

Fahrenheit 451, connection to current society



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The end of the Second World War sparked new cultural movements in American society. Factories which were once used to mass produce airplanes, tanks, and other machines of war were no longer needed for that purpose. Servicemen returned from overseas to find a massive amount of available jobs, wages were higher due to an economic boom, and because there were rarely any consumer goods during the war, the American people had a massive hunger to go shopping. The American Dream of having a husband or wife, “ 2. 5 kids”, and owning a house with a white picket fence was the “ Kool-Aid” that everybody in post-war America was thirsty for.

What did this mean for society, though? The Dream sparked a movement of rampant consumerism, materialism, and in turn, cultural decline. Ray Bradbury lived in Los Angeles, California, an epicenter of such movements which influenced him to write Fahrenheit 451. In the story, Ray Bradbury warns us of what society would be like if things were to continue as they were in America. Shockingly, those predictions made half a century ago by Ray Bradbury have been increasingly holding true for our society today. We can see the themes of censorship, mass media, and conformity play their roles not only in Fahrenheit 451, but in our current society today.

Censorship is the most prevalent theme of Fahrenheit 451. The story revolves around the life of Guy Montag, who makes his living as a “ fireman”, but not the common fireman we know and love. In the story, the firemen do the exact opposite of the firemen of today. They start fires rather than put them out in an effort to censor books from the society. In Montag’s world, anybody who is found to have books would in turn have their books burned

and their houses burned as well. Bradbury warns us of what may happen if the government is allowed to control what people read or watch.

In Fahrenheit 451, their government has already completely eliminated books. The book even starts by showing the emotions behind book burning by saying, “ It was a pleasure to burn” (Bradbury 3). Many of the firemen felt excitement and pleasure from burning the books. Guy Montag was one of these firemen, and at the beginning of the book, he feels thrill in starting fires in people’s homes as illustrated by the quote. In one instance, Bradbury explains that Montag, “ wanted above all, like the old joke to shove a marshmallow on a stick in the furnace, while the flapping pigeon-winged books died on the porch and the lawn of the house” (3).

This shows how Montag thought of books. Bradbury uses a metaphor to compare the pages of books to pigeons flapping their wings. Not only that, pigeons are common birds, much like how books are common. This quote also demonstrates the opinion of the government in the story, and how there is no place in society for the books. There, books cause problems and how reading them serves no purpose for Montag’s society. We see censorship even today in our current society. For example, there are religious fanatics in New Mexico who are offended by the Harry Potter books.

They feel that those books had a negative effect on children because of the witchcraft and wizardry portrayed in the series. Some of these groups have even gone so far as burning those books in massive public bonfires and in one case, thousands of those books were burned in one single event to send their message across (‘ Satanic’ Harry Potter Books Burnt). There are also

other examples of censorship in our society. While we are able to read, listen, or view whatever we want, there are restrictions on them. Certain words are blocked out of public television, and certain content cannot be shown at certain times during the day.

Music is edited for the radio, and certain books are banned because of their content. It seems we are continuing down the path of cultural decline that Ray Bradbury envisioned decades ago. With censorship rampant to remove content from society, there are measures to fill in that void by replacing the information through mass media. Mass media is the next major theme of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. When the radio first came out, people would turn to it to get their information from. People started to put down their books and listen to radio programs.

When the television came out half a century ago, it became the primary socializer for America. It's commonly known that shortly after its inception, 90% of American households had at least one television in their homes. This results in the television being the tool of choice for spreading messages through mass media. In modern society, television is such a norm that it's not even something we worry about like Bradbury did in the 1950's. The new thing is social media, such as Facebook or Twitter. Even then, it seems Bradbury foresaw these things too since it is such a predictable concept.

In *Fahrenheit 451*, we see Captain Beatty say to Montag, " Speed up the film, Montag, quick. Click, Pic, Look, Eye, Now, Flick, Here, There, Swift, Pace, Up, Down, In, Out, Why, How, Who, What, Where, Eh? Uh! Bang! Smack! Wallop, Bing, Bong, Boom! Digests-digests, digests-digests-digests. Politics? One

column, two sentences, a headline! Then, in mid-air, all vanishes! Whirl man's mind about so fast under the pumping hands of publishers, exploiters, broadcasters that the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought! (Bradbury 55).

This is an example of onomatopoeia being used to express the abruptness of such information spread to the masses. It focuses on the main points, such as why, how, who, what, or where. It also tells us of how all the unnecessary information is left out and the main topics are fed to the people. The people then digest this information, ready for the next batch of news. This is incredibly similar to current social media, such as Facebook or Twitter. In the news feeds we get such quick information and the messages are very short.

We have no time to get the beef of the stories and we just want the main points fed to us. What's further shocking is that in Fahrenheit 451, " 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 58). Just like in our society, this all didn't come from the government, but rather from the people themselves.

Our social media was indeed created by the people themselves, not the government. This also further emphasizes the effect of social media. It also predicted how we read all our entertainment, news, etc. In our current society, we see mass media in social networking, such as in Facebook and Twitter, and how our smartphones are becoming extensions of ourselves.

People prefer to text each other rather than talk in person, even if they are in the next room. People are connecting to people they know online, instead of meeting in person.

There is rapid increase of children watching TV or spending hours texting, which may ultimately decrease our enthusiasm for knowledge and books. If technology is causing people to act like this currently, how will our future be? Bradbury warns us that if we continue to rely on mass media, we may end up living in an exact mirror of Montag's world. With everybody limited to reading the same material and getting the same messages through the internet, we might just all end up conforming to commonly accepted practices, which brings us to the final warning of Fahrenheit 451.

The last big thing Bradbury is warning us about in Fahrenheit 451 is conformity. The people in the society of Fahrenheit 451 show absolutely no individuality. I believe that the book shows two different types of conformity: intellectual and physical. Intellectual conformity in Fahrenheit 451 is best shown in the schooling system in Montag's society. Captain Beatty recalls to Montag, " Surely you remember the boy in your own school class who was exceptionally ' bright,' did most of the reciting and answering while others sat like so many leaden idols, hating him.

And wasn't it this bright boy you selected for beatings and tortures after hours? Of course it was. We must all be alike. "(Bradbury 58). This shows that any child in school who displayed any form of self-thought or intellect was rejected by other students. The metaphor in this quote compares the students to leaden idols, who are just statues who sit there looking the same.

This is also highlighted by Clarisse, when she explains that in school, they all learn the same things, spending one hour on TV class, playing the same sports, and transcribing history.

This is also evidenced by the fact that Clarisse was diagnosed as anti-social because she was outgoing and loved to talk to people. Physical conformity is shown in the story from the fact that the firemen all look the same. Montag comes to the realization that, " Had he ever seen a fireman that didn't have black hair, black brows, a fiery face, and a blue-steel shaved but unshaved look? These men were all mirror images of himself! Were all firemen picked then for their looks as well as their proclivities? " (Bradbury 33).

This example is important because the last line of this quote brings up a very good point. Is it that society deliberately wanted these people to be the firemen because they looked alike? This possibly links to the society that Bradbury lived in because everybody wore the same clothes, and they believed heavily in physical appearance. All men wore suits no matter where they went or what they were doing. Women put on makeup and wore the same dresses and styles. It also shows that people conform to commonly accepted standards of appearance instead of focusing on individual value and skill.

This also links to our society today, where we all use the same phones, products, and mostly wear the same styles. Anybody who does anything different may be viewed as an outcast. This also links to mass media, where almost everybody now has a Facebook account. It almost seems strange to find anyone who doesn't have one. I believe that Bradbury is sending us the

message that if people become so simple minded and accept whatever happens, it can destroy any society from within. People would be so easily controlled by the mass media, as mentioned before, and the society would be composed of robots.

Therefore, society would be made up of followers, and no leaders. Society would not progress at all. There would be no one to come up with new ideas to make life better, as everything is supposedly already the best it can be. With all these themes analyzed in Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, we see the effects of censorship, mass media, and conformity in a dystopian society. Bradbury drew influence of these things from his experiences in Los Angeles, and his illustration of the society in Fahrenheit 451 is shockingly similar to ours.

Today, we see evidence of censorship in our banned books and control of the media. We experience mass media through our reliance on cell phones and being attached to our technology. We also see conformity through how people use the same products, do the same things, and have the same ideas. If we continue down this path, what would society end up like? Would it be just like the one depicted in Fahrenheit 451? I feel that Bradbury does a good job of making us think, and drawing connections between his fictional world and our world.