

**TOTALITARIANISM AND ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM IN RAY  
BRADBURY'S "FAHRENHEIT 451" (1953)**

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyzes the novel "Fahrenheit 451" (1953) written by American writer Ray Bradbury. It is a dystopian piece of writing, set in a post-apocalyptic America, that seeks to warn against what might happen if the tendencies dominating American society of that era would not change. The novel should be regarded as a reaction against censorship practices established during the McCarthy era and against the rapid development of technology that led to television and advertising having a strong influence on American population, especially the younger generation. The entire novel is permeated by a deep concern about the negative effects of totalitarianism and the suppression of intellectual pursuits that characterize the society depicted by Bradbury. The paper provides an analysis of the totalitarianism and anti-intellectualism displayed in the novel. The conclusion is that there is a high degree of idealism in Bradbury's optimism regarding the ability of intellectuals and book lovers to create a new, reformed society. At the same time, contemporary democracies with their current characteristics –preference for comfort, contempt for argumentative debates and obsession for political correctness – might, one day, produce totalitarian elements themselves*

**Keywords:** *dystopian, totalitarianism, anti-intellectualism, post-apocalyptic, warning;*

### **1.Introduction**

"Fahrenheit 451" (1953) is a dystopian novel written by American writer Ray Bradbury. The novel is very much embedded in the reality of the American cultural environment of the early 1950s and illustrates what the author identified as a wrong direction towards which humanity was heading at that point in time. It is impossible to understand the novel properly without connecting it with the larger realities of that era in both America and the entire world. The 1950s marked the beginning of the Cold War and concerns regarding the duration of the world peace established after World War II became more and more widespread. It was also the beginning of the nuclear era that had brought about the stark realization that humanity can be easily brought to an abrupt end by the use of mass destruction weapons. The conflict between South Korea and North Korea (1950-1953) threatened to escalate and many expected the worst to happen. In America, the McCarthy era had established censorship practices that were in total opposition with what the freedom of speech guaranteed by the American constitution. There was political repression and persecutions against all of those who were believed to spread the communist and socialist ideology. Moreover, the rapid development of technology led to television being an item in every American household. Coupled with the spread of advertising, the latter had a significant influence on American

population, in general and on American youth, in particular, making them more shallow and violent.

“*Fahrenheit 451*” (1953) should be regarded as a reaction against the political and cultural environment of that era in which Bradbury raises his concerns about the world at that point in time and tries to warn against what might happen if nothing is done to change things.

## **2. Sequence of events**

The novel tells the story of Guy Montag, a thirty-year old fireman in a dystopian American of the future. At no point in the novel is there exact mention of the year when the action takes place but, we are told that several atomic wars had already taken place. The novel is divided into three large chapters – “*The Hearth and the Salamander*”, “*The Sieve and the Sand*” and “*Burning Bright*”.

In the first chapter we learn that Montag is a fireman bearing the helmet numbered 451. However, the title of the novel comes from the fact that Bradbury understood that 451 Fahrenheit degrees is the temperature at which paper catches fire. Instead of putting out fires, as one might expect, firemen of that day start fires and their main task is to burn down all books together with their owners. Montag learns that previously firemen used to extinguish fires on his way home from work when he meets his neighbour – teenager Clarisse McClellan – with whom he has an eye-opening conversation that will eventually change the course of his life. After reaching home, Guy finds his wife Mildred, passed out and calls the Emergency hospital. She had attempted suicide but the medical team manage to bring her back to her senses and give her medication that makes her completely forget about what had happened the night before.

Montag is deeply shaken by an event during which he and his team burn down a woman who refuses to part with her books. However, he does manage to steal a book from the fire and brings it home in secrecy. Here he finds his wife Mildred doing what she did every single day – watching television games and being so totally wrapped up in them that she cannot form any connection with the real world. She does tell him, though, that Clarisse had been killed – run over by a car.

Sensing that something is wrong with Montag and in full awareness of the fact that he had stolen a book from the last fire, his boss – Captain Beatty- pays him a visit to explain what led to the current situation that sees firemen burn down books. Thus, we learn about the overpopulation, the shortened duration of school, the focus on sports to the detriment of in-depth thinking, the fact that minorities and special interest groups began criticizing books for the ideas expressed, for the difficulty in understanding them which made some feel inferior to others, etc. As a result, in order to avoid controversy and accusations, authors had ceased to produce intellectually challenging material and all we can find in the present world are comic books, three-dimensional sex magazines and scripts used during interactive television games that can be watched on parlor walls. Therefore, firemen are “*the*

*custodians of our peace of mind*” (Bradbury 2012: 56). No slippery stuff exists in this world, there are never two sides of a question.

Still, Montag continues to hide books in his house in the air-conditioning system and is determined to read them and see if they have any real value. His wife, of course, wants to destroy them.

In *“The Sieve and the Sand”* we find out that the USA has won two atomic wars since 2022. Montag remembers talking about books to a retired English professor about a year ago in the park. He decides to seek him out and goes to the latter’s house with the Bible in his hand. Though reluctant at first, Faber agrees to teach him about the importance and value of literature – *“The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us”* (Bradbury 2012: 79) Montag establishes communication with Faber through a radio ear-piece.

Later, being stupefied and outraged by the shallowness he sees in two of his wife’s friends who had come to visit, Montag brings out the books and reads poetry to them. One of them, Mrs. Phelps, becomes deeply emotional and starts to cry. Mildred is deeply angered by all these and decides to run away not without first calling the firemen to their house to burn down the books.

In the last chapter *“Burning Bright”* we see things going awry. After being forced to burn down his house with a flame thrower, Montag turns with it towards Captain Beatty and burns him together with two other firemen of the same squad. He runs away but the Mechanical Hound – a robot with eight legs, multifaceted eyes and a sense for all odors - attacks him.

He goes to Faber’s house who urges him to run away in the countryside and find the hobo camps of Harvard graduates.

The war breaks out in the city killing everyone there and destroying the entire city which is turned to baking powder. Away in the countryside, Montag meets with a group of five old intellectuals whose leader was a man named Granger. The novel ends with them contemplating the devastations produced by war and discussing the legend of the phoenix, the immortal bird of Greek mythology that is ceaselessly reborn from the ashes of its predecessor.

### **3. Guy Montag’s initiation journey and evolution in a totalitarian world**

Though never stated directly, totalitarianism permeates through the whole novel. Bradbury depicts how the government succeeds in suppressing the minds and actions of the population via efficient propagandistic methods enhanced by technological advancements. The reader learns how ordinary citizens are masterfully controlled by a state that knows exactly what they need to be fed in order to keep them calm and obedient – minimal comfort and the illusion of having a say in decision-making processes seems to be just what is necessary to make sure that everyone conforms to the rules established by the all-powerful state.

The word *“totalitarianism”* was coined in Italy during the fascist era of the 1920s and the 1930s. Italian fascist theorists were the ones who first used it and made it popular. It was regarded by all those who put it into practice – Joseph

Stalin and Adolf Hitler, to mention just two of the most relevant names – as the ideal form of governing nations. Therefore, totalitarianism should be understood as a system of political beliefs that is authoritarian and dictatorial and also, perfectionistic and utopian. The concept itself sparked intense debate among philosophers, political theorists and social scientists generating numerous for and against opinions. British liberals, especially, including philosopher Karl Popper, warned against the dangers of suppressing individual liberty and reinstating collectivism.

Hannah Arendt in her groundbreaking work *“The Origins of Totalitarianism”* (1968) focused on the connection between utopianism and authoritarianism and showed that totalitarianism was but a natural development of imperialism and extreme bureaucracy. She maintained that totalitarian regimes sought to destroy society and traditions as we know them and transform them in utopian societies tailored to suit their collectivist ideologies.

*The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (that is, the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (that is, the standards of thought) no longer exist.* (Arendt 2017: 474).

Throughout *“Fahrenheit 451”* (1953) the main protagonist undergoes a series of events that contribute to his evolution and transformation into the man he becomes at the end of the book. In the beginning of the novel, the reader meets a conformist thirty-year-old man trapped in an unhappy marriage and unwilling to question existence and the events around him. All of these aspects change radically as Montag goes through experiences that lead him to understand the surrounding world in different terms and develop into an opponent of the totalitarian regime.

The transformation takes place gradually, of course, with each step in this process illustrating Bradbury’s criticism of the early 1950s America.

The first event that triggers Montag’s transformation is the encounter with his rebellious young neighbour Clarisse McClellan on his way back home from work. She is the one who tells him that long ago firemen used to put out fires instead of starting them and that they were needed when houses actually started burning by accident. She awakens him and makes him pay attention to the surrounding environment and the absurdity of the world they lived in, all in a manner that he had not been capable of before. *“there’s dew on the grass in the morning.”* or *“Did you know that once billboards were only twenty feet long? But cars started rushing by so quickly they had to stretch the advertising out so it would last.”*(Bradbury 2012: 7)

The name Clarisse symbolizes clarification, enlightening and eye-opening processes. After the discussion with her, Montag realizes that all his senses had been numbed by the fast-paced rhythm of life with huge billboards and television walls, entertainment parks and speeding cars, all meant to prevent any look inside

one's consciousness. Clarisse makes Montag question himself and the world he lives in.

*He saw himself in her eyes, suspended in two shining drops of bright water, himself dark and tiny, in fine detail, the lines about his mouth, everything there, as if her eyes were two miraculous bits of violet amber that might capture and hold him intact. (Bradbury 2012: 5)*

She is the one who asks him if he is happy with the life he leads and, for the first time, Montag realizes how shallow and futile his existence is. This realization strikes him most strongly upon entering his house where he finds his wife passed out and notices that she had attempted suicide. It is yet another opportunity for him to understand the destructive potential that television and other technological advances may have on people.

Clarisse is the voice of the author who rebels against the ills of that world and teaches Montag to rebel too and step out of the destructive, mind-numbing paradigm. Through her, Bradbury criticizes state-controlled national standards in terms of television programs, amusement parks, educational system that focuses mostly on mass media and sports and has completely eliminated critical discussion. *"...everyone I know is either shouting or dancing around like wild or beating up one another."* (Bradbury 2012: 27) Clarisse says adding that *"Sometimes I'm ancient. I'm afraid of children my own age. They kill each other. Did it always use to be like that? My uncle says no. Six of my friends have been shot last year alone. Ten of them died in car wrecks."* (Bradbury 2012: 27) People have been rendered emotionless, art has become abstract and human compassion has become a rarity.

The second step in Montag's transformation is represented by two events that are connected in the book. First, it is the burning of the woman who refused to part with her beloved books and then, the subsequent conversation that he has with his boss, Captain Beatty, who realizes Montag has stolen a book from that house. Captain Beatty tries to make Montag understand the role of firemen in that world and explains it as a natural development of the society they lived in.

*School is shortened, disciplines relaxed, philosophies, histories, languages dropped, English and spelling gradually neglected, finally almost completely ignored. Life is immediate, the job counts, pleasure lies all about after work. Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting nuts and bolts?(Bradbury 2012: 53)*

To him, firemen have a noble mission – that of keeping the peace. He talks to Montag about the fact that the current situation is not solely the government's doing but that people themselves have asked for that. *"More sports for everyone, group spirit, fun and you don't have to think, eh? ... More cartoons in books. More pictures. Highways full of crowds going somewhere, somewhere, somewhere, somewhere, nowhere."* (Bradbury 2012: 54) Captain Beatty explains to Montag

that book burnings are rarely needed these days because the people have stopped reading altogether and traditional books are no longer published. The roots of this are in the political correctness movement which required that nobody be offended in any way whatsoever by the content of books and moreover, authors were even facing severe punishment for breaking these rules. As a result, more and more writers had ceased to approach controversial topics that might spark controversy in order to avoid unwanted consequences. That is why, the topic of books had become more and more insipid in an attempt to reach a larger audience and avoid upsetting anyone. Until, at a certain point, books ceased to exist altogether and they were replaced by comic books and three-dimensional sex-magazines.

*There you have it, Montag. It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. 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 2012: 55)

The third step in Montag's evolution is represented by the discussion he has with retired English professor, Faber. At this point, his transformation has already begun and he is a different man as opposed to the one we had met in the beginning of the novel. Stronger, more assertive, self-conscious and knowledgeable. To a certain extent, Faber seems to confirm what Captain Beatty had told him, namely that the elimination of books and the people's lack of intellectual pursuits was not exclusively the Government's fault. It was the people who settled for the little comfort they were given and refused to resist and subvert the process of national standardization and subjugation.

The conversation with Faber is a turning point in Montag's life and the moment when he decides to break with his past existence. He is now a completely transformed man unwilling to conform to standards set by the government any longer and determined to change his life for good.

*Now he knew he was two people, that he was, above all, Montag who knew nothing, who did not even know himself a fool, but only suspected it. And he knew that he was also the old man who talked to him and talked to him as the train was sucked from one end of the night city to the other on one long sickening gasp of motion. .... He would be Montag-plus-Faber, fire plus water, and then, one day, after everything had mixed and simmered and worked away in silence, there would be neither fire nor water but wine.*(Bradbury 2012: 99)

The fourth and last step in Montag's evolution is represented by the reunion with the Harvard graduates led by the rebel Granger. Montag feels a real connection with the very few in society who have refused to obey and have taken a

different stance. He learns from Granger that the organization seeks to preserve the valuable works of literature and pass them on to future generations at whatever cost. *“All we want to do is keep the knowledge we think we will need, intact and safe. We’re not out to incite or anger anyone yet.”*(Bradbury: 2012, 145) After having spent some time with them, it could be said that Montag’s transformation is complete. He has learnt from many mentors and now he has knowledge to impart with others. He feels that he has a mission to accomplish and readers are given the distinct feeling that he will not shy away from doing everything necessary to bring it to a successful end.

#### **4. Anti-intellectualism**

Despite the fact that, as I have stated before, Bradbury strongly criticizes the totalitarian regime that has a firm grip on the population and rules in an authoritarian manner promoting a culture that is meant to numb the minds of ordinary citizens, the blame is not laid entirely on the government. Characters like Captain Beatty and Faber, point out the fact that they have their share of guilt in all this unfortunate evolution. Indeed, the system is monstrous, but the majority of the population is no better. It is not so much about the conflict between the individual and the all-powerful state but more about the conflict between the intellectual and the masses which deepens the dystopian stance of the entire novel.

Bradbury takes a very elitist cultural and intellectual standpoint and postulates that humanity is doomed unless some evolutionary growth takes place in the upcoming years. Of course, one can easily infer that, in making this prediction, he was strongly influenced by what he identified as a natural and dangerous development in the American society of that time – the development of technology and the increasing influence of television, the international context and the overwhelming tendency of the public to let themselves absorbed by the shallowness and simplicity of the media while abandoning critical thinking altogether. As Captain Beatty puts it

*If you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides to a question to worry him.; give him one. Better yet, give him none. Let him forget there is such a thing as war. If the government is inefficient, top-heavy and tax-mad, better it be all those than that people worry over it. .... Give the people contests they win by remembering the words to more popular songs or the names of state capitals or how much corn Iowa grew last year. ....Don’t give them any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with.*(Bradbury 2012: 58)

And he goes on to explain why the book burning process and the role of the firemen is instrumental in keeping things this way, in preserving this peace of mind

*...we're the Happiness Boys, the Dixie Duo, you and I and the others. We stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought. We have our fingers in the dike. Hold steady. Don't let the torrent of melancholy or drear philosophy drown your world. We depend on you. I don't think you realize how important you are, we are to our happy world as it stands now. (Bradbury 2012: 59)*

And, indeed there are, very few intellectuals left in the world who can challenge standardized perceptions and adopt a subversive position. That is why, during his transformation Montag has to go through a process of reconnecting with his intellectual and humanistic side while, at the same time, discarding all influences that he had been subject to by the all-controlling state. But, still, as Jack Zipes put it in his article "Mass degradation of Humanity and Massive Contradictions in Bradbury's Vision of America in *"Fahrenheit 451"* – "to love a book or to be an intellectual is not, as Bradbury would have us believe, ideally ethical and humane" (Zipes 2008:17) Many intellectuals and books lovers have displayed questionable morality on numerous occasions. As a consequence, being an intellectual does not automatically qualify you as an ethical and just individual.

Therefore, humanity's downfall is not entirely the effect of governmental influence but humans themselves have brought their contribution to the current state of affairs with their perverted nature dominated by ignorance, greed, preference for comfort and ease of living to the detriment of active engagement, criticism, creativity and controversial, original ideas. To put it simply, standardization is much better than individualism. People themselves have allowed original ideas and the critical spirit to be gradually stifled. Bradbury sees this kind of entertainment and comfort seeking existence as extremely dangerous to the human race. Perhaps, that could explain the ending of the book which sees the whole city turned to baking powder by a nuclear war and the ensuing hope that a new beginning might bring about a much-desired change.

However, Bradbury does not proceed to a deeper analysis of the connection between mass conformity and material satisfaction.

Still, one cannot exactly discern whether the novel's ending is utopian or dystopian. The much-awaited reawakening might be still a utopian dream if one takes into consideration the cyclic nature of history and the fact that those who will rebuild the world, will do so based on the old world that had no role models to promote major changes. As the book ends, the rebel Granger, broods over what a rebuilding of civilization might result in:

*There was a silly damn bird called a Phoenix back before Christ, every few hundred years he built a pyre and burnt himself up. He must have been first cousin to Man. But every time he burnt himself up he sprang put of the ashes, he got himself born all over again. 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 god damn funeral pyres and jumping in the middle of them. We pick up a few more people that remember every generation.* (Bradbury 2012: 156)

The positives in Granger's conclusion are undeniable but it is hard to provide a definitive answer. Improvement of humankind is, of course, a distinct possibility but so is the repetitive nature of history.

### 5. Conclusion

It must be stated that there is a high degree of idealism in Bradbury's optimism regarding the ability of intellectuals and book lovers to create a new, reformed society. He assumes that being an intellectual equates with being ethical, correct and just, which is definitely not always the case. It is an elitist standpoint that stems from his contempt for mass culture and consumer society.

The tensions between intellectuals and the masses will probably continue to be an issue for many years but the coming years have proved that reconciliation between the two is possible and balance can be found provided enough effort is put into the matter.

To this day, one of the greatest fears of liberal societies is the possibility that an all-powerful government will, one day, rule the entire world by controlling our every move, word and thought with the help of technological advances. The past will be completely erased, leading thus to the death of morality in humans and populations will be driven into total submission and intellectual numbness by taunting them with easy entertainment and moderate comfort.

Bradbury's "*Fahrenheit 451*" is a novel trying to warn readers against the dangers inherent in the paths that the contemporary world has taken. Bradbury does not rule out the fact that the weakness, the preference for comfort and obsession with political correctness as well as the straying away from argumentative debates and critical positions of liberal societies might, indeed, lead to a totalitarian regime. Contemporary democracies may produce totalitarian elements themselves and today, more than before, we can see the seeds of such rule being planted in Europe.

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