

Research Article

Dystopian World of Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451

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ABSTRACT

Ray Bradbury explores in his dystopian novel Fahrenheit 451 (henceforth F451), the destructive side of technology and totalitarianism, which can deny individuals of their basic rights. This article gives a critical, contextual analysis of F451(1953) by Ray Bradbury. It investigates the dystopian elements to show how an authoritarian government projected in the novel that blocks mind and awareness. The protagonist of the novel is Guy Montag who takes a key role in revealing the tyrannical system and the potential consequences of disobedience. This article examines the manipulation and control of the state and its ill use of technology and its banning of books to shackle knowledge and mind. However, this article aims to show the effect of autobiographical elements, McCarthyism's censorship and the fear of communism during the postwar era and their effects on writing the novel. It also shows how in this dystopian world, an oppressive government is not successful in controlling all citizens. There are opposing characters whose consciousness is awakened and they are successful to show the failure of the system although they are becoming lonely outsiders by that system. The literature review has paved the way by providing the theoretical basis for the analysis of the novel. Thus, this short study sheds the light on how the totalitarian state affects Montag's change, but it is demonstrating the dystopian world of the novel.

Introduction

One of the major works of the 1950s is *F451*, which is a dystopian novel written by Ray Bradbury, and published in 1953. Set in an oppressive future American society, the novel introduces us to the story of a fireman who begins to question his task which consists of destroying books by setting them to fire. In the society portrayed by the author, books are illegal and "firemen" burn them by using a flame of 451 Fahrenheit degrees which is the supposed temperature at which the paper-book catches the fire and burns.

As a science fiction dystopia, Ray Bradbury's *F451* (1953) is offering a severely organized state sustained by book-burning. The protagonist of the novel is Guy Montag who is a fireman that went through an alteration. He leads himself to doubt the society and its suppressed humane standards. These differences focus on the mutual dystopian elements in *F451* like the uncertainties of lacking personal rights and humanity, as well as evaluation of the culture of consuming. Thus, these differences ensure the task of demonstrating the dystopian society of the novel (Brians, 2007).

Ray Bradbury is an American author of numerous genres, especially science fiction. He began composing his works through at the beginning of the Cold War, a conflict between the United States of America, and the USSR. The era of the Cold War was an era of "materialism, military expansion, ideological anxiety and a sense of the rapid transformation of consciousness." Media also became a very important part of people's everyday lives, and writers had to try hard to keep up with the quick world of media and their dominance over literature. This is a conflict between two countries and there was a threat of an

atomic war. These were the central features of one of Bradbury's most well-known works, *F451* (Ruland & Bradbury, 2005, p. 371).

When Ray Bradbury's popular futuristic novel appeared, the United States was involved in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. In its mad fear that communism would invade the state, the government had throughout much of the 1940s and 1950s been wary to a fault in hunting out citizens whom it may think that have a compassion with leftist causes. They were mechanically considered as dangerous to democracy and the country. Much of this monitoring policy focused on published material. Citizens lost their jobs and reputations for having books or journals that were labeled by the government as friendly to communism. And many writers, like the "Hollywood Ten" screenwriters and playwright Arthur Miller, were mistreated for writing books that the government disapproved.

On a more personal level, Bradbury employed his novel *F451* as a way of protesting against what he believed as the inappropriateness of publishing supervisors who through their severe control of the writings they published, deeply reduced the originality and creativity of authors. Ironically, *F451* was itself a means protesting towards censorship and has often been rewritten for foul language. Now, *F451* stands as a recognized literary classic work and millions of copies has been sold (Atkins et al, 2009, p. 4).

Literature Review

Although Bradbury's novel takes place at some future time in the United States, it also focuses on the government's prejudice of books; an action which is first to include only some selected works but then had come to take in all books of any kind. The novel is written at the height of the Cold War, and it shows elements of dystopia where intellectual and emotional matters are criticized, and citizens no longer have normal passionate relations with Mother Nature or one another. The main characteristic of such country is the ban that the government puts on all books (C. Johnson and V. Johnson, 2015, p. 305-306).

F451 is a criticism of postwar American society that breaks the link between individualism and an open-minded (or moral) society. In this way, Bradbury's writing is a reflection of America in the 1950s. Ray Bradbury lived his youth during years of the Depression era in a minor city and its standards were placed in conflict with those who shared capitalism and urban life. It became a place to escape from, or to avoid the dystopian formations of mid-20th century culture and civilization.

Bradbury is an invention of his political period. He was affected by the years of economic Depression, Popular Front politics and the WWII that tailed. He could simply be engaged to a form of science fiction that made-up the future in terms of the victory of logic and stability, and technical applications of scientific discovery. They come to be much gloomier in the postwar era. The reaction that manifested in *F451* was against the Utopia of technological wonder and the World States. That reaction was partly produced by a kind of drift away from the influence of Communist politics towards a liberal harmony (Seed, 2005, p. 491).

By using the excuse of defending the nation from socialist infiltration, federal agents took on individual rights and stretched government control on movie studios, universities, labor unions, and many other apparently sovereign nongovernmental associations. These works reveal a very real societal fear that the US might be changed into an oppressive, authoritarian society.

Accordingly, Donald Watt (1980, p. 165) says that *F451* has been viewed as a dystopian science fiction work, that creates a futuristic totalitarian society that stresses order and coherence at the cost of civil rights and liberty. Through the symbol of burning books, the novel primarily focuses on themes such as the suppression of ideas, the dangers of censorship, and the consequences of absolute government control.

In line with, Anwar (2016, p.1) states that Bradbury refers to how books make a civilization, and preventing them is "one of the worst crimes in history." Montag and the other exiled characters attempt to reserve civilization's stored knowledge by learning books by heart in an alienating age. Bradbury's novel proposes that humanity might be lost in the search for technological progress. Thus, his dystopian world both embodies and criticizes modern alienation, which is a symptom of uncontrolled progress.

Moreover, Emrah Atasoy (2015, p. 2) says that coming at the height of the Cold War, the novel projects a dystopia where the intellect and emotion are disparaged and citizens no longer have the normal connections with nature or with one another. Bradbury prophesied, at a time when television was in its infant stage and the Internet was completely unknown, that an

entire society would one day devote itself to staring at various screens, living their lives vicariously and interacting more intensely with personages on and through the screen than with people made of flesh and blood. In this paper, dystopia fiction will be briefly introduced and defined on one hand, and Ray Bradbury's novel *F451* will be further looked into, on the other.

Methodology

Dystopian Fiction

Dystopia is a modern concept created to explain the different meaning of utopia and is used to a disturbingly unfriendly fantasy world, that usually projects the future. The term is also applied to fictional works that depict such worlds. Dystopian fiction is often classified as Science Fiction; the novels are usually set in a future time with technology more advanced than today. It can be characterized by authoritarian governments or social control of the population such as the case in *F451*. As a significant form of science fiction and of modern satire, dystopian writing is exemplified in this paper in the novel *F451* by Bradbury (Baldick, 2001, p.74).

M. Keith Booker also describes dystopia literature as artistic literature that builds defective fictional communities shortcomings which satirize perfect utopian communities, or exact real-world communities, or both (Booker, 2005, p. 32-33). He continues to say:

Dystopian fiction is typically an individualist genre, opposing the special desires and inclinations of its protagonists to the demands of an oppressive regime that makes true individualism impossible. In this sense, one might be tempted to see dystopian fiction and utopian fiction as polar opposites.... Indeed, one of the central premises of most dystopian fiction is that one person's dream might be another person's nightmare, so that even an achieved utopia from the point of view of some might be a dystopia from the point of view of others. Of course, this very premise suggests that the opposition between dystopia and utopia is neither absolute nor simple. Among other things, while both dystopian and utopian fiction tend to be set in worlds that are distant in space or time from that of the author, both modes are often intended as satirical critiques of specific trends in the author's own world, the displacement in setting merely providing exaggeration and emphasis of the kind that is central to all satire.

Development of Dystopian Fiction

Chronologically, Plato's Republic is the first documented utopian suggestion.² Literally meaning "no place", it describes an island where everything is perfect or is an ideal community or society that sets out to create a perfect socio-political-legal system; citizens in this community enjoy equality and cooperate together to ensure the success of the community (Seed, 2005, p. 79).

However, the idea of a place where all well is of great antiquity that dated back to the Sumerians. The term "utopia" was coined circa 1516 by Thomas Moore for his book, taken from the Greek word which has a double meaning no place or good place and since then, this idea has become very popular and a great number of writers and philosophers have tried to describe various utopian forms of societies, where people would live in peace (Cudden, 1999, p. 957-960).

A "dystopia", then, would be a negative utopia, a place in which everything is imperfect. The first recorded use of dystopia was in an 1868 parliamentary speech by John Stuart Mill, who tried to find a name for an opposite of utopia: "If utopia was commonly seen as 'too good to be practicable', then dystopia was 'too bad to be practicable'". In 1899, more than three decades after the term was first employed, *The Story of The Days To Come and When The Sleeper Wakes*, the first dystopian works, in turn, were published by H. G. Wells, an author of English science fiction stories. Across the Atlantic, the first American dystopian novel is believed to be Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, which is published in 1909. The novel also consolidated ideological thematic in dystopian fiction.

Dystopian fiction come to be a major type fiction in the twentieth century, though it has roots that go back still further. This is specifically the situation in English literature, which was at the lead twist from utopian to dystopian ideas of the future at the end of the 19th century, particularly in the initial works of H. G. Wells. Moreover, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) can be reflected the earliest actual important 20th century dystopian novel in English, while it joins Evgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) to establish the three chiefs modern dystopian novels.

² Plato's Republic describes a utopian community based on the stratification of citizens in gold, silver, and bronze socioeconomic classes.

However, the dystopian fiction kept on flourishing in the years after the WWII, particularly within the dominion of popular science fiction, creating such notable authors as Vladimir Nabokov; Kurt Vonnegut Jr.; Frederick Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth, Ray Bradbury. After the first dystopian novels started to appear and were ultimately popularized in 1953, Ray Bradbury published one of his most famous works, *F451*, That come to be perhaps one of the best radical dystopian satire, along with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) as both works dealt with the topic of social classes and the control of human behavior (Carter, 2001, p.397).

In terms of creativity, the authors of dystopias, as well as the authors of utopias, very often express original and innovative ideas, which led to the forming of a heterogeneous genre. Despite this fact, there is a number of common characteristics that hold true for all dystopian literature. Dystopias are usually set in the future while borrowing some features from present societies and their main characters usually deal with fear and oppression from the side of the central government. Accordingly, at some point in the story, the main characters reach a level of awareness that prompts them to start a rebellion against the system (Booker, 2005, p. 36).

Different types of utopias are based on different underlying philosophical ideas. For example, economic utopias are generally against commerce and capitalism and call for equitable distribution of goods and work and abolition of money. Religious utopias attempt to establish communities of virtue. Scientific or technological utopias set in the future demonstrate the results of advanced scientific or technological changes. Feminist utopias explore changes in the idea of gender with single gender or single-sex societies. In dystopias, however, social control often trumps other ideas, leading to authoritarian rule and coercion (Horsfield, 2017, p. 16).

Both dystopian and utopian literature use the same narrative devices in which they imagine what their current society would be like in the future, but with different predictions as to the outcome. While utopian fictions are mostly optimistic in nature, the dystopian fiction is clearly pessimistic (Seed, 2005, p. 81).

Dystopia literature deals with dystopian societies that are ruled by a group with private agendas that are cleverly shrouded in euphemisms or outright lies. This group will operate by using force to sustain their rules, which are frequently reflecting actual systems as communism. The controlling group regulates most aspects of the individual's existence, everything from one's daily routine to their family unit and career. The individual is not as important as anything more than a part of the whole. As long as the status quo is maintained, the individual is typically safe, anonymous in the crowd. As conflict is necessary for storytelling, no dystopian work would be complete without dissension (Baldick, 2001, p. 74).

Usually, the conflict arises at the hands of one person or there will often be an event in a main character's experience that reveals the rift between the way things are and the way things might be better. Common devices for this event are missing a dose of emotion suppressants, seeing the hidden inner workings of the ruling system, or the discovery of forbidden elements from ages past. This awakening will give rise to a spirit of individualism, an awareness of human rights, and the knowledge that all is not as it seems and must be brought to light and if possible corrected (Ferris, 2012, p. 4).

As with much of literature, the ending may either be positive or negative; it is the journey that matters. The message of the work can often be more easily delivered if the hero suffers a tragic end at the hands of the society, and many of these works offer this feature. In this way, many dystopian works read as morality tales, aimed at pointing out flaws of the present and extrapolating them into the future. In short, a dystopian fiction centers on a dissenting person or group in a supposedly perfect society, awakened to the wrongness of inhumanity and willing to affect and make a change. Using this definition, the authors of these works have provided each human being with instructions for recognizing and overcoming such systems in their own life (Finsson, 2016, p. 5).

Elements of Dystopian Fiction

Elements of Dystopian fiction can include: A war story, rebellion, uprising, overpopulation or natural disaster. Civilization itself has transformed vividly as a consequence and plays a very important role in the story. Standards of living of the middle and lower classes can be considerably worse than current society, although this is not always the case. Freedom and humanity can be taken away as part of a controlling mechanism. Conformity is the central preferred outcome. There is a central character who questions society and the accepted norm. there is also a group who are not under the complete control of the ruling government will be responsible for the uprising. Advanced technology is often controlled by a ruling class, while the rest of the population lives in poverty and with primitive technology. According to many writers of dystopias,

the portrayal of a dystopian society makes it clear that certain aspects of human life should either remain or be eradicated if there is still to be a chance for humanity to flourish. While dystopias leave no room for hope (Gammon, 2017, p.1).

Analysis

The novel *F451* is an example of the above that displays signs of pessimism in the plot construction of the dystopia literature. The story of *F451* takes place in a futuristic society which seemingly attempts to provide to the needs of its inhabitants. However, the people are offered mass shows of the most modern technological gadgets, but the primary idea remains to prevent them from being independent in thinking. Ray Bradbury's *F451* is about Guy Montag, a fireman whose job is to set fire to books rather than to end fires. The society in which Montag lives is clearly marked by the growing mass media of Bradbury's time. Montag's living room has three walls which are television screens, but the programs are not intellectual. These shows are instead a blend of colors, loud noises and neutral shared conversations that create in people, a sensation that something similar to an adrenaline rush or, at the very least, mild pleasure. Faber tells Montag:

Most of us can't rush around, talk to everyone, know all the cities of the world, we haven't time, money or that many friends. The things you're looking for, Montag, are in the world, but the only way the average chap will ever see ninety-nine per cent of them is in a book (*F451*: 86).

The same is true of the Seashell radios that Montag's wife Mildred uses, even in sleep, ensuring that she is always connected to the mass media. Combined, the television screens and the radios create a sense that reality has very little knowledgeable influence and the media made a constant attack on effects of the senses. The only source suggested of material is to be literature. However, literature is banned as it is a call for confusion and sadness among the population. For example, Montag takes one of the literary books that he was presumed to burn but Captain Beatty who represents of the government says:

Do you know, I had a dream an hour ago. [...] in this dream you and I, Montag, got into a furious debate on books. You towered with rage, yelled quotes at me. I calmly parried every thrust. [...] Oh, you were scared silly [...] for I was doing a terrible thing in using the very books you clung to, to rebut you on every hand, on every point! What traitors books can be! You think they're backing you up, and they turn on you. Others can use them, too, and there you are, lost in the middle of the moor, in a great welter of nouns and verbs and adjectives (*F451*: 106-107).

To make sure that every person is 'happy' in the dystopian world of *F451*, the authorities are ready to unlimited to silence any sign of opposition or intellectual debate (McGlenn, 1953, p.2). So the firemen burn books, people who show signs of critical thinking and intellectual consciousness such as the neighbor of Montag, Clarisse who either vanish or are murdered by anonymous agents, and the media tone down the fact that their country is facing the forthcoming threat of a comprehensive attack. Beatty tells Montag that: "If you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none. Let him forget there is such a thing as war" (*F451*: 61).

As Montag chooses to do a further action in advance to regain what has been lost because he gradually understands what his community has become: "literature, history, language, memories, critical thinking and true happiness." Frequently, the negative prophecies made by the writer in a dystopian literary writing are centered on his lifetime tendencies, beliefs and thoughts that he sees as possibly challenging or catastrophic (Wien, 2012, p. 3). The story begins with Montag as the creator of fire as he had been taught about the history of firemen: "Established, 1790, to burn English-influenced books in the Colonies. First Fireman: Benjamin Franklin" (*F451*: 34), but he ends up floating in the river at the close of the story. He was washed and on his way to a new and diverse future. He finds compatible, intelligent allies in the countryside, but he sees the city burn put of being surrounded by fire. The war is ignored by people, but it has reached them while they still sit inactively watching TV, ignorant of what will happen to them.

The ideas of authoritarianism, scientific and technological progress, are as a replacement for the driving civilization to prosper. They have from time to time been active in the formation of dictatorships. Totalitarian society is not clear in Bradbury's *F451*, but it is however observable in the power and individual rights which are not accessible to the common people (Greasley, 2001, p. 77). In *F451*, the government uses books burning as a method of censorship. When Montag witnessed the burn of Mrs. Blake along with her books, he tells his wife:

You weren't there, you didn't see. [...] 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 (*F451*: 51).

Guy Montag, the is the central character of the novel and is a thirty-year old fireman, whose job is to set fires, not put them out, starts to inquire about the significance of his work and his life. In the beginning, Montag found amusement in doing his work and thinks of himself a cheerful person. He and his coworkers used to set fires in books, which are now regarded as smuggled goods.

Then, he started a relationship with his 17-year-old neighbor, Clarisse McClellan, who symbolizes goodness. Nevertheless, what she left was her humanist philosophy and interesting nature that made Montag to examine himself (Berger et al, 1999, p. 489). Clarisse is in direct contrast to Montag's wife who accepts the values of society blindly. Later, she vanishes together with her family and it is said that she been murdered by a car accident.

He finds himself alienated even from his wife, Mildred, who is reluctant to deal with reality and as a substitute, dips herself in an obsession to both tranquilizers and the cybernetic world delivered to her television and radio. Mildred takes an overdose of pills and this makes Montag question his career. He is frustrated by his work as a book burner and begins to question why books are motivating people such as a passionate woman who is ready to be burn rather than seeing her books burn. He is sick with himself and those nearby because they are accepting this kind of life rather than investigating what lies behind it.

Montag goes to a former English Professor whose name is Faber for help. He gives him a device to put in the ear so that they stay in contact. Faber is a scholar who attempts to save the substances of significant books in his head. Faber stimulates Montag to fight his fellow co-workers, the firemen. Montag appears to recognize:

Montag stood looking in now at this queer house, made strange by the hour of the night, by murmuring neighbor voices, by littered glass, and there on the floor, their covers torn off and spilled out like swan feathers, the incredible books that looked so silly and really not worth bothering with, for these were nothing but black type and yellowed paper and raveled binding (*F451*: 115).

Montag's faces an interior struggle where he scorns his unconscious society who is taken him to a kind of crisis when a siren carries co-workers, the firemen to his own home (Adamson, 2002, p. 253). This leads him to burn his own house and kill the chief, captain Beatty. Montag succeeded in making an escape from the city where he discovers the book people. They give him a shelter to hide from his fellow firemen and from the Mechanical Hound, a robotic dog. This dog can detect the place of banned books and wanted persona. Finally, the book people ask him to join their society. There, he expects the birth of a different society where truth and knowledge are again appreciated.

Censorship

F451 was an enormously popular work that ran to multiple printings and one of the strongest indictments of censorship and a highly popular work of literature, it has relevance even today as books are still taken off library shelves and textbooks are still censored (C. Johnson and V. Johnson, 2002, p.306).

According to C. Johnson and V. Johnson (2002, p.306) who mentioned that Ray Bradbury's 1953 novel on censorship, *F451*, had itself been censored by his publisher, and is what led to the formation of the Intellectual Freedom Committee of the American Library Association to monitor book censorship. They go on to say:

Ironically, Bradbury's frank treatment of issues controversial in the 1950s and 1960s caused his own publisher to cut or modify parts of the book without his knowledge. No one realized for many years that two versions of the book were being marketed one for schools and one for adult readers. *Fahrenheit 451*, and the censorship of the book, was the single biggest influence in the setting up of the American Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Committee, which brought pressure to bear on publishers who tried to expurgate books to promote sales. Bradbury's book made the connection between censorship and the dehumanization and degeneration of society. The book also warned that minorities initiated far too much censorship, whether they are African Americans asking for the removal of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the classroom or evangelical Christians urging that Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* be removed from science curricula.

However, the publishers of Bradbury's *F451*, who are unidentified to Bradbury, censored it by deleting some of the language that Bradbury used so as to sell the book to the high school market (Telgen, 1997, p. 138).

Conclusion

Dystopia fiction is an important genre of literature and it is exemplified in this paper by Ray Bradbury's greatest dystopian science fiction novel, *F451* (1951). The dystopia fiction that is also tied in with science fiction is usually that of a technocratic and totalitarian society, which demands order at the expense of individual rights and freedoms, and this can be clearly seen as the central plot structure of the novel. Developed in the years that immediately followed World War II, the novel set the stage for all future dystopian fiction novels and went on to become one of the important cultural science fiction texts that emerged out of the Cold War, which served to function as a background that contributed to or even caused dystopian oppression.

The novel, *F451*, was extremely critical of American society in the 1950s in terms of both conformism and mass culture and its main themes such as censorship and the struggle of knowledge versus ignorance, were cleverly and passionately dealt with. In depicting a future dystopian society that was so oppressive, Bradbury portrays the destruction of this society by nuclear war as a cleansing renewal. On the other hand, the novel finishes with an ill-omened suggestion that there is a very good chance that this new start for human civilization will eventually lead down to the same menacing path as the old one. This work does reveal a real fear in society that the government might evolve into an oppressive, authoritarian society.

However, as with many dystopia fiction novels, it does show, through the courage of the main character Montag, that deep inside the heart and soul of every human being, there exists a desire for freedom and individuality that can be achieved despite the odds.

This paper reveals the lack for further studies with regards to psychological analysis of alienation in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* because the sources do not cover in details about such kind of analysis. Therefore, I recommend that other researchers take this shortcoming into their consideration to verify the otherwise.

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