

## A Study of the Allusions in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

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On *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

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But if we look more closely at the novel, noting specifically the literary and Biblical allusions, we see a deeper message in the novel than simply the warning that our society is headed for intellectual stagnation. The literary allusions are used to underscore the emptiness of the twenty-fourth century, and the Biblical allusions point subtly toward a solution to help us out of our intellectual "Dark Age." Bradbury seems to be saying that the nature of life is cyclical and we are currently at the bottom of an intellectual cycle. We must have faith and blindly hope for an upward swing of the cycle. This concept of the natural cycle is most explicitly stated by Bradbury through the character of Granger:

And when the war's over, some day, some year, the books can be written again, the people will be called in, one by one, to recite what they know, and we'll set it up in type until another Dark Age, when we might have to do the whole thing over again.

The major metaphor in the novel, which supports the idea of the natural cycle, is the allusion to the Phoenix, the mythical bird of ancient Egypt that periodically burned itself to death and resurrected from its own ashes to a restored youth. Through the persona of Granger, Bradbury expresses the hope that mankind might use his intellect and his knowledge of his own intellectual and physical destruction to keep from going through endless cycles of disintegration and rebirth.

This image of the Phoenix is used in the novel in association with the minor character Captain Beatty, Montag's superior. As an officer, Beatty has knowledge of what civilization was like before the contemporary society of the novel. In an attempt to satisfy Guy's curiosity and hopefully to quell any further questioning, Beatty relates to Guy how the twentieth century began to decline intellectually, slowly reaching the point in future centuries of banning books, schools stopped teaching students to think or to question and crammed them with factual data in lieu of an education. Psychological hedonism became the most positive virtue; all questioners and thinkers were eliminated. It is crucial that Beatty wears the sign of the Phoenix on his hat and rides in a "Phoenix car." He has great knowledge of the past yet ironically and tragically does not know how to use his knowledge, treating it only as historical curiosity. He is interested only in keeping that status quo of uninterrupted happiness and freedom from worry. He imparts his knowledge only to firemen who are going through the inevitable questioning he feels all firemen experience. He tells Guy that fiction only depicts an imaginary world, and all great ideas are controversial and debatable; books then are too indefinite. Appropriately, Beatty is burned to death, and his death by fire symbolically illustrates the rebirth that is associated with his Phoenix sign. When Guy kills Beatty, he is forced to run off and joins Granger; this action is for Guy a rebirth to a new intellectual life.

Bradbury employs several specific literary quotations to illustrate the shallowness of Guy's world. By using references to literature, Bradbury carries through a basic irony in the book: he is using books to underscore his ideas about a world in which great books themselves have been banned.

After Beatty has given Guy a capsule history of how the world reached the anti-intellectual depths of the twenty-fourth century, Guy goes to a book he has concealed but has not yet had the courage to read. He reads several pages; then Bradbury has him quote the following passage:

It is computed, that eleven thousand persons have at several times suffered death rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end.

The quotation is from the first book of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, "A Voyage to Lilliput." At that point of the quotation Gulliver has learned of a long-standing feud in Lilliput, between those who have traditionally broken their eggs at the larger end, and the edict of the King, ordering all subjects to break their eggs at the smaller end because a member of the royal family had once cut his finger breaking the larger end. The struggle between being reasonable and being saddled to tradition even to the point of ridiculous suicide is perhaps what Bradbury is after here. The twenty-fourth century is just as saddled to the status quo, and Bradbury has been careful to point out the dangers of

intellectual deadness. The example from Lilliput is an excellent one for him to choose, since it represents an absurd situation taken to a gross exaggeration, a basic device of satire.

As Guy and his wife read on, a quotation is taken directly from Boswell's *Life of Johnson*:

We cannot tell the precise moment when friendship is formed. As in filling a vessel drop by drop there is at last a drop which makes it run over; so in a series of kindnesses there is at last one which makes the heart run over.

Guy makes the point that this quote brings to his mind the girl next door, Clarisse McClennan, who was labeled a "time bomb" by Beatty because she was a sensitive, observant person who questioned society, and was consequently eliminated by the government. Montag made an emotional attachment to Clarisse, an attachment that was sincere and true in a world hostile to honesty. It was his relationship with Clarisse that was for Guy the first "drop"; she started his questioning of the status quo, and subsequent events after her death made Guy think and question more and more seriously, until he completely breaks away from his diseased society at the end of the novel.

Guy continues to read and quotes again from Boswell, this time from a letter to Temple in 1763: "That favourite subject, Myself." Curiously enough, Guy's wife Mildred, who has not received any inspiration from this secret reading session, says that she understands this particular quote. Her statement is juxtaposed against Guy's saying that Clarisse's favorite subject wasn't herself, but others. He realizes the truth of the statements he has been reading from authors who wrote hundreds of years ago; his wife can only understand the literal level of one statement, the one reflecting the self-interest of her society.

The only other direct quote Bradbury employs from literature comes in the second part of the book, and serves to underscore the emptiness of the world that the three preceding quotes have shown. After Guy returns from having visited Faber, he talks with his wife and two of her friends. The conversation of the women reflects the shallowness of the women's thinking, since they are the products of this empty culture. Their discussion of politics, for example, has to do with voting for a candidate for president because he was better looking than his opponent. Guy has a book of poetry with him, and Mildred's visitors are shocked that he has a book. In a scene reminiscent of the banquet in *Macbeth*, Guy's wife attempts to cover for him by telling the women that firemen are allowed to bring books home occasionally to show their families how silly books are. Guy reads from Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"; the last two stanzas are quoted, and the last one is particularly apt, since it shows two lovers looking at what appears to be a happy world, but recognizing the essential emptiness that exists:

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! For the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here, as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Guy's world, too, rests on happiness, a happiness of psychological comfort and freedom from controversy, but Guy is finding that beneath the exterior is a vast emptiness, a "darkling plain."

Thus far, we have seen how Bradbury has used several allusions to literature to describe the situation of the contemporary world of the novel. It might be wise at this point to note an historical reference made, one that serves to underscore some basic ideas in the book.

Early in the book, when Guy is first beginning to undergo doubts, he and his squad are called to the home of a woman discovered owning books. The woman refuses to leave her home, choosing to die in the flames with her books. On the way back to the firehouse, Guy, shaken by the experience, mentions to Beatty the last words of the woman, "Master Ridley." Beatty—and note again that he has the knowledge—tells Guy that the woman was referring to Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London in the sixteenth century, who was arrested as a heretic because he allowed dissenters to speak freely. He was burned at the stake with fellow heretic Hugh Latimer, who spoke the words to Ridley that the woman in the novel alludes to as her last words: "We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out." These words recall the Phoenix idea of rebirth by fire,

since the woman's death proves to be an important factor in Guy's decision to investigate books. The words are ironic in the sense that the intellectual candle in Montag's world is burning rather dimly at the time, but the words are at the same time a fine statement of the indestructibility of questioners and thinkers in any society.

There are four specific Biblical allusions in the novel, and an examination of them shows that they both support the idea of the natural cycle and contribute to Bradbury's solution to helping us out of, or rather avoiding, the type of world pictured by the literary allusions. This solution would be the natural philosophical outlook that would be held by those who believe in a natural cycle to life and are in the midst of the bottom of a cycle: one must wait and have faith, since things will eventually improve.

Two of the Biblical allusions that support the idea of a philosophical faith in the renewal of cycles are the references to the Lilies of the Field (Matthew 6:28) and to the book of Job. Saint Matthew's parable of the Lilies illustrates that God takes care of all things and we need not worry; the Lilies don't work or worry, yet God provides for them. This submission to faith, this feeling that God will provide all in due course is also affirmed by the reference to the Book of Job, one of the strongest statements of faith in the face of adversity in Western culture. Both of these references come at significant points in the novel. The allusion to the Lilies of the Field comes as Guy is on his way to see Professor Faber. The Lilies are juxtaposed in zeugma-like style with Denham's Dentifrice, an advertisement Guy sees on the subway train. Both flash through his head and form an excellent contrast: the faith and submission of the Lilies and the artificiality and concern with facades of the contemporary advertisement jingle. After his clandestine meeting with Faber, at which the professor agrees to help Guy learn about books and plan for the future, Guy gets a message from Faber through the small earplug he wears to keep in contact with the teacher. The message simply says, "The Book of Job," in a sense reminding Guy that he must have faith, for the going will be rough on his new venture.

Two other Biblical allusions come at the end of the novel, when Guy has joined Granger and his colleagues. This group of men memorizes great works of our culture as a means of preserving ideas until literature is once again permitted. Guy is assigned to read and memorize the Book of Ecclesiastes, the Old Testament book that asserts the need to submit to the natural order of things. The only direct quotation from Ecclesiastes comes from Chapter Three, the well-known chapter that echoes the natural cycle idea in its opening line, "To everything there is a season..." The line comes to Guy as the men trudge along in Canterbury-like procession away from the destroyed city, each man being required to recite aloud from his assigned work in order to bolster their spirit and comradeship. Guy thinks first of some phrases from Ecclesiastes, appropriately enough, "A time to break down, and a time to build up," and "A time to keep silence and a time to speak." Another quote then comes to Guy, this one from the Book of Revelations, which Guy had told Granger he partially remembered:

And on either side of the river was there a tree of life which bore twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of nations (22:2).

This last book of the New Testament, also known as the Book of the Apocalypse, tells us that a victory of God is certain, but that much struggle must come first; we must have faith and endure before we can enjoy the fruits of victory. The lines Bradbury has Guy recall not only reinforce the idea of a cyclical world, but also give us a key to Bradbury's hope that "the healing of nations" can best come about through a rebirth of man's intellect. We must use our minds to halt the endless cycles of destruction by warfare and rebirth to a world of uneasy peace and intellectual death. The twelve tribes of Israel wandering in the desert seeking a new nation can be recalled here as Montag, Granger, and the others wander away from the city with hope that their new world will soon be established.

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