

## 'Embroidery' by Ray Bradbury

The dark porch air in the late afternoon was full of needle flashes, like a movement of gathered silver insects in the light. The three women's mouths twitched over their work. Their bodies lay back and then imperceptibly forward, so that the rocking chairs tilted and murmured. Each woman looked to her own hands, as if quite suddenly she had found her heart beating there.

'What time is it?'

'Ten minutes to five.'

Got to get up in a minute and shell those peas for dinner.'

'But -' said one of them.

'Oh yes, I forgot. How foolish of me ...' The first woman paused, put down her embroidery and needle, and looked through the open porch door, through the warm interior of the quiet house, to the silent kitchen. There upon the table, seeming more like symbols of domesticity than anything she had ever seen in her life, lay the mound of fresh-washed peas in their neat, resilient jackets, waiting for her fingers to bring them into the world.

'Go hull them if it'll make you feel good,' said the second woman.

'No,' said the first. 'I won't. I just won't.'

The third woman sighed. She embroidered a rose, a leaf, a daisy on a green field. The embroidery needle rose and vanished.

The second woman was working on the finest, most delicate piece of embroidery of them all, deftly poking, finding, and returning the quick needle upon innumerable journeys. Her quick black glance was on each motion. A flower, a man, a road, a sun, a house; the scene grew under hand, a miniature beauty, perfect in every threaded detail.

'It seems at times like this that it's always your hands you turn to,' she said, and the others nodded enough to make the rockers rock again.

'I believe,' said the first lady, 'that our souls are in our hands. For we do *everything* to the world with our hands. Sometimes I think we don't use our hands half enough; it's certain we don't use our heads.'

They all peered more intently at what their hands were doing.

'Yes,' said the third lady, 'when you look back on a whole lifetime, it seems you don't remember faces so much as hands and what they did.'

They recounted to themselves the lids they had lifted, the doors they had opened and shut, the flowers they had picked, the dinners they had made, all with slow or quick fingers, as was their manner or custom. Looking back, you saw a flurry of hands, like a magician's dream, doors popping wide, taps turned, brooms wielded, children spanked. The flutter of pink hands was the only sound; the rest was a dream without voices.

'No supper to fix tonight or tomorrow night or the next night after that,' said the third lady.

'No windows to open or shut.'

'No coal to shovel in the basement furnace next winter.'

'No papers to clip cooking articles out of.'

And suddenly they were crying. The tears rolled softly down their faces and fell into the material upon which their fingers twitched.

'This won't help things,' said the first lady at last, putting the back of her thumb to each under-eyelid. She looked at her thumb and it was wet.

'Now look what I've done!' cried the second lady exasperated. The others stopped and peered over. The second lady held out her embroidery. There was the scene, perfect except that while the embroidered yellow sun shone down upon the embroidered green field, and the embroidered brown road curved toward an embroidered pink house, the man standing on the road had something wrong with his face.

'I'll just have to rip out the whole pattern, practically, to fix it right,' said the second lady.

'What a shame.' They all stared intently at the beautiful scene with the flaw in it.

The second lady began to pick away at the thread with her little deft scissors flashing. The pattern came out thread by thread. She pulled and yanked, almost viciously. The man's face was gone. She continued to seize at the threads.

'What are you *doing*?' asked the other woman.

They leaned and saw what she had done.

The man was gone from the road. She had taken him out entirely.

They said nothing but returned to their own tasks.

'What time is it?' asked someone.

'Five minutes to five.'

'Is it supposed to happen at five o'clock?'

'Yes.'

'And they're not sure what it'll do to anything, really, when it happens?'

'No, not sure.'

'Why didn't we stop them before it got this far and this big?'

'It's twice as big as ever before. No, ten times, maybe a thousand.'

'This isn't like the first one or the dozen later ones. This is different. Nobody knows what it might do when it comes.'

They waited on the porch in the smell of roses and cut grass.

'What time is it now?'

'One minute to five.'

The needles flashed silver fire. They swam like a tiny school of metal fish in the darkening summer air.

Far away a mosquito sound. Then something like a tremor of drums. The three women cocked their heads, listening.

'We won't hear anything, will we?'

'They say not.'

'Perhaps we're foolish. Perhaps we'll go right on, after five o'clock, shelling peas, opening doors, stirring soups, washing dishes, making lunches, peeling oranges ...'

'My, how we'll laugh to think we were frightened by an old experiment!' They smiled a moment at each other.

'It's five o'clock.'

At these words, hushed, they all busied themselves. Their fingers darted. Their faces were turned down to the motions they made. They made frantic patterns. They made lilacs and grass and trees and houses and rivers in the embroidered cloth. They said nothing,

but you could hear their breath in the silent porch air.

Thirty seconds passed.

The second woman sighed finally and began to relax.

'I think I just *will* go shell those peas for supper,' she said. 'I ...'

But she hadn't time even to lift her head. Somewhere, at the side of her vision, she saw the world brighten and catch fire. She kept her head down, for she knew what it was. She didn't look up, nor did the others, and in the last instant their fingers were flying; they didn't glance about to see what was happening to the country, the town, this house, or even this porch. They were only staring down at the design in their flickering hands.

The second woman watched an embroidered flower go. She tried to embroider it back in, but it went, and then the road vanished, and the blades of grass. She watched a fire, in slow motion almost, catch upon the embroidered house and unshingle it, and pull each threaded leaf from the small green tree in the hoop, and she saw the sun itself pulled apart in the design. Then the fire caught upon the moving point of the needle while still it flashed; she watched the fire come along her fingers and arms and body, untwisting the yarn of her being so painstakingly that she could see it in all its devilish beauty, yanking out the pattern from the material at hand. What it was doing to the other women or the furniture or the elm tree in the yard, she never knew. For now, yes, now! it was plucking at the white embroidery of her flesh, the pink thread of her cheeks, and at last it found her heart, a soft red rose sewn with fire, and it burned the fresh, embroidered petals away, one by delicate one ...

# Critical position cards

## GREAT AUTHORS

I prefer to read literature written by great artists whose work has stood the test of time. Even a minor work by a great author has value. What is important is to read the text closely, without being distracted by questions about the writer's life, or too much concern with the conditions in which the work was produced. The writer's art is what the reader should be able to see clearly. This text interests me because ...  
I dislike this text because ...

## MORAL

For me, literature is nothing unless it teaches its readers something, and helps them to become better people. All good literature is basically moral and uplifting. It is important to consider the themes in the text, to understand its moral purpose. This text interests me because ...  
I dislike this text because ...

## STRUCTURALISM/POST-STRUCTURALISM

I am not interested so much in when a text was written, or who it was written by, or even what it is about. I believe that we use language, not simply to describe the world, but to construct it. Therefore, in literature, I am most interested in how the text is constructed: its form, its overall structure and the patterns of language in it, especially pairs of opposites. Texts from popular culture, societies, belief systems are all structures which can be explored and analysed like a literary text. Some critics who, like me, were interested in patterns and structures became more interested in the gaps, silences and absences in texts. They became known as post-structuralists. This text interests me because ...  
I dislike this text because ...

## GENRE THEORY

I believe that all literature can be classified into various types, or forms e.g. tragedy, comedy, romance, thriller, epic, lyric etc. I look for ways in which the text relates to the conventions of its genre. You can only really make sense of a text when you recognise the tradition to which it belongs. This text interests me because ...  
I dislike this text because ...

## READER-RESPONSE THEORY

I believe that the text needs to have a reader before it can mean anything. I work on constructing meanings from the text, filling in the gaps, making connections and predictions, and seeing how far these expectations of it are confirmed or disappointed. I think that the 'mistakes' a reader makes when predicting what will happen in a text are an important part of the meaning. This text interests me because ...  
I dislike this text because ...

## PSYCHOANALYTIC

Because of my interest in the unconscious, I pay most attention to what is glossed over or 'repressed'. I want to look beyond the obvious surface meaning to what the text is 'really' about. I also look for representations of psychological states or phases in literature, and am more interested in the emotional conflicts between the characters or groups in a text than in its wider context. This text interests me because ...  
I dislike this text because ...

### FEMINIST

I believe that 'feminine' and 'masculine' are ideas constructed by our culture, and it is important to be aware of this when reading texts from periods and cultures different from our own. I prefer to read literature written by women, which explores women's experience of the world. I am interested in how women are represented in texts written by men, and how these texts display the power relations between the sexes.

This text interests me because ...

I dislike this text because ...

### MARXIST

I read literature to understand the class struggle at various times and in various places, and to explore the causes of conflict between the privileged and the working class. I think it is important to relate a text to the social context of its author and the historical contexts in which it was written and is read.

This text interests me because ...

I dislike this text because ...

### RACE/POST-COLONIAL

The literature I prefer to read is often outside the white Anglo-Saxon tradition. I began by being interested in texts which explore the black struggle against injustice and oppression. I am aware of the negative portrayals of black people, and their absence generally, in white literature. I have become more interested in challenging the claims made by traditional critics that great literature has timeless and universal significance. I am aware when Eurocentric attitudes are taken for granted, and I look in the text for cultural, regional, social and national differences in outlook and experiences. I am interested in the way colonial countries and people are represented in texts by Western writers. I also explore the ways in which post-colonial writers write about their own identity and experiences.

This text interests me because ...

I dislike this text because ...

### CULTURAL MATERIALIST/NEW HISTORICIST

I read historical and other relevant texts, alongside the literary ones, in order to see more clearly the context in which the literature was produced, and to recover its history. I am interested in pre-twentieth century texts, often those written in the Renaissance, for example Shakespeare. I look at the ways these texts have been packaged and consumed in the present day. However, I also analyse the text closely, in order to question previous ways in which the text has been read. The word 'cultural' in my label means that I consider all forms of culture, popular as well as high culture, to be relevant; 'materialist' means that I believe that it is impossible for any form of culture to be independent of economic and political systems.

This text interests me because ...

I dislike this text because ...