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# FROM THE ACADEMY

## *Count Dracula and Mr. Ray Bradbury*

RUSSELL KIRK

In Los Angeles, Count Dracula is not forgotten. Not long ago I told ghost stories at the fifth annual awards dinner of the Count Dracula Society, meeting in Hollywood. This admirable association, devoted to the study of Gothic fiction and horror films, was founded chiefly by Mr. Donald Reed and Mrs. Manuel Weltman; originally they meant to establish a Gilbert and Sullivan Society, but they discovered that the memory of Dracula is greener in Los Angeles; so they settled for the noble vampire.

As the most fantastic of cities, Los Angeles is a fitting center for commemoration of the Gothic romance. Annually the Dracula Society (c/o Mr. Donald Reed, President, 334 West 54th Street, Los Angeles) presents its Ann Radcliffe awards, bearing the name of the lady author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. This year's recipient of the award for fiction was Mr. August Derleth; last year's, Mr. Ray Bradbury; the year before that, your servant was so honored.



*Kirk*

At the grand dinner of 1967, I sat between Miss Orriel Smith, the accomplished young singer of folk songs (always non-political, and sometimes Gothic), and our chief twentieth-century artist of the fantastic, Mr. Ray Bradbury himself. Somehow the author of *The Martian Chronicles* and I are forever rubbing elbows, much to my satisfaction; sometimes we even speechify on the same platform. Very truly has it been said that politics is the preoccupation of the quarter-educated; so, in my small capacity as a literary wanderer in the shadowy realm of the Gothic and the baroque (being the author of *Old House of Fear, The Surly Sullen Bell* and *A Creature of the Twilight*, the first of which has sold better than all my sober works put together), I extracted from Mr. Bradbury a report on his triumphal progress as Champion of Fantasy.

Those of my readers who have seen that very good film *Fahrenheit 451* have some notion of his power of imagination and expression. Yet the film (would that Bradbury himself had written the scenario, and directed it!) conveys only a tenth of Bradbury's mastery of language—and of terror, and of truth. What is very rare, Bradbury is as good a dramatist as he is a writer. His three short plays, *The World of Ray Bradbury*, ran for nearly a year in Los Angeles—but closed after a few days in Manhattan. In that hard latter fact one may find cause for reflection on the Manhattan mind and temper.

For Mr. Bradbury's one-act plays were the most entertaining and most meaningful I have seen on the stage for a great while. The rising generation of Los Angeles (of whom the handsome and youngish Mr. Bradbury is the chief hero) loved them. Yet the New York drama reviewers were more ferocious with Ray Bradbury than with any other man of mark in my memory, and they succeeded promptly in preventing anyone in New York from perceiving that high truth which is best revealed by allegory and proliferating fancy.

Mr. Bradbury (who, so far as he has any politics, thinks of himself as something of a revolutionary) was assailed by the New York critics as "a romantic reactionary." Charitably, Bradbury said to me that perhaps the Manhattan critics merely were waiting to gun him down once he should ride out of his Western fastness. But there was more to their vituperative detestation than that. They perceived that Bradbury is a moralist, which of course they cannot abide; that he has no truck with the obscene, which omission they find unpardonable; that he is no complacent liberal, because he knows the Spirit of the Age to be monstrous—for which let him be anathema; that he is one of the last surviving masters of rhetoric and description, which ought to be prohibited; that, with Pascal, he understands how the Heart has reasons which the Reason cannot know—so to the Rational Lamppost with him.

Yet Mr. Bradbury, in his good-natured way, is a man of war. At the end of April and the beginning of May, he will sally into New York once more, with a play call *Dandelion Wine*, to be seen on weekends in Lincoln Center. Another play of his soon will be produced in Los Angeles. Even those dull dogs the moviemakers are nibbling tentatively at some of his other romances, what with the success of *Fahrenheit 451*. *The Martian Chronicles*, though it would be very expensive to film, could be made into the Movie of the Century; and what matters more, it could be a regenerative force of high power.

### *Truth, Beauty and Witches*

For like C. S. Lewis, like J. R. R. Tolkien, Ray Bradbury has drawn the sword against the dreary and corrupting materialism of this century: against society as producer-and-consumer equation, against the hideousness in modern life, against mindless power, against sexual obsession, against sham intellectuality, against the perversion of right reason into the mentality of the TV viewer. His Martians, specters and witches are not diverting entertainment only: they become, in their eerie manner, the defenders of truth and beauty.

Take those three short plays, attacked by the Manhattan critics. *The Veldt* is a story of children abandoned by modern parents to the desolation of the Screen—and of how the thwarted imagination takes its vengeance. *To the Chicago Abyss* is a picture of the evocative power of tender trifles, after the Bomb has fallen. And the third play, about two men flung into prison for preferring nocturnal strolls to the compulsive TV screen, reminds us that the Total Society may not be so far distant as 1984. Mordant, prophetic, and full of loyalty to what deserves our love, Ray Bradbury confronts undismayed the hosts of decadence.