

Fahrenheit 451 critical essay

Literature, Russian Literature



Jamie Moseley 17, October, 2012 Ms. Telesca English 101HFahrenheit 451Analysis In all societies, knowledge breeds life and understanding about mankind and the world surrounding it. Without the purposeful application of knowledge, the entropy of ignorance sweeps civilization into ruin and decay. In Fahrenheit 451, Bradbury asserts the point that knowledge is the foundation of civilization and if removed, what is left is a decaying society ravaged by stupidity and immorality. War, technology, and paradox sculpt a world that treats lies as truth and knowledge as sin.

The characters in Fahrenheit 451 use technology as a mirroring motif, reflecting the characteristics of the society that invents things like headphones, bio-purging systems, and grotesque mechanical beasts. At first, headphones seem like a harmless invention, but actually showcase the fruitless “knowledge” of the people who use it. Montag discovers this when he observes Mildred using “the little Seashells, the thimble radios tamped tight, and an electronic ocean of sound . . . coming in on the shore of her unsleeping mind” (Bradbury 10).

What Mildred listens to is not knowledgeable information, but merely a bombardment of sound and useless facts used to asphyxiate her mind. The Seashell radios force information on the listener to block out thought and short-circuit the listener’s creative faculties. Again Mildred uses the radios, but Montag finds her “eyes wide and staring at the fathoms of blackness above her in the ceiling” (39), as though she is nothing but a shell. It is interesting that the radios are called Seashells for seashells mimic the sound of the ocean just as the listeners of the radios mimic the information of the ocean of sound.

People become nothing more than seashells that echo back the same bogus facts as truth without question. This empty society not only depresses free thought, but also dehumanizes its citizens. In the beginning of the book, Montag walks home to find Mildred overdosing on sleeping pills and calls the emergency line. In no time, two men walk in with two machines that are used to purge Mildred's system. One machine " slid[es] down into your stomach like a black cobra down an echoing well looking for all the old water . . ." (11) while the other is like an eye giving the operator the ability to " gaze into the soul of a person whom he was pumping out"(11). These machines invade the victim's body in a way that violates the person's humanity. The blood transfusion results in the victim becoming a wind-up toy. This incident portrays the indifference toward an individual's life because of the violation of one's body and disregard for personal emotion. However, the best embodiment of Montag's society is the mechanical hound. The hound is introduced as an almost undead creature, one that " live[s] but [does] not live in its gently humming . . . kennel in a dark corner of the firehouse" (21). Like the hound, its creators neither live nor die but simply exist in a dark, backwards existence and wait for their next orders. The game of bets and death the firemen play explains the hound's purpose. The hound traps its prey, " gripp[ing] in gentling paws while a four-inch hollow steel needle plunge[s] down from the proboscis of the hound to inject massive jolts of morphine and procaine" (23).

The people, or prey, of this civilization are trapped by a gentle, yet nightmarish circumstance which injects massive amounts of false pleasure and phony facts that create a surreal yet entertaining state of being like the

side effects of morphine and procaine. After Montag witnesses the killing, he asks Beatty if the hound is alive. Beatty immediately responds: “Come off it. It doesn’t like or dislike. It just ‘functions’ . . .” (24). The masses merely “function” like the hound going day to day in a mindless state of existence like mechanical creations. Also, the hound with “its eight incredible insect legs . . .” (23) exposes the distortion of reality that is believed by people who would call this monstrous creation a hound though there is almost no resemblance between it and a dog. It is one of the twisted machines that make up the dystopia Montag lives in. Underneath the futuristic advances of this civilization lies the true dystopian world that is Fahrenheit 451. Like George Orwell’s 1984, constant war in foreign regions is present in this culture as bombers fly overhead every night like the rocket bombs of Winston’s world. Montag, in the heat of rage, questions the war effort and asks “Why doesn’t someone want to talk about it!

We’ve started and won two atomic wars since 2022!” (69). Even after two atomic wars, the bombers still fly in formation, striking fear into the populace and rallying it together to focus its attention on a greater cause instead of the quality of their lives. War is inescapable on the radio where Montag hears the radio announce that “. . . war may be declared any hour . . .” (30), which keeps the population on alert and standing by to defend its borders rather than defending their individual lives from the invasion of ignorance. Killing also unveils the dilapidated social structure as Clarisse states, “I’m afraid of children my own age.

They kill each other” (27). Death no longer inhibits the actions of others, but instead becomes a common fact of everyday life like breathing. Even

Mildred, who comments on Montag's need to smash things, suggests taking the beetle for a spin. "It's fun out in the country. You hit rabbits, sometimes you hit dogs. Go take the beetle" (61). Killing has no consequence anymore whether one kills an animal or murders a human. Death, like war, distracts people through fear. Everyone fears for their own life, but cares nothing for the lives of others. Suicide, however, is the exception to this rule.

When one "enjoys" their life so much, they commit suicide. One of the operators who saves Mildred from overdosing casually says "we get these cases nine or ten times a night" (13), as if it is nothing serious. On top of that, he also states that "you take out the old [blood] and put in the new [blood] and you're okay" (12). The reason for suicide is that the people lead such hollow lives wrapped in cheap entertainment which leaves them without purpose. The lack of knowledge does not help because with knowledge, one can assume a purpose and make reason to life.

Without it, there is no way to find a purpose and therefore people toss themselves away. However, they are given their meaningless lives back through transfusion and begin again the downward spiral surrounded by paradox and contradiction. To place the final nail in the coffin of free thought, paradoxical ideas are substituted for knowledge that leaves society vacuous. Like the Ministry of Love in 1984, the firemen are a contradiction of good and evil. Beatty tells Montag that they are "the Happiness Boys, the Dixie Duo . . . we stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy . . ." (59) though they bring destruction and even death wherever they are sent. Yet, they whole-heartedly believe that their duty is one of ultimate justice for the good of man whereas it is the opposite. This

twisting of reality appears in the television shows like Mildred's "family". She feels like she belongs with them, crying out "' my 'family' is people. They tell me things; I laugh, they laugh! '" (69). The "family" creates a sense of belonging and inclusion that actually excludes and cuts the viewer off from the real world by satisfying the need for information.

Watching television is an exclusive affair which Montag soon realizes. In frustration, Montag asks Mildred, "' does your 'family' love, love you very much, love you with all their heart and soul, Millie? '" (73). What Mildred feels for the 'family' is a surrogate set of emotions, substituting fact and truth with what she sees and hears, causing her to truly love the "family" even though it is merely a program. Beatty explains the constant attack of pseudo-knowledge and emotion: "'Cram them full of noncombustible data, chock them so damned full of 'facts' they feel stuffed, but absolutely brilliant with information'" (58).

He goes on to say "' if the drama is bad, if the film says nothing, if the play is hollow, sting me with the Theremin, loudly . . . I just like solid entertainment'" (58). What Beatty is alluding to is if the masses are overrun with useless information, paradoxical ideas, and false emotions, they will believe that they understand the world around them from what they have absorbed and consider it truth and live in stupid intelligence which is the greatest paradox presented. Like light and darkness, knowledge drives off ignorance.

However, Bradbury creates a culture where knowledge is stifled in an impenetrable web of ignorance that dictates the lives of the characters in Fahrenheit 451. Murder, machines, and contradictions are used to give false

purpose and reason to humanity in place of knowledge. The hero Montag journeys through this dangerous environment in an attempt to find himself and uncover the horrific truth that without reason, destruction and rot await to consume all who ignore intelligence. Works Cited Bradbury, Ray. Fahrenheit 451. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967. Print.