

Name _____

“There Will Come Soft Rains”/Chernobyl Webquest

In “There Will Come Soft Rains,” we read about the aftermath of a mysterious radioactive event. In class many of you questioned the plausibility of this story. While Bradbury does create a fictional world, he does so to warn against the reality of the dangers nuclear disaster.

In 1986 there was an accident at a nuclear power station in Chernobyl, Ukraine. Read some background information [here](#) and [here](#).

List 5 facts you learned about the disaster. Do not copy and paste. Use complete sentences.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Look through the pictures here, in a web article titled [“Chernobyl then and now: 28 haunting images from nuclear disaster”](#)

Write down three observations from looking at the pictures.

1.

2.

3.

George Johnson, a reporter for National Geographic, visited the Chernobyl site years later as a tourist. In the following excerpt he gives some background of the incident and then talks about what it was like visiting. Read his account of his time there:

In the early hours of April 26, 1986, during a scheduled shutdown for routine maintenance, the night shift at Chernobyl’s reactor number four was left to carry out an important test of the safety systems—one delayed from the day before, when a full, more experienced staff had been on hand.

Within 40 seconds a power surge severely overheated the reactor, rupturing some of the fuel assemblies and quickly setting off two explosions. The asphalt roof of the plant began burning, and, much more threatening, so did the graphite blocks that made up the reactor’s core. A plume of smoke

and radioactive debris rose high into the atmosphere and began bearing north toward Belarus and Scandinavia. Within days the fallout had spread across most of Europe.

Throughout the night firefighters and rescue crews confronted the immediate dangers—flames, smoke, burning chunks of graphite. What they couldn't see or feel—until hours or days later when the sickness set in—were the invisible poisons. Isotopes of cesium, iodine, strontium, plutonium. The exposures they received totaled as much as 16 sieverts—not micro or milli but whole sieverts, vastly more radiation than a body can bear. From the high-rises of Pripyat, less than two miles away, Chernobyl workers and their families stood on balconies and watched the glow.

In the morning—it was the weekend before May Day—they went about their routines of shopping, Saturday morning classes, picnics in the park. It was not until 36 hours after the accident that the evacuation began. The residents were told to bring enough supplies for three to five days and to leave their pets behind. The implication was that after a quick cleanup they would return home. That didn't happen. Crews of liquidators quickly moved in and began bulldozing buildings and burying topsoil. Packs of dogs were shot on sight. Nearly 200 villages were evacuated.

The immediate death toll was surprisingly small. Three workers died during the explosion, and 28 within a year from radiation poisoning. But most of the effects were slow in unfolding. So far, some 6,000 people who were exposed as children to irradiated milk and other food have had thyroid cancer. Based on data from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the overall mortality rate from cancer may rise by a few percent among the 600,000 workers and residents who received the highest doses, possibly resulting in thousands of premature deaths.

After the accident a concrete and steel structure—the sarcophagus—was hastily erected to contain the damaged reactor. As the sarcophagus crumbled and leaked, work began on what has been optimistically named the New Safe Confinement, a 32,000-ton arch, built on tracks so it can be slid into place when fully assembled. Latest estimate: 2017. Meanwhile the cleanup continues. According to plans by the Ukrainian government, the reactors will be dismantled and the site cleared by 2065. Everything about this place seems like science fiction. Will there even be a Ukraine?

What I remember most about the hours we spent in Pripyat is the sound and feel of walking on broken glass. Through the dilapidated hospital wards with the empty beds and cribs and the junk-strewn operating rooms. Through the school hallways, treading across mounds of broken-back books. Mounted over the door of an old science class was an educational poster illustrating the spectrum of electromagnetic radiation. Heat to visible light to x-rays and gamma rays—the kind that break molecular bonds and mutate DNA. How abstract that must have seemed to the schoolkids before the evacuation began.

In another room gas masks hung from the ceiling and were piled in heaps on the floor. They were probably left there, our guides told us, by “stalkers”—surreptitious visitors who sneak into the zone. At first they came to scavenge, later for the thrill. They drink from the Pripyat River and swim in Pripyat bay, daring the radiation and the guards to get them. A stalker I met later in Kiev said he'd been to Chernobyl a hundred times. “I imagined the zone to be a vast, burnt-out place—empty, horrible,” he told me. Instead he found forests and rivers, all this contaminated beauty.

Our tour group walked along the edge of a bone-dry public swimming pool, its high dive and racing clock still intact, and across the rotting floor of a gymnasium. Building after building, all decomposing. We visited the ruins of the Palace of Culture, imagining it alive with music and laughter, and the small amusement park with its big yellow Ferris wheel. Walking up 16 flights of steps—more glass crunching underfoot—we reached the top of one of the highest apartment buildings. The metal handrails had been stripped away for salvage. Jimmied doors opened onto gaping elevator shafts. I kept thinking how unlikely a tour like this would be in the United States. It was refreshing really. We were not even wearing hard hats.

From the rooftop we looked out at what had once been grand, landscaped avenues and parks—all overgrown now. Pripyat, once hailed as a model Soviet city, a worker's paradise, is slowly being reabsorbed by the earth.

In at least 3 complete sentences, summarize what George Johnson experienced as a tourist to the Chernobyl site.