

PLEASURE TO BURN:

VIOLENCE AS MADNESS IN *FAHRENHEIT 451*

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“Any man’s insane that thinks he can fool the
government.”

-Beatty, *Fahrenheit 451*

Critics, teachers, and students routinely idolize the main character of the 1953 novel *Fahrenheit 451* as a hero who valiantly fights against the conformity of his dystopian society. The author, Ray Bradbury, wrote the book having seen Hitler come to power by destroying a nation and having witnessed McCarthyism crush the individuality of the American people. Bradbury’s book in fact both critiques societies that give individuals too much power and societies that refuse individuals any power. Though readers identify with Montag’s anger and frustration, Bradbury does not see Montag’s descent into violence and extreme individuality as a sane response to a deranged society; rather he sees Montag’s actions as indicative of further madness.

In this novel, Bradbury presents a society that expects and produces immediate gratification and instant pleasure, a notion that sounds ideal. People are so intent on being entertained that they don’t care if their entertainment is insubstantial. Montag’s boss, Firechief Beatty, claims that if people stay drugged-up and plugged-in and everything will then be fine. “Don’t give them any slippery stuff

like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with,” Beatty advises, and people will be “happier” (61). Beatty explains what most people in this society are trying to attain: “People want to be happy, isn’t that right? Haven’t you heard it all your life? I want to be happy, people say. Well, aren’t they? Don’t we keep them moving, don’t we give them fun? That’s all we live for, isn’t it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these” (59). More than offering a homogenized happiness, Montag’s society enforces utter equality; people are not born equal but made equal (58). Yet in a society centered on pleasure and equality, something is not right.

Beatty believes that people are looking to have fun, not looking to work or think: “If the film says nothing...I don’t care. I just like solid entertainment” (61). Montag’s wife Mildred echoes this insensible yet insatiable desire for pleasure; she has no notion of what the characters in her favorite television show yell about, but she does not care because the show entertains her (20, 44). In fact, Mildred is the character most inundated with distracting material. “No matter when [Montag] came in, the walls were always talking to [his wife] Mildred” (44). When not staring at her three-wall-large television, she listens to music through her bud-sized “Seashells,” which she keeps perpetually stuck in her ears in order to keep a constant stream of sing-song and chatter running through her head. “There was only the singing of the thimble-wasps in her tamped-shut ears, and her eyes all glass, and breath going in and out, softly, faintly, in and out, faintly, in and out of her nostrils, and her not caring whether in came or went, went or came” (13). Bradbury shows that he never turns off the mindless noise of the television or her Seashells; indeed, her entertainment has become so vital to her that she sleeps with Seashells in and learns to read lips so she never need remove them even if someone talks to her. Listening to music and radio or watching mindless television requires no action, thinking, or input on Mildred’s part; in fact, radio and television seem to distract Mildred from the nothingness that would otherwise consume her life.

Beatty talks about this distraction within a distraction when he says,

So bring on your clubs and parties, your acrobats and magicians, your daredevils, jet cars, motorcycle helicopters, your sex and heroin, more of everything to do with automatic reflex. If the drama is bad, if the film says nothing, if the play is hollow, sting me with the theremin...I'll think I'm responding to the play, when it's only a tactile reaction to vibration. But I don't care. I just like solid entertainment. (61)

The pursuits allowed in this society, however, cannot be considered as active as reading, writing, creating, or appreciating art. Reading, for instance, requires one to process words, ideas, and actions within the theater of the mind, whereas watching television keeps one much more passive. Passive pleasure does not require people to think actively.

Though a society centered on entertainment and pleasure sounds ideal, Bradbury shows that, though Montag's society offers entertainment, the entertainment is of no substance and merely acts as a distraction from people's repressed unhappiness. Though characters are unable to procure literature, they are able to find entertainment in the form of mass-produced television, radio, and music. The presented society, while feeding its citizens easy entertainment, denies creativity and self-expression, for the government outlaws literature in order to facilitate surface, easy pleasures and maintain control of their people. In denying its citizens creativity, the leaders of the society of *Fahrenheit 451* create a dystopian world—that is, “an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible” (OED).

Authors' present dystopias as the opposite of utopias, such as Thomas More wrote about; he meant for utopia to be a kind of idea “nowhere place,” but the term has been appropriated to mean a totally just and fair society. The dystopia Bradbury presents in *Fahrenheit 451* consumes itself with a passionate hatred and fear of

literature so pervasive people routinely and casually burn books. Laws dictate that no one may own any piece of literature, and firemen like Montag—people who once protected others from fires—are now duty-bound to destroy and immolate. Firechief Beatty directs such destruction with forceful quips about the pointlessness of reading, indoctrinating firemen and trying to keep them tame.

A society, as well as the individuals it produces, can be deemed either healthy or unhealthy, and given what Montag's society has produced, it is fair to say it is insane. His society fixates so hard on control and forced equality that it actually subjugates and pathologizes the things that are most healthy, the most constructive: creativity and self-expression. Bradbury shows that people in *Fahrenheit 451* are not permitted to work creatively, and they cannot connect to one another because they are too distracted by entertainment that imparts nothing. Because the people of Montag's society are barred from doing so many things, their frustrations bubble below the surface until they impulsively act in destructive ways. Montag's world is inundated with suicides, with mental instability. Erich Fromm notes in *The Sane Society*, "I consider it a safe assumption that a high suicide rate in a given population is expressive of a lack of mental stability and mental health" (7). Yet citizens of this world are so blasé about suicide that no one but Montag, with the help of his new neighbor Clarisse, stops to consider why a person might even commit such an act. Throughout the book, he begins to notice people's tendencies to hurt themselves, most notably when his wife Mildred takes too many sleeping pills. Though she later claims she never tried to hurt herself, he calls the medics to revive her, and they employ a special machine to do so. When Montag asks why the incident is not treated as a medical emergency, he receives the following explanation: "Hell!...We get these cases nine or ten a night. Got so many, starting a few years ago, we had the special machines built" to clean the blood of sleeping drugs (15). Citizens so often try to kill themselves that saving people is a chore, something done easily and without much thought. The medic responds so casually to Mildred's near-death

experience that he never even puts out his cigarette (15). No one attempts to avoid suicide attempts before they happen; citizens simply respond passively to situations as they arise.

Readers can trace underwhelmed reaction to the news of people's suicides throughout the entire novel, which is indicative of the insanity in this society. Early on, one of Montag's coworkers tells him of a brutal hunting machine called a Mechanical Hound; he then adds that it's "a funny thing [that a] Fireman in Seattle purposely set [one] to his own chemical complex and let it loose. What kind of suicide would you call that?" (31). With these words, Bradbury shows that Montag's coworker isn't marveling that a fellow fireman committed suicide; rather, he is confused about the specific manner by which the fireman did so. Shortly after this exchange, Mildred and her friends blandly discuss various types of death and how common or rare they are: "I've never known any dead man killed in a war. Killed jumping off buildings, yes, like Gloria's husband last week, but from wars? No" (94). Even Montag's boss Beatty mentions the tendency toward self-harm, telling Montag, "The[y]...always try suicide; the pattern's familiar" (39). Characters routinely dismiss such deaths as inconsequential, just as Mildred's friend Mrs. Bowles does when she says, "I've always said poetry and tears, poetry and suicide and crying and awful feelings, poetry and sickness; all that mush" (101). Bradbury shows here that literature and suicide both get relegated to the trash-pile as soon as people dismiss them.

In addition to spotting the commonness of suicide, Montag also notes the sharpness of others' cruelty and random viciousness, likewise indicative of insanity:

A carful of children, all ages. God knew, from twelve to sixteen, out whistling, yelling, hurraing, had seen a man, a very extraordinary sight, a man strolling, a rarity, and simply said 'Let's get him,' not knowing he was Mr. Montag, simply a number of children out for a long night of roaring five or six hundred miles in a few moonlit

hours, their faces icy with wind, and coming home or not coming home at dawn, alive or not alive, that made the adventure. They would have killed me, thought Montag...For no reason at all in the world they would have killed me. (128)

Later, when he hears the claim “People are having *fun*,” an exasperated Montag responds with “Committing suicide! Murdering!” (87). By expressing his exasperation, Montag has learned what Erich Fromm discusses in *The Sane Society*: “destructiveness is conducive to suffering, creativeness to happiness...Mental health is characterized by the ability to love and to create...by a sense of identity based on one’s experiences of self as the subject of one’s powers, by the grasp of reality inside and outside ourselves, that is, by the development of objectivity and reason” (68-69). With the help of Clarisse, even without wide access to literature besides the few books he can steal at work, Bradbury shows that Montag gains perspective on, if nothing else, at least what does *not* make him happy. He has learned to question and has developed the ability to reason, despite the fact that he has never learned to do so.

Montag notes others’ violence from a distance, trying to make sense of it. Through Clarisse, who teaches Montag to question the assumptions he had previously held, Montag can finally put a voice to his own misery: “He was not happy. He was not happy. He said the words to himself” (12). Montag slowly alters his perspective on violence, realizing it makes him miserable. For instance, when he talks about Mechanical Hounds, he notes that it is ““sad...[that] all we put into [them] is hunting and finding and killing. What a shame if that’s all they can ever know””(27). It is little wonder that he begins to question the violence and mundanity of his life when he notes the sharp contrast between Clarisse’s kindness and other’s cruelty. Her example helps him understand how he can transform, as the most violent thing she ever does is collect butterflies (23). By learning what the unhappy people around him are doing wrong, Montag can see the cause-and-effect pattern

that leads people to violence and suicide. He notes the pattern Fromm mentions, that “an unhealthy society is one which creates mutual hostility, distrust, which transforms man into an instrument of use and exploitation for others, which deprives him of a sense of self, inasmuch as he submits to others or becomes an automaton” (*The Sane Society*, 72). When exposed to other people’s protestations and faced with the realization that he is likewise unhappy, Montag does the sensible thing—he revolts against his upbringing. Rather than act violent and ignorant like his contemporaries, Montag turns to peace, individuality, and intellectualism, hoping to find stability while doing so.

Though he has spent most of his adult life distrusting literature and burning books, Montag marks his transformation by reconsidering this idea. ““There must be something in books, things we can’t imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there. You don’t stay for nothing...She was as rational as you and I, more so perhaps, and we burnt her”” (51). Not only does this quote show his curiosity about books and their power, it also shows his willingness to dismiss the normal notions of sanity, logic, and pleasure. Throughout the narrative, Montag continues to separate himself from his contemporaries as he searches for meaning in his pleasure-driven culture. For instance, after a particularly destructive burning, Montag has the following exchange with Beatty:

“I—I’ve been thinking. About the fire last week. About the man whose library we fixed. What happened to him?”

“They took him screaming off to the asylum.”

“He wasn’t insane.”(33)

With this quote, Montag shows his progress into individual thought; he refuses to passively accept the ideas of others, marking a transformation. Montag before his transformation is the essence of destruction. He opens the narrative with the line, “It was a pleasure to burn,” setting the tone of built-up, eroticized violence that will recur throughout the rest of the story (3). Violence, by Bradbury’s characters, is

treated just as cavalierly as suicide, showing this society has pervasively insane. For instance, Mrs. Phelps, one of Mildred's friends, finds the violence of her own children funny: "They'd just as soon kick as kiss me. 'Thank God I can kick back!'" (96). With this comment, Mrs. Phelps dismisses child abuse as a joke, and her friends' silence expresses their complicity in this casual treatment of a truly brutal act. She feels so little for her own children that she would rather kick them than care for them; children in this society act with violence because their parents show them how, and their parents learned from those who came before. Thus the pattern continues.

Society and the actions committed in the name of duty can be summed up with the statement that Faber, a retired professor, makes: "Those who don't build must burn. It's as old as history and juvenile delinquents" (89). Violent children and self-destruction have become ubiquitous to the point they are barely worth discussing. With art and literature outlawed, Bradbury shows here that very little still needs to be built; based on this premise and on the fact that important thoughts no longer need to be thought, people have returned to their baser instincts. Instead of creating, they destroy. Given that cultural creation is at a minimum and that the population at large has never been socialized to think critically about anything, all they can do is passively take in the world—they have no way to express their frustrations and desires through art or literature, and they cannot understand themselves as distinct from others. The only way citizens are able to express themselves and *hope* people might take notice is through violence and suicide. People, being barred from dynamic mental activities, have begun acting out their frustrations physically because they are barred from working through them, both because they have not been taught how and because art is banned. Citizens distract themselves with constant television, with overdosing on drugs, with jumping off of buildings because they are denied the intellectual pursuits that, psychologists agree, lead to a fully-realized person.

This notion of self-actualization was presented in 1943 by Abraham Maslow, creator of Humanistic Psychology. He believed that each person had a desire to reach his or her utmost potential, and created a pyramid-shaped “hierarchy of needs” to describe how one would go about realizing that potential. In order to reach upwards toward self-actualization, a person’s basic needs must be met—that is, he or she must have food, water, sleep, and other physiological necessities (Maslow). Once these basics are met, a person can strive for safety (further defined as security of body, resources, morality, health), love and belonging (friendship, family, sexual intimacy), esteem (self-esteem, confidence, respect of others, respect for self), and finally self-actualization (Maslow). Given that people in Montag’s are constantly threatened with bodily violence, they are never able to gain reassurance of their own safety, never mind climb towards self-actualization. The hierarchy of human needs—*needs*, not desires—is cut in two in *Fahrenheit 451* and yet people are force-fed the idea that they are given everything required to make them happy; in theory, all they have to do is passively accept what is offered and everything will be perfect. When citizens experience sadness and anger—emotions they are not expected to feel, let alone taught to deal with—violence remains their only outlet, whether of the self or of others. When people are denied the chance to expressive their feelings, of course they will destroy themselves. Their violent acts—their mental disorders—become a kind of protest.

Self-actualization requires learning, and as Montag grows and changes over the course of the book, he becomes more self-actualized. Moreover, now that he has gone through this transformation, Montag states that he wants to continue to grow: “I don’t want to change sides and just be told what to do. There’s no reason to change if I do that” (92). This shows that he wants to continue to reason things out for himself, accepting the help of others, like Faber the retired professor, without being the mindless automaton he had been. Bradbury expresses this nicely when he writes of Montag, “This was all he wanted now. Some signs that the immense world

would accept him and give him the long time he needed to think all the things that must be thought” (143). Because Montag does go through this transformation, learning to appreciate literature and history, many academics, critics, teachers, and students identify with and admire him. Montag’s literature-driven transformation is one that readers—lovers of the written word—can sympathize with; his dynamism makes him an interesting character to follow, especially given that he goes on such an arduous journey. Teachers regularly include *Fahrenheit 451* in their curricula, as students can appreciate the protagonist’s transformation (Hamplen, Ellenbogen, Axiolitis). He is considered an idol by most (Gruber, Smolla, McGiveron). One critic calls him a “rebel-action hero” (Smolla). Another believes he is “frightened and unsure, but he resists the forces that have destroyed freedom and unhappiness. Students can identify with him” (Rodriguez).

Despite the widespread appeal both of the book and its main character, Bradbury does not simply intend for readers to look up to Montag. He presents Montag as a warning. Montag does, over the course of the book, become saner by his own standards. He changes his notion of what stability and health entails, becoming more like Clarisse and less like Beatty—yet that is not the whole story. He certainly does refuse to let his peers set his parameters for sanity in a society creates its insanity and then blames its people for being insane. By fabricating unhealthy notions of insanity and normality, governmental figures are better able to root out potential problematic people within the society—and better, they hope, at avoiding insurrection. They refuse people the right to fight for meaning, refuse the idea that life even *has* meaning outside of obtaining pleasure. People do not value life because the government maintains that life *has* no value.

This society’s view of insanity is in itself unhealthy; citizens within Bradbury’s society consider Clarisse loudly and overwhelmingly crazy merely because she has an imagination. Shortly after she introduces herself to Montag, she admits that her family forces her to see a psychiatrist, and readers later learn it is because she is an

“odd duck...timebomb...[and] a queer one” (60). After their second meeting, she bids him good-bye by saying, “I’ve got to go see my psychiatrist now. They *make* me go. I make up things to say...The psychiatrist wants to know why I go out and hike around in the forests and watch the birds and collect butterflies” (22-23). Indeed, Clarisse’s own family barely takes her seriously, considering her just as unstable as the rest of her society does. She explains, “I’m seventeen and I’m crazy. My uncle always says the two go together. When people ask your age, he said, always say seventeen and insane” (7). Though Clarisse is the only person Montag respects, she is considered unequivocally crazy. Yet it is her influence that causes Montag to awaken, so he *cannot* consider her simply crazy. By widening his viewpoint, Montag slowly becomes saner.

This dystopia, then, engenders a view of morality and psychology that is not only atypical to modern readers but also deeply unhealthy, given that, to Montag’s contemporaries, burning houses down is a common nightly activity and persecuting neighbors is considered a scintillating hobby. To explain this notion, Foucault in his *Madness and Civilization* describes the typical external view that society often takes of madness: that it is subjective, “a combination of persuasion and mystification” (164). The government has convinced people that Clarisse is crazy; but objectively, she is actually quite stable. People who commit suicide are not spoken of as abnormal, and committing random acts of violence is totally socially acceptable. But the normality or abnormality of these acts does not make them sane or insane. A society as well as a person can be unhealthy. Many readers would posit that Montag is a paragon of health after his transformation, yet he actually proves, before the end of the novel, to be quite pathological.

Though Montag is pleased by his awakening, before the book is over, he reverts to his former violence; he ultimately betrays himself. Even after he teaches himself to be an intellectual who questions his society and the violence it recommends, Montag decides to *kill* his boss and coworkers by setting them aflame.

Despite the fact that Montag has grown weary and skeptical of Beatty's lessons and advice, despite the fact that he has grown very tired of violence from others, and despite the fact that he is *glad* he has changed, Montag at the end of the novel reverts to violence when venting his frustrations. His late actions are made worse by the fact that he no longer has someone like Beatty ordering him to do despicable things—he cannot simply say it is part of his job to murder people. Montag's reverted actions look all the more pathological because they not only have no excuse to stand on, but because he knows better than to be committing such actions. Though he is fed up of others treating one another cruelly, he acts precisely this way when annoyed by the trite conversation of his wife and her friends:

“Go home.” Montag fixed his eyes upon her, quietly. “Go home and think of your first husband divorced and your second husband killed in a jet and your third husband blowing his brains out, go home and think of the dozen abortions you’ve had, go home and think of that and your damn Caesarian sections, too, and your children who hate your guts! Go home and think how it all happened and what did you ever do to stop it? Go home, go home!” he yelled. “Before I knock you down and kick you out the door!” (101).

Perhaps Montag meant his words as a wake-up call or some kind of warning to those he believes are living in ignorance, yet by reacting this way, all he does is scare others and threaten them; his speech is one of a madman, not the peaceful revolutionary he would like to be. He cannot rally those around him because he is too extreme with his tactics and severe with his reactions. He cannot convince people to join his cause because instead of calmly talking about things, he rages and insults everyone around him.

Montag, even after he understands the healthy, sane thing to do, shows a strange inability to control his actions, often doing precisely the opposite of what is in his best interest. He sabotages his agreement to slowly spread literature through

society by word of mouth with Faber; instead of being subtle, Montag tosses books around in front of his neighbors and yells at them about poetry (98). Then he sets fire to his coworkers and boss when he cannot get them to see his point of view (120). Montag himself views his actions from a noted distance, as if he has no idea what he is doing at any given time: “My god, how did this happen?” said Montag. “It was only the other night everything was fine and the next thing I know I’m drowning” (131). Likewise, “it seemed so remote and no part of him; it was a play apart and separate, wondrous to watch, not without its strange pleasure” (134). As if these actions were not enough, he then tries weakly to rationalize them as soon as he commits them: “*Beatty wanted to die*” (122). He spends the book grasping at reason, crawling towards mental stability and creativity, only to return to insanity and violence by killing Beatty and the other firemen. Given that Montag’s society is insane, perhaps some would not blame him for his transgressions; some would not blame him for being insane. Yet I argue that he can. Montag is culpable.

Though readers sympathize with Montag and his transformation, his actions are truly pathological. He murders his boss without remorse, leaves his wife without caring that he will never see her again, and puts his allies Clarisse and Faber in danger because of his own carelessness. His harsh treatment of others is made worse by the fact that Montag knows that violence does not lead to happiness. He consistently and knowingly breaks the law, he acts impulsively and dangerously, and he disregards the safety and rights of others by placing them in danger or by directly and guiltlessly hurting them. His return to the unquestioning violence he so recently abandoned speaks both to him as a character and to the society that produced him. No doubt his society made him crazy initially, given that he comes from a society utterly hell-bent on destroying itself—it is no wonder he is pathological at the outset of the novel. If he did not go through a difficult transformation, readers would not appreciate how difficult it is to exist in a dystopian society. Montag initially bought into the tenets prescribed by his peers; his father and grandfather were firemen like

him. He paid for the ceiling-to-floor televisions that cover the walls of his house. He loves the smell of kerosene and initially loved burning books. For nearly thirty years, he got by without questioning anything. It makes sense that, at first, he was insane like everyone else born into a world irrevocably deranged.

But Bradbury shows that Montag does transform. He changes. He becomes more likeable and sympathetic. He appeals to the intellectual and the peace-keeper, only to burn his reformation to the ground. Montag did not need to kill his coworkers and boss before fleeing for the wilderness; a lookalike of Montag's was hunted and "killed" on television, so no one continues to look for him as a fugitive. Some might argue that destroying a destructive force is actually a good idea, in that it rids the world of further destruction, but in Montag's case it simply returns him to insanity. Killing Beatty implicates Montag in the killing; it makes him a killer, and killing makes him insane. Seemingly, Montag's newfound intellectual standpoint would keep him from killing others, given that he disapproves of violence. Montag's actions, however, can be placed upon a marked continuum. His society (and, at first, Montag) refuses to focus on the personal or individual aspects of citizens, and people are almost never alone: they are continuously babbling, pretending to listen to other people chatter, watching television, and encouraged not to venture anywhere alone. Firechief Beatty in fact addresses this enforced community atmosphere when he explains the origins of censorship, stating that enacting it was not an immediate decision, nor was it enacted from a dictator down; rather it was a slow movement put in place by the people out of a desire to protect themselves and to avoid being offended by others:

We must be alike. Not everyone born free and equal as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against. A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon.

Breach man's mind. Who knows what might be the target of the well-read man? (58)

Censorship arose to avoid infuriating minority groups who had problems with specific pieces of literature; once government officials realized people's fury, they helped facilitate the destruction of literature as a way of avoiding controversy. In an effort to make everyone equal, to actively force everyone to have the same status, minority groups within society argued for the removal of offensive reading material until eventually everything but rule books were essentially gone (58). This desire to expunge everything deemed even mildly suggestive or offensive moved society to an extreme, requiring that people be violent, obsessive watchguards—all in an effort to keep confrontational material from offending anyone. Protecting the masses from threatening material requires continuously threatening bodily harm, and so every person lives under the constant threat of violence, and each citizen keeps an eye on the neighbors to ward suspicion away from him- or herself.

This outward focus, this tendency to be other-obsessed as a method of maintaining order, characterizes Montag's society—everyone focuses on surface realities, on immediate pleasures gained while in the presence of others, and these deny any focus on the self. Focusing on the self leads to introspection, and introspection could lead to insurrection. When no one feels like a minority, people are not as focused on inequality or comparing themselves to one another and, ostensibly, people do not feel out of place; then society can function as the government wants it to. Focusing on every potential threat anyone else could pose involves denying any focus on the self, and inherent in such denial is an elimination of self-actualization. Implying that one doesn't have a self—and denying the expression of self that art, literature, and creativity require—pathologizes feelings, and especially pathologizes unhappiness. Feelings of unhappiness are going to persist even if someone denies their existence, as repression and suppression are ineffective at eliminating unhappiness. Unhappiness persists even if people pretend

it does not, and when citizens do not understand where their feelings of discontent are coming from, they may make misguided attempts to escape.

When escape either doesn't work (e.g., television, drugs, dangerous driving habits) or isn't allowed (reading, creativity, appreciation of nature), people in this dystopian society try a more effective and permanent kind of escape: suicide. The commonness of suicide can be readily explained in dystopia. Moreover, it makes sense that Montag would want to search for a different kind of escape once he realizes he has the option. He begins to move away from the overwhelming influence of pacifying everyone at the expense of his own actualization, and this journey marks his transformation into a sane human being. Montag goes too far, however—he throws himself too far across the continuum and lands in the other extreme. He no longer cares for any aspect of the other, and ignores the fact that people besides him have feelings. Montag is too focused on stumbling towards enlightenment to think of others' potential well-being. He is so focused on elevating himself that he loses sight of his sanity and compassion in the process. By altering his former traits and by trying to be someone he *doesn't* hate, yet still ultimately resorting to violence in the end, Montag betrays his cause and himself. He could absolutely teach people if he tried—after all, Clarisse taught him even though he was closed-minded. But he resorts to cruelty because he is frustrated and because cruelty is easy, even though he understands it is reprehensible and decidedly unhealthy.

Montag tries to symbolically destroy the person he was, to burn it away. Yet he is no longer willing to consider suicide as an outlet or escape, and so he resorts to killing a figure that represents his past: Beatty. Killing someone he once revered is indeed a betrayal of what Montag once was—but it is also a betrayal of what he had become. He becomes so focused on himself that he abandons caring for anyone else. Though he wants to improve society so that he and everyone else can be fully actualized human beings, he loses sight of others' betterment and instead focuses solely on his own. Montag willingly destroys people to suit his own needs; given that

he abhors violence and knows his actions are inappropriate, there is no excuse for his deeds. The reasoning behind his attitude—his desire to better *his* individual situation no matter the means—does not justify his pathological actions given that he knows that violence does not truly solve anything. Montag's journey to consciousness is dangerous in that, by the end of the book he realizes his own isolation and lashes out in frustration and a misguided attempt to alter his situation.

With this train of events, Bradbury does not advocate violence; he rather does the opposite. He warns against violence, stating in fact that violence is a symptom of mental instability. Moreover, he believes that there are multiple marks of an insane society—not only can equality be taken too far, but so can individuality, specifically when they result in suicide and murder. Bradbury offers an alternative at the conclusion of the book, as Montag flees the city and comes across a group of forest-dwelling outcasts and runaways who have taken to memorizing books. They believe that this will eventually allow them to reinstate literature even if every book is destroyed, as it allows *them* to become books. When Montag first stumbles upon them, they are huddled around a fire for warmth—and upon looking at them, Montag realizes that fire can be helpful as well as harmful. They tell Montag that memorizing books allows them to keep the knowledge safe in their heads, and no one can tell whether it exists or not (152). Importantly, they do not exert their power over others. “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...for if we are destroyed, the knowledge is dead, perhaps for good” (152). They realize that people cannot be forced to listen or to agree, even when threatened. This small community is able to reconcile the two extremes Montag launched himself between; they understand that each person has a role to play and must alter the world in some way by living—and they also understand that they are not any more important than any other person (163). They maintain sanity walking the line between individuality and community, without destroying themselves or anyone else. Interacting with them gives Montag

models which can perhaps allow him to return to sanity, given his awareness and presence of mind. He has already become aware of the madness of others, and now he has to be made aware of his own madness by being confronted by a communal sanity. It is with this group that Montag sees his old society destroyed by an atom-bomb, and it is with them that he hopes to rebuild.

Bradbury created Montag as a way of working out his anger in a less violent manner than the character himself does. The author does precisely what Montag in his censored societal creation cannot: he vents his frustrations creatively in order to remain sane. He is advocating a rebuttal to censorship, certainly, but he does not seem to be advocating actual physical violence, neither through his novel nor in subsequent interviews on the subject. When asked his beliefs on countering government-enforced censorship, Bradbury had the following response:

Speak up and say whoever's doing it is wrong, very quietly. If you're a librarian and someone insists you take a book off the shelf, and maybe they come and take it off the shelf. When they leave you put it back. And when they come back a week later and they take it off the shelf. When they leave, you put it back. And when they come back a week later and they take it off again, you put it back. And you keep putting it back and finally they get tired and they leave. It's that simple. (Aggelis 148)

It seems, then, that Bradbury likewise sees that Montag's violent actions are unhealthy, even if readers typically sympathize with his anger and even his lashing out. In this way, Montag actually functions as a warning.

Bradbury had deeply rational reasons for writing such a warning. Bradbury treats Montag with sympathy, giving him the fortunate ending of finding like-minded individuals who can teach him how to stay sane after the destruction of their insane society. Clearly, Bradbury feels for his narrator and even reacted with the same sort of fury that Montag did when he saw censorship in *his* society:

“I wrote it in 1953. I was angry at (Senator Joseph) McCarthy and the people before him—Parnell Thomas and the House Un-American Activism Committee and Bobby Kennedy, who was part of that whole bunch. I was angry about the blacklisting and the Hollywood 10. I was a \$100-a-week screenwriter, but I wasn’t scared—I was angry” (Aggelis 146).

He was living in an unhealthy society and described a character as deeply flawed as the world he created. Like Fromm, Bradbury realized that “society can have [distinct] functions; it can further man’s healthy development, and it can hinder it; in fact most societies do both, and the question is only to what degree and in what directions their positive and negative influence is exercised” (*The Sane Society*, 72).

Bradbury’s message was important to his contemporary audience and is likewise poignant today. Not only is our society inundated with an abundance of technology, but illiteracy is still a problem; the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, for instance, has “administered tests which revealed that an estimated 14% of US residents would have extreme difficulty with reading and written comprehension. These people can legally be defined as illiterate” (caliteracy). Illiteracy currently keeps these adults from functioning in many wider social contexts, and though illiteracy currently has a stigma, Bradbury presents a world in which literacy has a poor reputation. Though his world is indeed fiction, there is a concern that it could someday be a reality.

Just as importantly, people worldwide experience censorship and tyranny, and pretending that such issues are nonexistent or not harmful will not lead to the creation of a healthy society. Awareness, Bradbury notes, is the best defense against violence and instability, especially when instability is a direct result of ignorance. He stated in an interview that the totalitarian mentality comes about “if your educational system fails and people can’t read or write, then they’re at the beck and call of everyone with a flimsy idea” (Aggelis 141). Bradbury promotes sanity and creativity

by showing circumstances in which those concepts are difficult to achieve. He depicts a society that can only produce destructiveness, which is a form of destruction itself. But he warns moreover that the destructive forces will eventually destroy themselves, and that committing violent acts due to frustration does not lead to the advent of sanity. In order to remain healthy, the sane cannot resort to the tactics of the unhealthy, even if they do so based on different ideals. Ultimately, Bradbury promotes non-violence and sanity, even though his book would seem at first glance to do the opposite.

Bradbury's book was timely and relevant when it was published, but it is likewise important now. Not only does our modern society place more emphasis on technology, it also relies on instant and constant entertainment. We expect the internet to remain readily available and for information to send instantaneously; we rely on the immediacy of cell phones and satellites to keep us connected to our friends and loved ones. Bradbury's fear of our over-reliance on technology is a very reasonable one, and in fact with *Fahrenheit 451* he was oddly prescient. Not only did he predict the concept of flat-screen televisions, he also predicted earbud headphones; in fact, Bradbury himself claims that the inventor of the Walkman was inspired by this novel (Aggelis 189). Technology, then, can affect *and* be affected by literature. Though concerns about the ill effects of superficial entertainment certainly still abound, the fact that high-school teachers continue to include this novel in their required reading means Bradbury's lessons remain relevant.

Montag, the protagonist of Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, is routinely valorized as a hero who refuses to submit to the tyranny of his dystopian society. By viewing Montag's violence as mental instability, readers of this book can better take in Bradbury's intended meaning—and his desire to warn others about the dangers of narrow-mindedness and destruction. One must balance individuality and interest in others in order to remain sane, and a sane society must foster these aspects, as well.

Elimination of either autonomy or compassion, whether by banning creativity or threatening violence, creates an insane society and a likewise unstable populace.

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