

### *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury

The novel *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury was written in 1953. This novel portrays the cultural environment in America in the early 1950s and political and social relations in a society (Nolan 3). Bradbury portrays a society where firemen burn all books they can find in order to prevent proliferation of progressive ideas and knowledge. This novel is full of symbolism which helps the author to appeal to readers and create a unique atmosphere in the novel. Bradbury creates a story conflict and appeals to emotions of readers through images and unique symbols which support plot development and unveil cultural and social problems and false ideals.

The novel deals with fire and death though it was necessary to conceive new rituals and customs from the ashes of America bent on destroying itself and the whole world. Bradbury assumes that his vision of America and Americans is a form of the game that might take place in reality. That is, the book imbues the metaphorical images with a political gesture aimed at influencing the reader's conscience and subsequent behavior in a society (Blakey 34). While Bradbury obviously takes a position against the mass degradation of humanity, there are curious massive contradictions in his illumination of social tendencies which make his own position questionable (Bustard 32). The symbol of fire can be perceived as a struggle of an individual against the state, or as individualism versus conformity:

Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord. You firemen provide a circus now and then at which buildings are set off and crowds gather for the pretty blaze, but it's a small sideshow indeed, and hardly necessary to keep things in line. (Bradbury 94)

In the process despite the overwhelming powers of state control through mass media and technology, he forces his hero Montag undergo a process of re-humanization (Clareson 11). Montag must shed the influences of the state's monopoly of the consciousness industry and renew ties with his humanistic impulse. Significantly, this process begins with his entering the firehouse where he starts doubting his profession. The mood is set by the firemen playing cards in the tidy, polished firehouse, idling away their time, and the "radio hummed somewhere. ... war may be declared any hour. This country stands ready to defend its" (Bradbury 38).

Thus, in Beatty's view, the firemen are the keepers of peace. He cynically argues that a profession of firemen has to keep people happy and answer their claims. That is why it conducts espionage and has a computerized system to keep track of each and every citizen in the United States. Yet, despite Beatty's explanation, Montag is firm in his resolution for he suspects that there is more to Beatty's analysis than meets the eye. Intuitively, he recalls Clarisse's discussion about her uncle and the front porches which were eliminated from people's homes because the architects (i.e., the government) did not want people to be active, talkative, and communicative (Hofstadter 39).

The hero becomes impressed by the image of death when he gets to know that his wife has attempted suicide. This is startling but what is even more startling for Montag is the mechanical, indifferent way the operators treat his wife with a machine that revives her by pumping (Wetzel 34). As Bradbury's mouthpiece, Clarisse wonders whether Montag is actually happy leading a death-in-life, and Montag quickly realizes

that he is not happy when he enters his sterile and fully automatic house (Reid 12). He proceeds to the room where his wife Mildred is ostensibly sleeping and feels that:

The room was cold but nonetheless he felt he could not breathe. He did not wish to open the curtains and open the French windows, for he did not want the moon to come into the room. So, with the feeling of a man who will die in the next hour for lack of air, he felt his way toward his open, separate, and therefore cold bed. (Bradbury 19 )

As a law-enforcer, Montag symbolizes those forces of repression which were executing the orders of McCarthy supporters and the conservative United States government led by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, and J. Edgar Hoover. He is not a simple law officer, but he belongs to the special agency of liquidation and espionage, similar to the FBI and CIA (Scholes and Rabkin 22) .

Moreover, he is an insider, a thirty year old person, who has reached full manhood and is perhaps at his most virile stage (McGiveron 282). This is exactly the reason why he was created and chosen by Bradbury:

And it looks like we're doing the same thing, over and over, but we've got one damn thing the phoenix never had. We know the damn silly thing we just did. We know all the damn silly things we've done for a thousand years and as long as we know that and always have it around where we can see it, someday we'll stop making the goddamn funeral pyres and jumping into the middle of them. (Bradbury 177)

At thirty, Montag is also entering a critical stage and is most susceptible to outside influences. Therefore, he is perfect for initiating the game of the possible. Montag likes

his job. He gets pleasure out of burning, and his virility is closely linked to "the brass nozzle in his fists, with this great python spitting its venomous kerosene upon the world" (Scholes and Rabkin 28). Readers first encounter Montag in a fit of orgasm, idealistically fulfilling his mission of purging the world of evil books. The image of book-burning, the symbolic helmet, the uniform with a salamander on the arm and a phoenix disc on his chest suggest a situation of the past, namely the Nazis, swastikas, and book-burning of the 1930s. But it is not far from the realm of possibility (early 50s in America), and then Montag, as an American fireman, might be pouring kerosene over books and burning them. The censorship of books which dealt with socialism, eroticism, and sexuality in early 50s made the extension of Montag's actions conceivable for Bradbury and his readers (Scholes and Rabkin 37). Indeed, the novel begins with an acceptable statement for the silent 1950's in America which demanded a silence to all dissent: "It was a pleasure to burn" (Bradbury 11). Here male identity is immediately associated with liquidation and destruction, with dictatorial power.

Bradbury plays with the unconscious desires of the American male and sends them into the future while at the same time he immediately questions that reality (Suvin 88).

The image of learning experience is initiated by Clarisse McClellan who makes him wonder why people talk and why he does not pay attention to small things. The name Clarisse suggests light, clarity, and illumination, and Montag must be enlightened concerning this. His own ability to discuss, see, feel, and hear has been muted. He is unconscious of his own history and the powers influencing him (Suvin 76). Clarisse infers that his consciousness has been stunted by the two-hundred foot-long billboards, the parlor walls, races, and fun parks, she avoids all that because they

prevent her from being alone with her own thoughts (Reid 62). Thus, she illuminates the way Montag must take not only for his own self-questioning but for the reader's own questioning of the consciousness industry in America.

Bradbury wants to get at the roots of American conformity and immediately points the finger at the complicity of state and industry for using technology to produce television programs, gambling sports games, amusement parks, and advertising to block self-reflection and blank out the potential for alternative ways of living which do not conform to fixed national standards (Suvin 76).

Throughout the novel, war lurks on the background until it finally erupts. The obvious reference here is the Cold War and the Korean War which might lead to such an atomic explosion as the one that occurs at the end of the book (Segall 87). Again, media spread one-sided news about nation's critical situation, driving the people hysterically to war instead of convincing them to seek means for communication and co-existence. Montag gradually learns how the government manipulates the masses through media, shows of using force, and legal measures to pursue its own ends. His first lesson is quick and simple when he talks about a man who was obviously sane but was taken to an insane asylum because he was reading books and built his own library. Captain Beatty remarks: "Any man's insane who thinks he can fool the Government and us" (Bradbury 39). Montag's next lesson comes from his direct experience of witnessing a woman kills herself because her books are burned by the firemen. This incident makes Montag bring a book back to his own house and to question what it is in books that would encourage a woman to stay in a burning house. For the first time in his life he realizes that books were based on human's effort and

feelings, and he decides, despite a warning visit from Beatty, to carry out an experiment with his wife so that they can understand why their lives are in such a mess. This time he tries a different ploy by placing the responsibility on other people. He is arguing that different ethnic minority and interest groups did not want controversial subjects aired in books (Clareson 44). This led to vapid and insipid publications:

But the public, knowing what it wanted, spinning happily, let the comic-books survive. And the three-dimensional sex-magazines, of course. Today, thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time, you are allowed to read comics, the good old confessions, or trade-journals. (Bradbury 61)

A pill can be seen as a symbol of total and state control over the life of citizens. Moreover, Montag becomes highly disturbed when the pill given to his wife by the operators made her unaware next morning and she decided that she had tried to take her own life. Montag suffers because Clarisse has made him more sensitive. The manner, in which technology is being used, even in the field of medicine, is to deaden the senses while keeping people alive as machines. He is a part of the deadening process. In fact, being dead by himself, he now begins to rise from the ashes like the phoenix. He is testing “wings” which he thought he had never had ( Scholes and Rabkin 63).

On the whole, symbols support plot development and help Bradbury to create vivid and bright images of wrong social values and the image of totalitarian society. Here Bradbury suggests that the anti-intellectual strain in America forces most intellectuals to take an outsider position where it is difficult to influence people from. In

his book, Bradbury uses symbols of fire, books and firemen in order to show the capacity of human to control the process of labor with the help of machinery. From the beginning of capitalism, production may be controlled by the owners and representatives of capital, not by the direct producer. The mass of humanity is subjected to the labor process for the purposes of those, who control it, rather than for any general purposes of "humanity".

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