilation, grinding down even huge cities to dust. In this respect, the wind has both generative and destructive capacities, symbolizing both life and death, but most of all change.



ROCKET

The rocket symbolizes Harry Bittering’s determination to return to Earth and, more broadly, the settlers’ former lives there. Harry, who is particularly disturbed by the severing of ties to Earth after the nuclear war on the planet, is particularly attached to the idea of building a new rocket that will return them to Earth. The presence of daily rockets before the war had been a great comfort: “As long as the rockets had spun a silver web across space, he had been able to accept Mars. For he had always told himself: Tomorrow, if I want, I can buy a ticket and go back to Earth.” Harry begins to construct a rocket of his own, even as this plan is gently mocked by his friends and viewed with concern by his family. Gradually, however, “In the flow of days

and weeks, the rocket receded and dwindled. The old fever was gone.” Eventually, Harry’s abandonment of the rocket comes to symbolize his abandonment of the dream of ever getting back to Earth. When he leaves the “flimsy rocket frame rusting in an empty shop,” he leaves behind him the final vestiges of a connection to Earth, and instead accepts that he is becoming, however strangely and gradually, a Martian.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Avon Books edition of *A Medicine for Melancholy* published in 1990.

Dark They Were, and Golden-Eyed Quotes

●● The wind blew as if to flake away their identities. At any moment the Martian air might draw his soul from him, as marrow comes from a white bone. He felt submerged in a chemical that could dissolve his intellect and burn away his past.

Related Characters: Harry Bittering

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

When he and his family first step foot on Mars, Harry Bittering is immediately put off by the Martian environment, sensing its potential to change and alter those who enter into it. Already he feels out of place, a stranger in a land that is foreign to him and that is not necessarily benevolent. Rather than accepting the opportunity for change that Mars represents, Harry is initially fearful and anxious about it. The wind comes to serve as a symbolic example of the encroaching, omnipresent influence of the Martian environment, something that touches everything and has the power to dissolve, erase, and fundamentally alter.

●● Earth people left to the strangeness of Mars, the cinnamon dusts and wine airs, to be baked like gingerbread shapes in Martian summers, put into harvested storage by Martian winters. What would happen to him, the others? This was the moment Mars had waited for. Now it would eat them.

Related Characters: Harry Bittering

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 287

Explanation and Analysis

When the Bittering family learns that their connection with Earth has been violently severed by nuclear war, they are shocked and horrified. Now that there will no longer be any rockets going to and from Earth, their idea that they could one day return to their planet of origin is shattered, and they are left to contend with the unpredictable and shifting Martian environment. Here, the wind again represents a possibly suspicious Martian atmosphere, the parts of Mars that will inevitably and inescapably affect the settlers, no matter how hard they try to maintain their connections and identity with Earth. It's worth noticing that the language describing the natural world is strange ("cinnamon dusts," "baked like gingerbread shapes"), and while its strangeness is unsettling, it's also inviting. After all, it's an evocation of delicious foods—wine, cinnamon, and gingerbread—and even while Harry worries that Mars will "eat" the settlers, it seems actually that the settlers are subtly becoming enticed by the wonders of Mars.

●● He glanced up from the garden to the Martian mountains. He thought of the proud old Martian names that had once been on those peaks. Earthmen, dropping from the sky, had gazed upon hills, rivers, Martian seats left nameless in spite of names. Once Martians had built cities, named cities; climbed mountains, named mountains; sailed seas, named seas. Mountains melted, seas drained, cities tumbled. In spite of this, the Earthmen had felt a silent guilt at putting new names to these ancient hills and valleys.

Related Characters: Harry Bittering

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 287

Explanation and Analysis

Harry Bittering's rumination upon the names of the mountains and other geographic features of Mars reflects a continued anxiety concerning change, memory, and language. All that is left now of the Martian civilizations are

abandoned ruins and names that are no longer in use. However, Harry senses that the new names that have been affixed to them are somehow unnatural or inappropriate: they are names that colonizers have affixed to features of the landscape, rather than names that are organic and truly belong. Harry's worries concerning the impermanent and fragile nature of both human memory and human constructs are also reflected in the forgotten ruins that are scattered around the planet.

●● The Earthmen had changed names. Now there were Hormel Valleys, Roosevelt Seas, Ford Hills, Vanderbilt Plateaus, Rockefeller Rivers, on Mars. It wasn't right. The American settlers had shown wisdom, using old Indian prairie names: Wisconsin, Minnesota, Idaho, Ohio, Utah, Milwaukee, Waukegan, Osseo. The old names, the old meanings.

Related Characters: Harry Bittering

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 287

Explanation and Analysis

In his continued meditations on the names of things, Harry focuses on the new names that colonizers (primarily American colonizers), have given to the Martian landscape. The names seem completely incongruous, celebrating famous American industrialists like Rockefeller and Ford, whose history and heritage seems remarkably out of place on Mars, irrelevant to the ancient landscape and its lost history. In contrast, names borrowed back in America from Native Americans seem somehow more appropriate to the American landscape, as they have meanings more closely in tune with what's there. They are native names rather than the names of colonizers, albeit from a different place and time. Here, Bradbury plays into both negative and positive stereotypes about Native American language and culture as being more attuned to nature and land.

●● You know they have! Onions but not onions, carrots but not carrots. Taste: the same but different. Smell: not like it used to be." He felt his heart pounding, and he was afraid. He dug his fingers into the earth. "Cora, what's happening? What is it? We've got to get away from this." He ran across the garden. Each tree felt his touch. "The roses. The roses. They're turning green!"

Related Characters: Harry Bittering (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

Sometime after the Bitterings learn that there will be no more rockets coming from Earth, ever, they begin to notice changes in their environment, most noticeably to the plants and animals that they have brought with them from Earth. The Martian environment has come to have an effect on these things, subtly shifting and changing them into different forms, both like and unlike the previous versions of themselves. Harry is horrified by these changes, and his panicked attempts to escape Mars and return to Earth are increasingly fueled by these uncanny changes to the natural world around him. With everything turning “Martian” before his eyes, Harry cannot accept the changes taking place and instead attempts to deny and resist them with everything in his power.

“If we stay here, we’ll all change. The air. Don’t you smell it? Something in the air. A Martian virus, maybe; some seed, or a pollen.”

Related Characters: Harry Bittering (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

After he notices the changes taking place around him, with the crops subtly different and the roses turning green, Harry rushes into town to confer with the other settlers and to try to galvanize them into constructing a rocket with which to return home to Earth. However, the settlers are much more blasé about the changes than Harry is, gently mocking his sense of urgency and refusing to help him with his rocket scheme. The wind again symbolizes the invisible, omnipresent powers of change that Mars has over everything it comes into contact with, plants and animals, people and objects alike.

“Lying abed, Mr. Bittering felt his bones shifted, shaped, melted like gold. His wife, lying beside him, was dark from many sunny afternoons. Dark she was, and golden-eyed, burnt almost black by the sun, sleeping, and the children metallic in their beds, and the wind roaring forlorn and changing through the old peach trees, the violet grass, shaking out green rose petals.”

Related Characters: Cora Bittering, Harry Bittering

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

As the changes to the settlers, their belongings, and their attitudes toward the Martian world continue on apace, Harry Bittering grows more ambivalent to the changes, his resistance waning even as he still feels that the world around him is deeply uncanny and unnatural. His wife and children, and he himself, have grown dark and golden eyed, the physical transformation from which the story draws its title. Gold here represents malleability and change, a soft metal that is easily bent by heat and pressure into new and strange shapes. The wind that surrounds the house infiltrates everything, blowing strange Martian airs over the family and everything that they have brought with them from Earth, symbolizing the power that the Martian environment has over everything it encompasses.

“Cora, how long have your eyes been yellow?” She was bewildered. “Always, I guess.” “They didn’t change from brown in the last three months?” She bit her lips. “No. Why do you ask?” “Never mind.”

Related Characters: Cora Bittering, Harry Bittering (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

When Cora finally persuades Harry to take a break from the construction of the rocket, the Bittering family decides to

go for a picnic and swim in the Martian canals that surround the settlers' town. While there, Harry probes Cora's memory of what life was like before the Martian influence, and finds that she is largely unable to recall the details of it, not even the color of her own eyes. This reflects both the rapid physical changes that the settlers have undergone on Mars, as well as the mental changes that have slowly washed away all memories of Earth from their minds. This is especially reflected in the gold coloring of their eyes, symbolic of the effects of the Martian environment and the shifting identities of the settlers. Because of his determined resistance to the Martian influence, Harry is still able to cling to some memories of what it was like before. However, even he grows more forgetful, more ambivalent toward and less fearful of the Martian environment.

They leaped into the canal water, and he let himself sink down and down to the bottom like a golden statue and lie there in green silence. All was water—quiet and deep, all was peace. He felt the steady, slow current drift him easily. If I lie here long enough, he thought, the water will work and eat away my flesh until the bones show like coral. Just my skeleton left. And then the water can build on that skeleton—green things, deep water things, red things, yellow things. Change. Change. Slow, deep, silent change. And isn't that what it is up there?

Related Characters: Harry Bittering (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

After being convinced by his wife to take a break from building his rocket and to instead join the family on an excursion to the Martian canals, Harry finds himself introspecting as he swims alongside his children. Here, Harry again associates gold with malleability and change. He imagines himself as a gold statue, sinking, and reflects that change is all around him in the natural world. In this moment of insight, Harry begins to see the changes taking place in him and his family as potentially positive and generative rather than simply negative and destructive. When viewed in the right way, change can be seen as a natural process rather than as an alien and unnatural influence.

Looking at the small white cottage for a long moment, he was filled with a desire to rush to it, touch it, say good-bye to it, for he felt as if he were going away on a long journey, leaving some thing to which he could never quite return, never understand again.

Related Characters: Harry Bittering

Related Themes:    

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Explanation and Analysis

When the Bittering at last says goodbye to their house and leaves for the Martian villa, it marks the end of their association with Earthly things and the beginning of their transition to a completely Martian lifestyle. Although Harry is not quite able to articulate this change, not even to himself, there is a bittersweet and melancholy quality to leaving the house that they were once so attached to behind. While change can have both positive and negative connotations, the story emphasizes that it is a linear process: the past cannot ever be returned to or regained, and something is always lost with its passing. While the emigration of the settlers to the villas is in many respects a life-affirming adaption to their new environment, it closes the chapter on an entire way of life to which they will never return.

“Lots to be done, Lieutenant.” His voice droned on and quietly on as the sun sank behind the blue hills. “New settlements. Mining sites, minerals to be looked for. Bacteriological specimens taken. The work, all the work. And the old records were lost. We'll have a job of remapping to do, renaming the mountains and rivers and such. Calls for a little imagination.

“What do you think of naming those mountains the Lincoln Mountains, this canal the Washington Canal, those hills—we can name those hills for you, Lieutenant. Diplomacy. And you, for a favor, might name a town for me. Polishing the apple. And why not make this the Einstein Valley, and farther over . . . are you *listening*, Lieutenant?”

The lieutenant snapped his gaze from the blue color and the quiet mist of the hills far beyond the town.

Related Characters: The Captain (speaker), The Lieutenant

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

Five years after connection with Earth is initially severed, new settlers land on Mars, only to find the old settlements abandoned, and people that they mistake for Martians dwelling in the hills. The settlers begin work straight away renaming the landmarks, constructing new houses and towns, and beginning work again on Mars. However, there are intimations that they, too, will eventually succumb to the

fate of the previous settlers. Bradbury seems to indicate that, should anyone spend long enough time exposed to the Martian elements, they, too, will become a part of the planet, no longer able to separate or distinguish themselves from it. Instead, they will become Martian, both better adapted to the environment in which they live, and unable to leave it.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

DARK THEY WERE, AND GOLDEN-EYED

Harry Bittering and his family arrive as settlers on Mars. While he cannot explain why, Harry has an immediate and visceral reaction to the Martian environment—the **wind** blowing across the plains, the unsettling atmosphere, the old ruins. He impulsively suggests that the family return to Earth, but his wife Cora, encourages him to have a positive outlook. They walk into town from the **rocket**, with Harry unable to shake the sense of uncanny foreboding.

Harry continues to have trouble settling into his life on Mars. While on the surface everything is ordinary, he is constantly checking up on things to make sure they haven't changed in the night. He is suspicious of the Martian environment, and is always waiting, unknowingly, for the other shoe to drop. The paper he receives from Earth each morning, still "toast-warm" from the arriving **rocket**, is one of his few consolations. It represents a reassuring tie to the world of Earth that they have left behind, although Cora indicates that the connection is more tenuous than Harry might like. She brings up the fact that Mars is somewhat safer than Earth, considering the atomic bomb.

The Bittering children also have a sense of unease regarding the environment, and they repeatedly ask to be reassured by their father about their new life on Mars. They are particularly fascinated and concerned by the old Martian ruins, wondering who used to live there and what happened to them. They, too, have a sense of foreboding, and cannot shake the feeling that "something" will happen. While Harry tries to reassure both his children and himself that the ruins are harmless, and that the fate of any previous Martians will not be their own, he is unable to do so to anyone's satisfaction.

Later that afternoon, word comes from Earth that there has been an outbreak of nuclear war, and that no more **rockets** will be arriving from the planet. Laura, who brings the news, is in tears. At first the family is in stunned disbelief, unsure of what to do with this new information. Harry is particularly affected by the news, at first accusing his daughter of lying and then panicking at the thought of being trapped on Mars for the rest of his life.

Harry's immediate unease in response to the Martian environment reflects its unfamiliar nature and his own out-of-place, unnatural presence on the planet. Harry is immediately resistant to the capacity for change that he senses in the Martian environment.



Harry's continued psychological discomfort with his life on Mars is symbolic of his failure to truly assimilate into the Martian environment – the planet remains foreign to him, and he remains foreign to it. His continued heightened suspicion of the environment and nostalgia for Earthly things represents his alienation from Mars and his fear of the possibility of change.



The children's fears and anxieties about Mars, like Harry's, reflect a concern with change, destruction, and the passage of time as symbolized by the Martian ruins on the outskirts of their own tenuous settlements. The Martian cities are strange and unsettling both because they are so unlike the settlers' own Earth-like towns, and also because they are abandoned and mysterious, echoing the characters' own anxieties about their precarious existence on a foreign planet.



When their connection to Earth is violently severed by nuclear war, the settlers must face the fact that they are no longer a colony of a much larger civilization, but are instead stranded in a new place, without any contact from their former home. The Bittering family must decide how they will react to this change: either with continued resistance or with acceptance and a desire to move forward.



Harry's unease with the Martian environment is exacerbated by the severed connection to Earth. He reflects upon the names the settlers have given the Martian geographical features, and he is uneasy with the way that they have affixed new, American names to these ancient landmarks. They seem out of place in this strange and alien world.

Harry views even innocuous aspects of the new world with suspicion. His scrutiny is rewarded when he notices changes to the crops they have brought from Earth: the carrots, onions, grass, and trees have all turned different colors and seem subtly different from how they should be. The changes eventually progress so that once-familiar crops and animals now seem unnatural and absurd, with violet grass, green roses, and cows with unicorn horns. Harry is deeply disturbed by these changes, and vows to do something about it.

Harry heads into town and is disconcerted to find that the other settlers are less concerned than he is about being stranded on a possibly malevolent, constantly shifting and changing planet. Harry, in a panic, suggests that they build a **rocket** to return to Earth, but they reject this idea. The other settlers have already accepted many of the changes that Mars has wrought and are not overly worried about them. They point out that Harry himself is changing, showing him in a mirror that his eyes are developing the signature Martian **gold** flecks.

While Harry still devotedly works on his rocket, he begins to experience other changes. His eyes grow more **golden**, along with those of his family and friends, and their skin begins to darken in the Martian sun. Waking up from sleep one night, he is startled to find that he has been speaking in the Martian language. Increasingly panicked, Harry shuns the company of the other settlers, preferring to spend long hours working on the **rocket**.

Harry's ruminations on names and language reflect his continued anxieties surrounding memories, history, and the past, indicating that identity is fluid and changeable, and that individual people and even whole civilizations can be easily lost to the passage of time.



What was once intimately familiar and natural is gradually beginning to change with prolonged exposure to the Martian environment, reflecting the ways in which place can shift perception and identity even in regards to the most basic and ordinary things, like plants and animals. Harry struggles to come to terms with his extreme fear of and resistance toward the changes that the Martian environment is working upon the settlement.



Unlike Harry, the other settlers have largely accepted the changes, and have come to see the Mars as familiar and comfortable, indicating that they already consider the planet their home rather than a temporary colony, and are no longer put off by the strange environment. Harry, meanwhile, is still resistant to that change, even and especially changes to his own person, and he struggles with what becoming fully "Martian" might mean for himself and his family.



As the Martian influence continues to pervade the lives of the Bitterings both physically and mentally, the family changes even without their realizing it. In particular, their gradual switch to Martian language indicates the ways in which language and memory intertwine and influence one another, with their forgetfulness of Earthly things growing in tandem with their new Martian appearance and speech. Undergoing these changes, they are becoming a native part of the planet, rather than unattached colonizers.



Cora finally encourages Harry to pause his work on the **rocket** and join the family for a picnic and swim in the Martian canals. Cora is already displaying the forgetful symptoms of the other settlers with respect to their former lives on Earth, and she asserts that her eyes have always been golden, unaware of the recent change. Harry, while swimming, reflects that not all change is bad, and that some change is regenerative and positive. The children begin insisting on being called Martian names, and the parents eventually relent. They come across a small Martian villa and reflect upon how pleasant it would be to live there, but Harry insists that they return to town for the moment.

Harry's drive to work on the **rocket** dwindles as the settlers become more and more at home on Mars and their ties to Earth grow weaker. One day, he sees other settlers packing up to move up to the mountains and into the abandoned villas that they had seen earlier. When Harry asks them where they are going, he is startled to realize that they now almost exclusively use the Martian names for the mountain ranges and rivers. Eventually, Harry himself is persuaded to move up there, and he and his family begin packing up their belongings. However, they are no longer attached to most of the things that they have brought from Earth, whether that be encyclopedias or fancy dresses, specially designed furniture or once-cherished books. They end up leaving much of it behind them when they leave the old settlement.

The family moves up to the villas, and become even more thoroughly Martian. They begin entirely calling each other by Martian names, speaking the Martian language, and embodying a Martian lifestyle of leisure. They gradually forget that they were ever even from Earth, looking with pity upon the small Earth settlement and wondering what became of the people there. While Harry wonders once or twice whether they should return, they ultimately remain in the villa, having forgotten everything about Earth. He and Cora reflect on how "odd" and "ridiculous" the houses of the "ugly" Earth people are, and how "glad" they are that the Earth people have finally gone.

As they continue to forget both their former lives on Earth and their former language, the Bittering family adapts more fully to the Martian environment. They begin to consider inhabiting the Martian villas rather than their own settlements, indicating the ways in which they are relinquishing the trappings of their ill-suited colonial possessions in favor of those that are better suited to their new environment and lifestyle.



The settlers' assimilation to Mars is reflected in the fact that they now use the Martian names for things—there is no longer any disconnect between the place where they live and the names that they use, since they now refer to everything by the original Martian names rather than English interpolations. Similarly, their Earthly possessions are relinquished in favor of things that are more appropriate to the Martian environment, indicating the ways in which the settlers now belong more fully to Mars than to Earth.



In moving up to the villas, in speaking the Martian language more and more, and in their forgetfulness about their own past, the settlers are shown to have become fully "Martian," with little to no trace of their Earthly origins present. Their gradual change represents the transformative power of place, and the ways in which colonization fails to account for the particularities of different environments. At the same time, their forgetfulness is tinged with melancholy, as much of what Harry initially feared has come to pass, with their initial identities swept away by the Martian wind.



Five years later, a Captain and Lieutenant from Earth arrive, declaring that they won the war and are there to rescue the settlers. They are startled to realize that the settlement has been abandoned, and they chalk the disappearance up to a mysterious plague. They mistake the old settlers, who have completely forgotten their origins, for native Martians, and begin plans to reconstruct and expand the settlement with new settlers from Earth. As the captain discusses various suggestions for new place names—such as the “Lincoln Mountains” or “Washington Canal”—the Lieutenant is distracted by the “blue color and the quiet mist of the hills far beyond town.”

The arrival of new settlers represents the continued efforts of Earth to colonize Mars and remake the planet in its own image. The initial settlers are now so transformed that they are no longer recognizable, reflecting the ways in which identity is tied to place and memory and is ultimately unstable and in flux. Furthermore, the story hints that the new settlers will go the way of the old settlers, already bewitched by the Martian hills and the different way of life that they might offer.





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