
**SYMBOLISM AND THE DYSTOPIAN TRADITION IN RAY BRADBURY'S
FAHRENHEIT 451.**

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Abstract: Science fiction is a genre of fiction in which the stories often tell about science and technology of the future and holds an important place in the direction and future of mankind. As it stimulates thought beyond the present here and now, science fiction is able to perform services for the progression of human kind as no other genre can. Science fiction novels which describe societies that are bleak, restrictive, and totalitarian are called as dystopias. Ray Bradbury is one of the most celebrated science fiction and fantasy writers of the twentieth century. Bradbury's internationally acclaimed novel Fahrenheit 451 is a masterwork of twentieth century literature published in 1953 during the McCarthy era and the Cold War. Bradbury in his dystopian novel depicts a frightening society in which reading books or for that matter even own them are strictly forbidden, the firemen are tasked to burn books instead of extinguishing fires. The society restricts people from reading books, encourages them to watch nonsense on television and avoid deep emotional conversation which reflects the dehumanized lives people were leading.

In this paper an endeavour is made to examine Ray Bradbury's satire, Fahrenheit 451, a novel which is full of symbols criticizing the modern world. Bradbury incorporates symbolism throughout the novel which gives the novel a deeper meaning and serves as a warning to contemporary man about the negative future where humanity is oppressed and freedom of thought and expression are suppressed. A humble attempt is also made to show the numbing effects of technology on human mind, our addiction to popular forms of entertainment, consumerism, which warns us against some modern trend that will eventually rob us of our human interaction, values and morality. The novel is a thought provoking one which draws many similarities to our current society and is relevant even in the present time. It depicts Bradbury's vision into future and reflects his concern about censorship and conformity which suppresses individual freedom and above all his genuine love for books.

Keywords: censorship, dystopia, phoenix, satire, salamander, Science fiction.

Introduction: Science fiction genre having evolved from the industrial revolution has brought forth time machines, computers, robots and rockets. The genre deals with a myriad of societies, encouraging the possibility of different futures. Ray Bradbury championed as one of America's greatest storytellers, has helped bring the genre of science fiction into the forefront of literature. Science fiction novels that describe societies that are bleak, restrictive, and totalitarian are called dystopias. Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 a dystopian novel is perhaps one of the best-known science fiction, novels that is widely read today. It is often compared to George Orwell's 1984 and Aldous Huxley's Brave New World the other dystopian novels which created such societies where people were leading dehumanized lives and often dangerous too.

"You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them." Ray Bradbury.

Historical context of the novel: Fahrenheit 451 was written by Bradbury on the basis of several historical

events that took place during the early 1930s. Bradbury's lifelong passion with books began at an early age. He had been nurtured as a child on books and frequently visited the local libraries in the 1920s and 1930s. He also learnt about the destruction of the ancient Library of Alexandria which resulted in the colossal loss of cultural knowledge. This had a great impact on him about the vulnerability of books to censure and destruction. Bradbury was merely fifteen years old, when he witnessed the scene of books being burnt on the streets of Berlin during Hitler's regime. The burning of books during the 1930s became a major symbol of the repression that followed in Nazi Germany. Later Senator Joseph McCarthy began to focus on writers, poets and film makers, the question of artistic freedom troubled many people. It was within this context of artistic repression and also his concerns about the threat of book burning in the U. S that Bradbury expanded his story "The Fireman" into a full length novel. The importance of books and the freedom to read them was a major concern of liberal-minded people during the 1950s. His fear of losing this freedom is apparently

seen in the novel where reading was not encouraged and literature was being reduced.

In the 1930s-40s, Ray Bradbury witnessed technological advances such as the growing popularity of television, and increased performance from radios. There was a widespread fear of the technology dominating human lives. Bradbury saw these forms of media as a source of distraction from reading books, being aware of important affairs, indeed as a threat to society. Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451* on a rental typewriter in the basement of UCLA's Powell Library, the origin of the idea of books being burned in the novel was written amidst thousands of books and creative imagination.

The Storyline: *Fahrenheit 451* a short novel is an expansion of a story, "The Fireman" originally published in *Galaxy* in 1951. Book burning and book preservation are the central ideas in all the three parts of the novel. It is perhaps one of the best-known dystopian science fiction, novels in which the fire fighters are tasked to burn books instead of extinguishing fires. The novel begins in an unspecified futuristic American city where the protagonist Guy Montag is a fireman who sets fire by burning books rather than extinguishing them. In Montag's society people are prohibited from reading books, exercising freedom of thought and expression and are encouraged to watch television. In the beginning he takes pleasure in burning books and feels a sense of pride in his job because by doing so he keeps his society happy and free from conflicting opinions.

His life seems comfortable till he meets Clarisse McClellan, his new neighbour, a teenager whose innocence, free-thinking ideals and liberating spirit cause him to question his life and his own perceived happiness. She makes him examine himself, his actual role as a fireman and the emptiness in his life and an important instrument in his transformation. Montag introspects himself and experiences a series of disturbing events. To begin with, his wife Mildred who attempts to commit suicide by consuming an over dose of sleeping pills. At the fire station they have a Mechanical Hound, which is usually employed to track people with illegal book collections. Now the Hound seems to get suspicious about Montag's secret of hoarding books taken from his fires that it begins to strike at Montag when he comes to work. The next person is an old woman who has a stash of hidden literature and chooses to be burned alive along with her books rather than sacrifice them. He wonders why books inspire such passion that a woman is willing to burn herself along with her books rather than live without them.

It took some man a lifetime may be to put some of his thoughts down, looking around at the world and life. (Bradbury 49)

This incident further shakes up Montag who begins to introspect himself, which leads him into a series of problems both at his workplace and at home. His wife is one who is completely obsessed with television, totally indifferent to the world outside and considers the idea of reading books as a crime. Montag reveals to Mildred that over the last year he has accumulated a stash of books that he has kept hidden in their air-conditioning duct and looks to her for help and support. Montag ventures the risk of reading books, much against the wishes of his wife and boss to find the true meaning in them which is strictly forbidden in his society. He rebels against his chief Captain Beatty, the other firemen, his society and destroys the Mechanical Hound which attacks him several times. He then begins to question the government's motive behind burning books. He seeks help from a retired Professor named Faber to understand the meaning hidden in the books that he has stolen from different places before burning them. Faber helps him to realise the value of books, and awareness of life that they contain.

Do you know why books such as this are so important? Because they have quality... To me it means texture. This book has pores. (Bradbury 79)

Montag escapes from the city and joins the book people in the country which is headed by Granger who are all book lovers and memorize them. While in the country, Guy and the exiles watch as the city is bombed with a nuclear bomb as part of the war, destroying everyone. The next day, the leader, Granger, and Montag move on to the city, determined to rebuild it from the ashes. Eventually the fireman Montag transforms from a book burner to a living book when he memorizes the book of *Ecclesiastes*.

Symbolism in the novel: Symbolism is the practice of using symbols or a set of related symbols to represent objects or idea, by giving them an associated or symbolic character and meaning. Bradbury's satire, *Fahrenheit 451*, is a dystopian novel full of symbols that ridicules the modern world. Bradbury incorporates symbolism in all the three parts of the novel, "The Hearth and the Salamander", "The Sieve and the Sand", and "Burning Bright."

The Title Fahrenheit 451: The degrees is “The temperature at which book paper catches fire, and burns...” This is because in Fahrenheit 451 books are illegal and firemen are tasked to burn any books they find to keep the society happy without any conflicting opinions. By saying that Montag, who is a “fireman,” wears the “symbolic helmet numbered 451,” Bradbury is stressing the irony that Montag’s job as a fireman is to burn things, rather than to save them from burning. The opening lines of the novel gives a description of Montag’s pleasure to burn.

It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed.
(Bradbury 1)

The Hearth and The Salamander: In this first part the hearth is a fireplace, a traditional symbol of home which gives us warmth and brings out the constructive side of fire. The other image is that of a salamander which is a creature that lives in fire and is resistant to it. Perhaps the salamander is symbolic of Guy Montag, who is being described as a salamander because he works with fire, and endures it, but believes that he can escape the fire and survive, just like a salamander does. The firefighters do the opposite of their intended purpose; they start fires to burn books, the salamander represents the destructive uses of fire. Fire symbolizes destruction of knowledge and hope. It is ironic to note that Montag and others believe themselves to be salamanders but the mighty flame destroys them.

Fire: Fire is one of the most important symbols in the novel which has a dual image. At the outset Montag enjoys his work as a fireman and feels it is a key to all problems in the society of his time. In the work of the fireman it is seen as a destructive force which burns books and the freedom of thought that they represent. But in reality fire is a destructive force which destroys books, people and homes including the very own house of Montag and also the city from which he barely escaped. On the contrary fire also symbolizes something which is positive, bright and a source of warmth and goodness. In the last part Burning Bright the fire at the campsite gives people living there life and helps them to sustain. It becomes a symbol of warmth rather than a source of destruction or threat. Montag meets the Book people, a group of scholars who share their ideas, books and memorize them as they are all sitting around a campfire that gives them the warmth. In the beginning it is a symbol of destruction, and towards the end it becomes a symbol of warmth. Fire changes its connotations and begins to symbolize promise and hope.

The Mechanical Hound: In the novel it is the most frightening symbol, an eight-legged robotic dog-like

creature that resides in the firehouse and aids the firemen. A robotic device which sniffs and attacks those who read books illegally and relentlessly destroys people who do not conform to the rules.

In the words of Johnson, “Montag’s particular enemy is the fire station’s Mechanical Hound. As Montag becomes more fascinated with books and nearer to betrayal of his duties as a fireman, the hound becomes more suspicious of him. The Hound is then symbolic of the relentless, heartless pursuit of the State.”

The Hound was a programmed robot that didn’t do things on its own and represents the absence of natural things. Bradbury uses the Mechanical Hound, the most frightening symbol which is devoid of human compassion and represents the dehumanizing side of technology. This fierce creature seems to have powers greater than human ones; it has inescapable tracking capabilities, and can capture its victims with just one sting of anaesthetic. Eventually Montag escapes from the dangerous mechanical world of the city to the traditional haven of the country.

The Sieve and the Sand: This is the title of the second part in the novel which comes from Montag’s childhood memory when his cousin had asked him to fill a sieve with sand on the beach to get a dime. Montag realised the futility of the task. This incident can be compared to his attempt in reading the whole Bible quickly on the subway with a hope that he could remember something. The sand is a symbol of truth which he tries to search and the sieve represents the human mind seeking it. The title is symbolic of Montag’s refinement of character after he meets Clarisse and Faber, who are instrumental in changing him from a fireman to a good human with values and knowledge.

Burning bright: The Phoenix: Bradbury uses the symbol of The Phoenix in the last part Burning Bright where Granger compares mankind to it which burns itself and rises out of its ashes again. Montag and the group watch helplessly as bombers fly overhead and attack the city with nuclear weapons, completely annihilating it. Granger and his men that survive see this as an opportunity to be reborn-like a phoenix rising from the ashes. Fire becomes a symbol of renewal, out of the ashes, the mythical bird will be renewed, suggesting that a new society will be born from the ashes of the old one. Granger emphasizes that man has something the phoenix does not: mankind can remember the mistakes it made from before it destroyed itself, and try to not make them again. In the beginning of the novel Montag is intoxicated with the smell of kerosene, the sight of fire and is fond of burning books but it is this same

fire that burns him from within, purifies him, and makes him realize the true value of books which are a great source of knowledge. Montag had a downfall in the novel but he rises like the phoenix from the ashes to rediscover himself. It also symbolises Montag's spiritual resurrection which transforms him from a book burner to a living book. The symbols add much insight and depth to the story line. Bradbury's use of symbolism throughout renders the book moving and powerful and reinforces his ideas of anticensorship.

The Dystopian Tradition: Dystopia is anti-utopia, an imaginary place where the state or society is miserable. It is seen as a warning to the contemporary man against some modern trend. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury presents a dystopia in which he depicts numbing effects of technology on the mankind that they refuse to think. The people in Montag's world were living in a society where they never read books, enjoy nature or think independently, ask questions or have meaningful conversations. In the novel he describes Montag and his society live in a fast-paced world where the speed limit is so high that everything that they see seems like blurs. They never see objects but only colours. Being a pedestrian or driving slowly is considered as an offence. This is clearly seen when Clarisse converses with him.

"I sometimes think drivers 'don't know what grass is, or flowers because they never see them slowly,' she said. "If you showed a driver a green blur, Oh yes! he'd say, that's grass! A pink blur! That's a rose garden! White blurs are houses. Brown blurs are cows. My uncle drove slowly on a highway once. He drove forty miles an hour and they jailed him for two days"(Bradbury 6).

Montag as a fireman enjoyed his job, conformed to the rules, never questioned the state, and donned a mask of happiness especially when it comes to his life at home and work. But in reality he was living a miserable life which was dark and empty. His wife Mildred was fascinated by the parlour walls which kept her constantly amused and her obsession was such with the Parlour walls that she would call them as her family.

"Now", said Mildred, "My family" is people. They tell me things: I laugh, they laugh!(Bradbury 69)

Her fascination towards virtual world made her completely indifferent to the real world outside. She immerses herself in an addiction to both tranquilizer, her Seashell radios, and senseless shallow media which became a barrier between the couple. The walls represent her close-mindedness toward her husband and the reality that is their present society. Mildred and her friends, due to their addiction to parlour walls are ignorant of the upcoming war, which

eventually led to their death. This is the realization that this society follows a dystopian tradition where millions of lives were lost due to their ignorance, lack of freedom and thought and addiction to media which turned them into zombies.

In the words of Hamblen, No one communicates with anyone else on any but the most superficial level because the senses are completely inundated by the constant sound and music blaring from vast TV- walls and transistor radios.

Bradbury deals with in his book the Mechanical Hound, which is personified, has made the creature seem so real that it exists in the novel as an important character. A device of terror, the development of it is to be feared because they do not possess human qualities and might even be able to take control over human beings.

According to Johnson Fahrenheit 451 is not primarily a work of social criticism. Its anti machine and anti war elements are there primarily as background for Montag's spiritual development.

Bradbury's vision into future: Bradbury while writing satirically in a setting depicted in the future, invented technology that would be developed decades later in a similar manner which proves the fact that some of his prophecies have come true.

Fahrenheit 451 is a book which still reflects to our current world. Their society is similar to the one which we are living in today. It draws similarities to the present time where we are living a busy stressed out and fast paced life. Our speed limit isn't as high as theirs is, but people usually drive fast cars much faster than the usual speed limit is. Bradbury presents television in *Fahrenheit 451*, the society that was obsessed with parlour walls which still remains the same to this day, People are addicted to watching television on wall-size, large flat TV screens, home theatre systems, listening music, browsing the net, using Facebook where there is wall to post and see messages, They interact with each other only by means of computers, social networking sites, digital connections. The usage of "seashells" and "thimble radios," in the novel are very similar to our present time latest i-pods, head phones and Bluetooth headsets and all this has competed with reading books.

Today, technophilia has led to an ever increasing demand on more advanced machinery to make our lives better and comfortable. Bradbury rather than marvelling about the potential for humans to develop new gadgets, warns us of the devastating effects they can have on us and our society. In the present scenario man is so busy in his pursuit of pleasure and comfort but in the process he is losing the human touch, family time, values and spiritual strength.

Bradbury is warning us that in the present lifestyle with too much of dependence on technology, this sort of mindless addiction, pursuit of pleasure could lead to lack of human interaction and the likelihood of getting disconnected. Humans who are so prone to accept technological advancement and its comforts should also preserve their human touch, morality and above all values which are the very foundation of civilized society. This novel unlike other dystopian novels brings out a ray of hope for mankind to learn

from his mistakes and value books which are the most important element of intellectual freedom. *Fahrenheit 451* is an illustration of the fact that science fiction can comment eloquently in a realistic tone on social problems and succeeds in warning mankind. (Mogen) His skill for causing readers to think while entertaining them makes him one of the most celebrated authors of the 20th and 21st centuries. *There are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them.* Ray Bradbury.

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