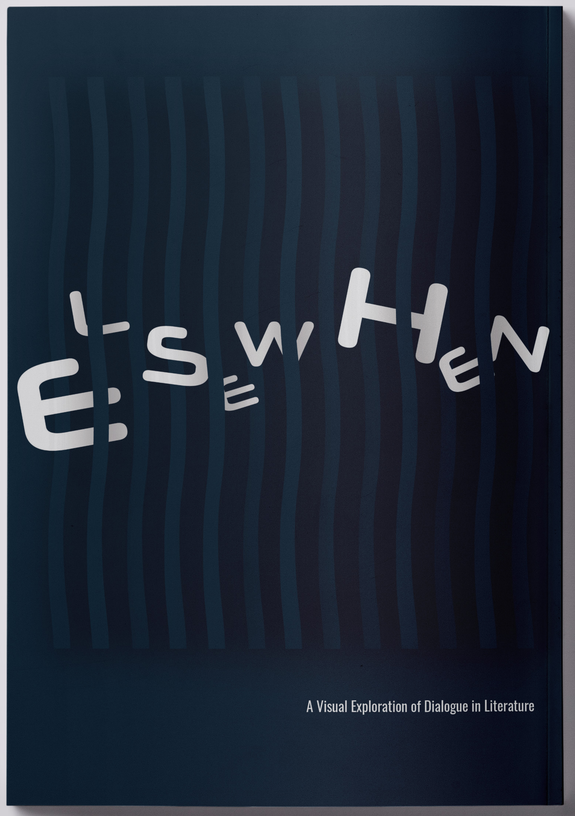
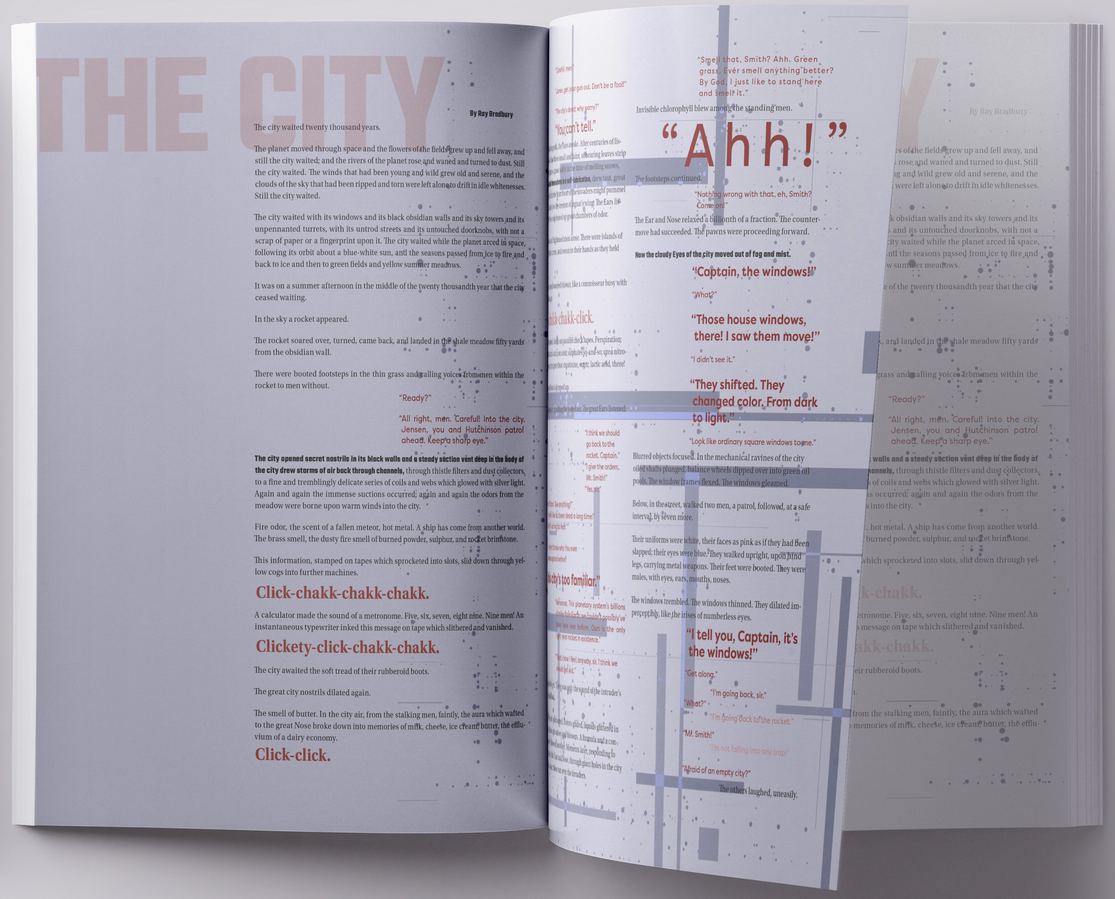

E:SWHEN
A Visual Exploration of Dialogue in Literature


THE CITY
By Ray Bradbury
The city waited twenty thousand years.
The planet moved through space and the flowers of the fields grew up and fell away, and still the city waited, and the rivers of the planet rose and waned and turned to dust. Still the city waited. The winds that had been young and wild grew old and serene, and the clouds of the sky that had been ripped and torn were left alone to drift in idle whitenesses. Still the city waited.
The city waited with its windows and its black obsidian walls and its sky towers and its unpennanted turrets, with its untrod streets and its untouched doorknobs, with not a scrap of paper or a fingerprint upon it. The city waited while the planet arced in space, following its orbit about a blue-white sun, until the seasons passed from ice to fire and back to ice and then to green fields and yellow summer meadows.
It was on a summer afternoon in the middle of the twenty thousandth year that the city ceased waiting.
In the sky a rocket appeared.
The rocket soared over, turned, came back, and landed in the shale meadow fifty yards from the obsidian wall.
There were booted footsteps in the thin grass and calling voices. Ermemen within the rocket to men without.
"Ready?"
"All right, men. Careful! Into the city. Jensen, you and Hutchinson patrol ahead. Keep a sharp eye."
The city opened secret nostrils in its black walls and a steady suction vent deep in the body of the city drew storms of air back through channels, through thistle filters and dust collectors, to a fine and tremblingly delicate series of coils and webs which glowed with silver light. Again and again the immense suctions occurred, again and again the odors from the meadow were borne upon warm winds into the city.
Fire odor, the scent of a fallen meteor, hot metal. A ship has come from another world. The brass smell, the dusty fire smell of burned powder, sulphur, and rocket brimstone.
This information, stamped on tapes which sprocketed into slots, slid down through yellow cogs into further machines.
Click-chakk-chakk-chakk.
A calculator made the sound of a metronome. Five, six, seven, eight nine. Nine men! An instantaneous typewriter inked this message on tape which slithered and vanished.
Clickety-click-chakk-chakk.
The city awaited the soft tread of their rubberoid boots.
The great city nostrils dilated again.
The smell of butter. In the city air, from the stalking men, faintly, the aura which wafted to the great Nose broke down into memories of milk, cheese, ice cream, butter, the effluvium of a dairy economy.
Click-click.
"Smell that, Smith? Ahh. Green grass. Ever smell anything better? By God, I just like to stand here and smell it."
Invisible chlorophyll blew among the standing men.
"Ahh!"
The footsteps continued.
"Nothing wrong with that, eh, Smith? Come on."
The Ear and Nose relaxed a millionth of a fraction. The countermove had succeeded. The pawns were proceeding forward.
Now the cloudy Eyes of the city moved out of fog and mist.
"Captain, the windows!"
"What?"
"Those house windows, there! I saw them move!"
"I didn't see it."
"They shifted. They changed color. From dark to light."
"Look like ordinary square windows to me."
Blurred objects focused. In the mechanical ravines of the city odd shafts plunged; balance wheels dipped over into green oil pools. The window frames closed. The windows gleamed.
Below, in the street, walked two men, a patrol, followed, at a safe interval, by seven more.
Their uniforms were white, their faces as pink as if they had been slapped, their eyes were blue. They walked upright, upon hind legs, carrying metal weapons. Their feet were booted. They were males, with eyes, ears, mouths, noses.
The windows trembled. The windows thinned. They dilated imperceptibly, like the irises of numberless eyes.
"I tell you, Captain, it's the windows!"
"Get along."
"I'm going back, sir."
"What?"
"I'm going back to the rocket."
"Mr. Smith!"
"I'm not falling into any trap!"
"Afraid of an empty city?"
The others laughed, uneasily.