

Frowning at
conformity:
bradbury's growing
disillusionment in
freedom of expressi...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

After World War II, United States was growing in prosperity as a seeming winner of the war; yet, growing alongside of it, was an omnipresent fear and tension about technology and ideology—the summation of the oncoming Cold War. As a young writer in the midst of this mid-twentieth century panic between the Capitalistic U. S. and the Communist USSR regime, Ray Bradbury, like many others, communicated and protested the irrationality of the hidden war through a series of short stories and novels published at the time. Of those, *The Martian Chronicles* and *Fahrenheit 451*, published consecutively in 1950 and 1953, respectively, still remain the best received for their adventurous take on the American mass culture hysteria and the irrational policy passed by Congress during the Cold War. An episodic novel, *The Martian Chronicles* focuses on the American superiority and conformity complex through a series of independent short stories that follow the American conquer of Mars. It often hints at the purification and destruction of ideas on Earth, aspects that are more fully explored in *Fahrenheit 451*. Well known for its extensive analogy of government censorship and mindless materialism, *Fahrenheit 451* walks through the metamorphosis of a book-burning fireman as he realizes the necessity of the knowledge and thoughts produced from novels and stories. In both worlds, Bradbury emphasizes the process of conformity—first, purification of public opinion to an ideology via mass appeal and majority pressure, and then, eradication of future differing opinions that might birth under the established purified society. However, Bradbury's attitude on the process, as reflected by character analysis of the two novels, changes over time, growing grim as the Cold War movements escalated at the time of publication.

Ray Douglas Bradbury was born in Waukegan, Illinois on August 22, 1920. Since he was young, Bradbury was known to have a future in liberal arts. As a lifelong devotee to drama literature, and poetry, he claimed that his major influences include Edgar Allan Poe, William Shakespeare, and later contemporaries such as Aldous Huxley. Bradbury often hinted and referenced the style and works of his favorite poets and writers to pay respect to their contribution to literary arts. Besides being a novelist, Bradbury was also a prominent playwright and screenwriter, occupations that were particularly targeted and harassed during the McCarthy Era. because of his experience with the Cold War reactionaries, Bradbury questioned the integrity of freedom of expression in his books. As exemplified by *The Martian Chronicles* and *Fahrenheit 451*—both about American obsessive control of ideology—Bradbury's personal witness of his time influences and stands as important elements in his novels. As he stated in an interview in 1980, the Cold War Era was arguably the mind-settling period for Bradbury's criticism of government, when he " was warning people...[when he] was preventing futures" (Hoskinson).

To demonstrate his disapproval about the Cold War policies, Bradbury first embarks on extended symbolism of majority conformity in both of his novels. Through specific characterization, Bradbury presents the rivaling relationship between majority and minority, in which the former dominates the latter and purifies the public with mass appeal and pressure. In the two novels, the government's justification for these conformity policies is the resulting harmony and happiness among the people; yet, as many critics has deciphered, the metaphors of these books represent the mirroring early Cold

War policies that brought about narrow-mindedness in people and in terms, “Bradbury’s strong distrust of [those]’ majority-held’ views” (Hoskinson).

Several of The Martian Chronicles episodes contain clashes between majority and minority that result from the effort to purify ideas; most significant of them all is “And the Moon Be Still as Bright”, originally published as an independent short story in 1948 (Hoskinson). In the story, Captain Wilder is the leader of the Fourth Expedition crew to Mars and in terms, the central figure of the majority. His identity as the will of the majority is highlighted when he is challenged by an outcast crew member, Spender, who, unlike the other colonizing crew members, wants to protect the lost Martian civilization. Wilder stands by his identity throughout the story whenever he converses with Spender; and later, he wins the battle with Spender, representing the success of the majority. Afterwards, Wilder acknowledges, but more ever, begins to doubt the majority:

Who are we, anyway? The majority? Is that the answer? The majority is always holy, is it not? Always, always; just never wrong for one little insignificant tiny moment, is it?...how the devil did I get caught in this rotten majority? (Bradbury, Chronicles, 95)

In executing his responsibility to purify minority, Wilder himself becomes conflicted with, as Hoskinson puts it, “the issue of individuality vs. conformity.” By establishing the majority and furthermore, criticizing the majority through its own leader, Bradbury sculpts out the use and faults of majority pressure.

Because of the publication chronology, themes of *The Martian Chronicles*, such as the one above, are often more fully explored in *Fahrenheit 451*. Whereas the majority-minority conflict is limited to each of *Chronicles* episodes, the idea of purification is the essence and is found throughout *F451*. Characters such as the wife of protagonist Guy Montag, Mildred, and Captain Beatty, represent the nature and features of a purified mind of the majority. Mildred—with her head filled with government-issued soap operas on “parlor walls” (Bradbury, *F451*, 130), her ears addicted to “electric ocean of sound” (Bradbury, *F451*, 10) for ten years, and her attention span lasting no more than a few seconds—she is the poster-woman of the materialistic and ignorant population. She even values the imaginary characters on TV more than her husband. When Montag asks her, “Will you turn the parlor off?” she refuses and replies, “That’s my family” (Bradbury, *F451*, 46). McGiveron points out that this kind of mindless behavior “is the result of the public’s active desire to avoid controversy...in favor of easy gratification and, eventually, intellectual conformity.” Though he argues that the public majority is the cause of this purification, government policy certainly plays a part in spreading and maximizing conformity to mass appeals, thereby erasing controversy and solidifying harmony. Captain Beatty of the Fire Department understands this well. As an unusual intellectual who actually agrees with the government, Beatty, too, “just like[s] solid entertainment” (Bradbury, *F451*, 61); but he also emphasizes the need for a uniform public. “We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, like the Constitution says, but everyone made equal” (Bradbury, *F451*, 55). However, by defining Beatty as the antagonist of the story (who is later burned to death by Montag), Bradbury shows his disapproval to Beatty’s ideas of <https://assignbuster.com/frowning-at-conformity-bradburys-growing-disillusionment-in-freedom-of-expression-during-the-cold-war/>

conformity. In fact, the opposing intellectual character and the aid to Guy Montag, Faber, identifies Captain Beatty as “ the most dangerous enemy to truth and freedom, the unmoving cattle of the majority” (Bradbury, F451, 104). Similar to Wilder, the majority representative in *Chronicles*, Beatty is antagonized because of his symbolic identity; however, it is important to note that Wilder of the early Bradbury publication is self-antagonized, and Beatty, from Bradbury's later work, is deemed as enemy by another character, while he himself still believes in the absolute will of the majority. The intensification of the symbolic character's belief in majority-held views through the publication years parallels the growth of McCarthy Movement (roughly 1950-1956) and U. S. government and public push for advance weaponry (caused by USSR becoming a nuclear power in 1949). This parallelism of literature to reality not only legitimizes the pretense of Bradbury's Cold War criticism, but also shows the evolution of Bradbury's disillusion with government conformity policy—from believing that it could change, to completely downcasting it as antagonistic to the people's freedom.

After the act purifying ideals and destroying any current opposition in society, Bradbury continues onto the next step of government policy to obtain peace—eliminating any future possibilities of different opinions so that the uniform ideology sustains. Bradbury already shows the eradication of opportunities to learn new ideas through the prominent book burning events in both of his novels, but he also demonstrate how government reacts to newly spurred ideas post-purification by introducing rebellious characters in his worlds. Furthermore, these rebels of different novels, though similar in

their characterization, have different ending to their interactions with the governmental censorship. Standehl of *The Martian Chronicles* is targeted by government oppression for celebrating Edgar Allen Poe, but he is able to defeat censorship officials and continue his free expression; however, in the later publication of *Fahrenheit 451*, Clarisse, a delinquent who questions social ideology and structure, is killed for her behavior. The fact that Bradbury's characterization of the end to these outlaws depresses over time indicates his growing pessimistic view on the consequence of free individual expression in the real American society of his time.

In chapter "Usher II" of *The Martian Chronicles*, Bradbury already describes Earth as a conformed and closely censored world. Eminent and high-ranking people of society and government condemn books, fantasies and imagination; ordinary citizens are all "Clean-Minded" and believe "the Burning [of books] was a good thing" (Bradbury, *Chronicles*, 165). A censoring organization called the "Moral Climates" is established and is, at the time of the story, responsible to have the newly colonized Mars "as neat and tidy as Earth" (Bradbury, *Chronicles*, 166). In the midst of conformity, Standehl builds a horror house, "Usher II", on Mars to celebrate Edgar Allen Poe, who described a house of the same name in one of his horror stories. This act, obviously against the societal establishment of prohibiting supernatural and imaginary books, leads to Standehl's arrest by Garrett, an Investigator of the Moral Climates. However, Standehl is not censored like most of the outlaws in Bradbury's stories—he in fact tricks Garrett, and later, kills him along with all of the other "'majority guests' [to the House of Usher] with different approaches to murders seen in Poe's stories"

(Hoskinson). The fact that Standehl is able to not only maintain his freedom of expression in the form of exercising Poe's fantasies, but also succeed in "paying back...the antiseptic government for its literary terrors and conflagration" (Bradbury, *Chronicles*, 170), demonstrates, what Hoskinson called, an individual's unusual "sinister triumph over the majority." Moreover, in characterizing Standehl with such success, Bradbury shows hope in reforming his own government from its eradication policies of anti-communism.

Yet, it is important to note that "Usher II" is originally published in 1950, when the "Second Red Scare" led by Joseph McCarthy was only solidifying its ground. By 1953, the year *Fahrenheit 451* was published, the Anti-Communist crusade had reached its pinnacle with its arrests, allegations, and general harassments. In this later book, Bradbury gives a much graver portrayal of the outcome for outspoken outlaws.

In *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury again constructs a world in which conformity is essential and opinions are criminal. Schools, starting earlier and earlier to muster complete brainwash of children's minds, require their students to embrace and praise materialism and ignorance. As the new generation born completely surrounded with intense indoctrination, the seventeen year old Clarisse McClellan is a surprising outcast who still believes in questions and wonder. She criticizes that her classmates "name a lot of cars or swimming pools mostly and say how swell...but they all say the same things and nobody says anything different from anyone else" (Bradbury, *F 451*, 28).

Instead of following that socially accepted behavior, Clarisse chooses to ask the why in protest and in tribute to the part of innate humanity that pursues <https://assignbuster.com/frowning-at-conformity-bradburys-growing-disillusionment-in-freedom-of-expression-during-the-cold-war/>

individuality. Yet, even though her behavioral protest to the social doctrine is similar to Standehl's rebellion against the established condemnation of fantasy and books, she does not have the same glorious fate as Standehl. As Captain Beatty, the representative of the majority and the firm believer in the established structure of conformity, later explains—" She was a time bomb. She didn't want to know how a thing was done, but why...The poor girl's better off dead" (Bradbury, F 451, 58). And she is. The fatal end of Clarisse, most likely fabricated by Beatty and his majority bunch, " shows how intolerance for opposing ideas helps lead to the stifling of individual expression and hence of thought" (McGiveron). Yet this process contradicts the outcome of Standehl, as he is in the end victorious in the combat of individuality v. conformity. One may suspect this polarizing contrast of Clarisse's fate from Standehl's in confronting pre-established government regulation to be an error in Bradbury's philosophy, but given the historical context, this in fact may be due to the change of his philosophy. *Chronicles* is a collection of short stories Bradbury published in the years 1944-1950; since then, many issues that Bradbury addresses in *Chronicles* had changed, or escalated. When *Fahrenheit 451* was published in 1953, the McCarthy movement was at its height when all opposing opinions seem to lead to accusations and outcasting. And not only was it a time for the Red Scare, it was also when people were just generally so focused on the absolute Americanism that they either oppressed or ignored any contradiction to their ideology. Such a change in social and political absolutism must have shifted Bradbury's view on government tolerance to freedom of expression, from hopeful to grim.

Many critics claim that *The Martian Chronicles* and *Fahrenheit 451* contain prophetic interpretation of the future. Yet, while the imagination that Bradbury shows within his stories indicates that he has the capacity to predict the future, the act of doing so requires an active willingness to see the unknown. Bradbury's attitude in his books suggests a more depressing and passive incentive. Through his increasingly bleak portrayal of characters that manifests the different sides of government's combat to conformity, Bradbury expresses his evolving disillusionment with the future of freedom of expression and government tolerance of it. The fact that Bradbury does not focus on the practicality of his worlds, such as Mars having sustainable air for people to live on and children learning about materialistic trivia for school, rules out his incentive to prophesize. Instead, Bradbury intends to evoke the similar grim emotion in his readers so that they can understand and take caution in their response to conformity. As he declared in his 1980 interview and his discussion with the *Los Angeles Times* thirty years later, "I'm not a futurist. People ask me to predict the future, while all I want to do is prevent it."

Works Cited

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012. Print.

Bradbury, Ray. *The Martian Chronicles*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2011. Print.

George, Lynell. "Ray Bradbury Dies at 91; Author Lifted Fantasy to Literary Heights." *Los Angeles Times*. *Los Angeles Times*, 06 June 2012. Web. 16 May 2013.

<https://assignbuster.com/frowning-at-conformity-bradburys-growing-disillusionment-in-freedom-of-expression-during-the-cold-war/>

McGiveron, Rafeeq O. "What 'Carried the Trick'? Mass Exploitation and the Decline of Thought in Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451." *Extrapolation* 37. 3 (Fall 1996): 245-256. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 235. Detroit: Gale, 2007. Literature Resource Center. Web. December 2012.

Hoskinson, Kevin. "The Martian Chronicles and Fahrenheit 451: Ray Bradbury's Cold War Novels." *Extrapolation* 36. 4 (Winter 1995): 345-359. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 235. Detroit: Gale, 2007. Literature Resource Center. Web. January 2013.

"Ray Douglas Bradbury." 2013. The Biography Channel website. December 2012. <http://www.biography.com/people/ray-bradbury-9223240>.