

***Fahrenheit 451* as Social Criticism**

Date: 1986

On *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

Author: David Mogen

From: *Fahrenheit 451*, Bloom's Guides.

If *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) established Bradbury's mainstream reputation as America's foremost science-fiction writer, publication of *Fahrenheit 451* three years later (1953) confirmed the promise of the earlier book. Indeed, these two science-fiction novels from the early fifties seem destined to survive as Bradbury's best-known and most lyrical treatment of science-fiction conventions. *The Martian Chronicles* presents the pioneering space romance in a distinctive tone of poignant irony and elegy; *Fahrenheit 451* counterpoises this ironic otherworldly drama with a searing vision of earthbound entrapment, evoking a painfully ambivalent poetry of incineration and illumination from the conventions of antiutopian fiction. Whereas *The Martian Chronicles* portrays entrapment in memory, the difficulty of accepting and adapting to an alien environment, *Fahrenheit 451* dramatizes entrapment in a sterile and poisonous culture cut off from its cultural heritage and imaginative life, vigilantly preserving a barren present without past or future. Though *Fahrenheit 451* has been accused of vagueness and sentimentality, it remains one of the most eloquent science-fiction satires, a vivid warning about mistaking, in Orville Prescott's phrase, "mindless happiness and slavish social conformity" for "progress."

Fahrenheit 451 fuses traditional themes of antiutopian fiction to focus satirically on the oppressive effect of a reductionist philosophy of "realism" translated into social policy. A very American satire, written in response to the cold war atmosphere after World War II, the novel's sarcasm is directed not at specific government institutions but at antiintellectualism and cramped materialism posing as social philosophy, justifying book burning in the service of a degraded democratic idea. *Fahrenheit 451* depicts a world in which the American Dream has turned nightmare because it has been superficially understood. For all his burning eloquence Captain Beatty represents Bradbury's satirical target, not Big Brother but the potentially tyrannical small-mindedness of the common man, perverting the most basic community institutions to enforce conformity. The underground scholar Faber warns Montag that the captain's rhetoric, like the seductive brilliance of fire, destroys the foundations of true freedom in its leveling blaze: "Remember that the Captain belongs to the most dangerous enemy to truth and freedom, the solid unmoving cattle of the majority. Oh, the terrible tyranny of the majority."

Given this satirical target—the debased Americanism of McCarthyism—the ironically reversed role of the "firemen" serves admirably as Bradbury's central metaphor, since it represents both the charismatic seductiveness of demagoguery and a perversion of the community values of Green Town, Bradbury's symbol of the American tradition at its best. Indeed, the power of *Fahrenheit 451*'s imagery derives from this ironic inversion of values in an institution that once evoked Bradbury's boyish awe and respect. Writing of the personal memories that inform the novel, he recalls how like many boys he idolized local firemen prepared to battle the "bright-monster" of fire.

And I did pass the firehouse often, coming and going to the library, nights and days, in Illinois, as a boy, and I find among my notes many pages written to describe the red trucks and coiled hoses and clump-footed firemen, and I recall that night when I heard a scream from a part of my grandmother's house and ran to a room and threw open a door to look in and cry out myself.

For there, climbing on the wall, was a bright monster. It grew before my eyes. It made a great roaring sound and seemed fantastically alive as it ate of the wallpaper and devoured the ceiling.

In his memory, the firehouse is the protector of library and home. And this heroic image of the community firehouse, the curiously thrilling terror of fire, inspire the angry lyricism of Bradbury's vision of the American Dream gone awry: for in this appalling future the community firehouse has become the impersonal agent of fire itself, destroying rather than preserving the community institutions Bradbury cherishes above all others—family life, schools, and, most fundamentally of all, perhaps, the local library. As Donald Watt demonstrates in "Burning Bright: *Fahrenheit 451* as Symbolic Dystopia," ambivalent associations with fire, both destroyer and center of hearth and home, fundamentally structure the novel. But the ambivalence evoked by fire metaphorically represents the ambivalent implication of American democracy, the possibility that the communal spirit of Green Town could become an American form of totalitarianism, a "tyranny of the majority" as fearful as the tyranny of Big Brother, founded on shallow misunderstanding of rationality, science, and the nature of "happiness."

Yet if *Fahrenheit 451* gains power and specificity from its American frame of reference, the satire also applies to patterns that can recur in all societies, whenever reductionist philosophies result in the sacrifice of individuals and free play of imagination for the common good. Bradbury's satire is directed not at American ideals but at simplistic perversions of them, as well as at the American innocence that assumes totalitarianism can't happen here. However, horror at Hitler inspired the book's original conception, that to burn books is to burn people: "When Hitler burned a book I felt it as keenly, please forgive me, as burning a human, for in the long sum of history they are one and the same flesh." And though Hitler is defeated, and McCarthy's era finished, they will always have successors who will keep the firemen at work: "For while Senator McCarthy has been long dead, the Red Guard in China comes alive and idols are smashed and books are thrown to the furnace all over again. So it will go, one generation printing, another generation burning, yet another remembering what is good to remember so as to print again. Ultimately, *Fahrenheit 451* warns that tyranny and thought control always come under the guise of fulfilling ideals, whether they be those of Fascism, Communism, or the American Dream. Yet the cyclical pattern Bradbury describes also suggests the positive implications of one of the book's central symbols, the Phoenix: for like the Phoenix, mankind always arises from ashes to rediscover and refashion a desecrated cultural heritage.

Though *Fahrenheit 451* has been compared frequently to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*—an obviously influential model—it actually combines the oppressive atmosphere of Orwell's police state with a cultural milieu delivered from the other major model in the science-fiction antiutopian tradition, Huxley's *Brave New World*. Indeed, the novel's affinities with *Brave New World* are profound, since they established the basic thrust of Bradbury's satire, which is not directed at authoritarianism but at a more characteristically American problem, a reductionist, materialist image of human nature and human culture reinforced through mass entertainment media. Though the novel's basic mechanics of thought control derive from Orwell, Bradbury's satirical vision does not focus primarily on government itself but on the potentially poisonous superficiality of mass culture, on whose behalf the firemen work. As in Huxley's satire (itself profoundly influenced by American culture in the twenties), the power of totalitarianism in *Fahrenheit 451* derives primarily from pleasure rather than pain, from addiction to mindless sensation rather than from fear of government oppression. The firemen work for the "people," not for an established hierarchy. Indeed, compared to Big Brother the firemen are haphazard and mild agents of repression.

Next to Orwell's vision of totalitarianism, Bradbury's appears vaguely defined, both ideologically and politically. Montag's entrapment generates nothing like the weight of despair that crushes Winston Smith's spirit. Yet understanding the American context in which Bradbury writes clarifies the logic of this political vagueness, since his major satirical target is the leveling impulse of mass culture, rather than the rigidity of ideology. As Kingsley Amis suggests, Bradbury's style is very different from Orwell's, working through key symbols rather than through elaborately imagined detail. Yet the final effect is similarly impressive: "The book [*Fahrenheit 451*] emerges quite creditably from a comparison with *Nineteen Eighty-four* as inferior in power, but superior in conciseness and objectivity."

Citation Information

Mogen, David. "Fahrenheit 451 as Social Criticism." In *Ray Bradbury*, 105–108. Twayne Publishers, 1986. Quoted as "Fahrenheit 451 as Social Criticism" in Bloom, Harold, ed. *Fahrenheit 451*, Bloom's Guides. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2007. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 28 Aug. 2015.
<<http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&SID=5&iPin=BGF014&SingleRecord=True>>.