

# A Complex Analysis of Fahrenheit 451's Themes

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## Abstract

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* critiques a dystopian society where the government's use of technology and censorship threatens humanity by creating an illusion of happiness while stripping people of genuine emotional fulfillment. This paper explores how the novel follows the themes of happiness and technology through the glorification of ignorance. The paper discusses contrasting perspectives on happiness as presented by characters Clarisse McClellan and Mildred Montag, the protagonist's wife. Clarisse is promoted as someone who values human connection and views happiness as a result of true interaction, while Mildred represents government-induced complacency through the ideal definition of happiness as a result of technology. Moreover, Captain Beatty's ignorance-based justification for censorship is also highlighted. By analyzing such elements, this paper argues that Bradbury uses his novel to depict people losing touch with their humanity and happiness as a result of technological control and hidden censorship in order to warn against blind obedience to technological influence.

**Keywords:** *Fahrenheit 451*, Guy Montag, Clarisse McClellan, Mildred Montag, Beatty Book Burning, Happiness, Technology, Censorship, Ignorance

## 1. Introduction

"It was a pleasure to burn" is the first sentence of *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (Bradbury, 1953, p. 1). In this globally recognized novel, Bradbury illustrates a dystopian futuristic society that is spun around the idea of bridled knowledge through exercised book burnings. Having experienced the Nazi book burnings, Bradbury paints a world in which firemen exist not to protect but to burn all books they come across, curbing the people's ability to learn. "Monday burn Millay, Wednesday Whitman, Friday Faulkner, burn 'em to ashes, then burn the ashes. That's our official slogan" (Bradbury, 1953, p. 6). The novel follows protagonist Guy Montag, a fireman whose satisfaction in his work is disturbed by the introduction of a strange girl called Clarisse McClellan. Across three subsections "The Heart and the Salamander," "The Sieve and the Sand," and "Burning Bright," Bradbury compiles a story preaching the importance of choosing humans over technology.

In *Fahrenheit 451*, it is portrayed that people are happiest and most fulfilled when they have everything they ask for—no philosophical concerns, no controversy, four TV walls, etc. However, Montag discovers otherwise through several confrontations by Clarisse and Captain Beatty, his boss at the station. During his journey to finding true happiness—an unorthodox happiness that isn't predetermined and defined by the walls of his world—and going beyond the repressive limits of society, Montag encounters barriers of both the physical and psychological senses.

The novel *Fahrenheit 451* was written around the time of Hitler's book burnings, McCarthyism, and several large-scale wars. Bradbury rather saliently references these events through various themes in his novel. He emphasizes that the firemen's role in society is to keep the population happy through high degrees of censorship; he also discusses the shallow way people act due to this censorship, paired with overexposure to technology—namely a set of television walls known as parlor walls. *Fahrenheit 451* uses the character Clarisse, as well as the idea of societal control through firefighters and brainwashing TV screens to study the themes of humanity through extreme levels of censorship.

In this paper, I will explore several motifs. Namely, I will analyze the motif of happiness to analyze Clarisse's importance in the theme of technological control. Happiness appears as a motif throughout the novel to make clear the regressive role of technology. Moreover, I will also study how people degenerate into non-human beings due to government censorship that the public cannot discern. My analysis borrows from scholar Emrah Atasoy, whose claim about taking away one's imagination and replacing it with ignorance being a poor action influences the position on the "ignorance is bliss" mentality that I take in one part of the analysis. People, as a result of such technological control, become subjects of censorship that is adroitly hidden behind the entertainment of television, therefore causing them to lose touch with their humanity and happiness.

## **2. Technology, Humanity, and Their Correlating Roles**

One of the major characters featured in *Fahrenheit 451* is Clarisse McClellan, self-described as seventeen and crazy. She was first introduced on page 10 of the novel when Montag encountered her in the neighborhood on his way home from work. Although Clarisse's role in the story is brief due to her dying in an accident involving a speeding car, she leaves a lasting impact by leaving Montag questioning the true legitimacy of what the government presents as happiness and the ideology his job maintains: limits on the gaining of knowledge to prevent political disagreements. When Clarisse asks him if he is happy on page 10, his pre-existing beliefs that he had been leading a happy life shatter, and he is left doubting himself. Where the happiness that Montag thought himself to have was the orthodox, objective definition of happiness promoted by the government, the happiness Clarisse was referring to was one untainted by technology and brought about by true human interactions. Montag says, "he wore his happiness like a mask and the girl had run off across the lawn with the mask and there was no way of going to knock on her door and ask for it back" (Bradbury, 1953, p. 9). Clarisse forces Montag to question his perception of happiness and of what is right and wrong. She strips away his unknowingly illusory facade of happiness and reveals the underside of a mask he did not know he was wearing.

One example of someone harboring this fake, government-induced 'happiness' is Montag's wife Mildred Montag. She acts as an exemplar of a happy person as presented by the government. However, the dangers of following this example are clear in how she acts almost robotically when interacting with the people around her. Montag attempts to reason with his wife Mildred to help her understand this concern, saying, "We need not to be let alone. We need to be really bothered once in a while. How long is it since you were really bothered? About something important, about something real?" (Bradbury, 1953, p. 52). Mildred, however, like Montag at the novel's beginning and like everyone else in their community, believes that she is fully happy and content. Her example is developed through a very

prominent part of Fahrenheit 451 society: “parlor walls” or “TV walls,” screens that replace walls in homes and project interactive “families” for watchers.

On page 18, Mildred displays exemplary behavior reflecting the government’s values as she asks Montag to buy another screen wall because another person she knows has all four. Despite her already being dependent on technology for “interactions” and human connection, she desires more, which would only send her further down the rabbit hole of apathy and unawareness. These parlor walls are essentially tools for societal control; their almost addictive quality, as seen by Mildred’s fearful insistence to always be between them, prevents people from thinking critically. They are reduced to simply another unimportant part of society: obedient tools that keep the government running. Mildred exemplifies the people’s inability to think critically by asking Montag for another TV wall. She says, “It’s only 2,000” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 18). Her ignorance as she asks for extensive amounts of money and sacrifice from her husband who spends his entire day working demonstrates the extent to which she has been consumed by technology. She tells Montag, “‘Happiness is important. Fun is everything. And yet I kept sitting there saying to myself, I’m not happy, I’m not happy. I am.’ Mildred’s mouth beamed. ‘And proud of it’” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 49). She believes wholeheartedly in the concept of ‘happiness’ that Montag finds so difficult to grasp following his run-in with Clarisse. Somewhere in her subconscious, she recognizes to an extent that she may not be truly happy, but her aware mind fully convinces her that she is. She does not think she needs anything more to fulfill her apart from her parlor walls.

These TV walls serve not only as a symbol of their dependency on technology but also as a means of isolating everyone. They exist to create the illusion of interconnectedness and familial connections for the people when in reality, they are only living under the idea that they have relationships. Even those who live together under the guise of a family live their separate lives. When Montag was feeling unwell, he asked Mildred if she could turn the parlor off, to which she responded, ‘That’s my family’” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 48). Mildred cannot let go of her television family even when her physical family is unwell, demonstrating the extent to which the parlor walls have occupied and consumed her. Montag wonders, “Well, wasn’t there a wall between him and Mildred, when you came down to it? Literally not just one wall but, so far, three!” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 38). In a world where everyone can achieve their ideas of entertainment and leisure by watching TV and fulfill their innate need for interaction by talking to the characters on their walls, they are alienated even from those closest to them.

Montag once attempts to talk with his wife, asking how they first met. However, neither of them remembers, and Mildred simply says, “‘Funny, how funny, not to remember where or when you met your husband or wife’” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 40). Even families lose interest and don’t seem to care about being interconnected; rather, they seem more content with being disconnected. Mildred responds to not remembering how she met Montag with a comment on how it is “funny” that they don’t remember; she says nothing else after this before returning to her television family. Mildred saying it is “funny” demonstrates more clearly how saliently distinguished each person is from the other even within families because in reality, not remembering such a pivotal moment is more disturbing than amusing. The way Mildred overlooks such concerning behavior shows the extent to which everyone has become alienated.

This isolation and apathy exists not only in families but also more prominently in general society. When Mildred nearly dies from an overdose of sleeping pills, a machine is sent by the hospital to save her instead of real doctors. When Montag asks why, the doctors say, ““We get these cases nine or ten a night. Got so many, starting a few years ago, we had the special machines built”” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 13). People are so detached that even potential suicide cases and near-death situations do not faze them; this robotic apathy has reached a point to which they have machines built to perform their jobs for them. In this sense, people are more attuned to technology and machinery than they are to other people. Their apathy and orientation toward technology put them in individual bubbles where doctors do not even want to interact with their patients for such pivotal purposes. People respond robotically and express clear apathy toward any given situation, even when it comes to the extremes of life and death, leading them to simply create robots to do their jobs for them.

Moreover, the isolation in this world becomes so rudimentary that people believe it to be natural despite the obvious overlying alienation and confusion that results from it. People do not have to think about other people and their opinions, and they are fed the idea that it is a privilege to have this lifestyle with their television screen walls. In doing so, however, because they all live the same way, apart from society and aloof, it becomes easy to manipulate the way each person lives. Beatty tells Montag, “We must all 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 is happy” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 58). Through technology, people are all turned into machine-like beings. They are stripped of their humanity: their inherent ability to act deliberately with emotion and self-awareness. As they continuously regress into mindless beings who blindly follow what is placed in front of them by the media, they progressively act in the same technology-oriented way and subsequently become near copies of each other. Mildred is one of these mindless beings. This idea depicts the extent of government control and need for uniformity. Everyone follows blindly in the footsteps placed in front of them, no matter how negative the result because they cannot see the problems that are set before them behind the screens on their walls. With censorship and television leaving everyone vulnerable to adopting the same mindsets and subsequently acting identically, Fahrenheit 451’s society is placed on the path of ruination and loss of humanity by sheep mentality and mindless obedience.

Mildred is one of the people who live under this sort of sheep mentality. She lives with little to no thought regarding the reality of her situation, continuing to indulge in her television family, and, in stark comparison to Clarisse—who is criticized for thinking too much—finding the mere action of thinking repulsive. Clarisse, who does not live in a house of television walls but instead in a house with a real family she can laugh with, is the embodiment of what the leaders of Montag’s dystopian society do not want. Mildred, on the other hand, is exactly what they hope to make everyone become. She cannot relate with her husband or express even the bluntest sign of emotional intelligence when addressing him. When she relates him through the event of Clarisse’s death, she bluntly says, ““McClellan. Run over by a car. Four days ago. I’m not sure. But I think she’s dead”” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 44). She does not seem to care for his distraughtness, only thinking about returning to her TV family. However, in reality, in order for happiness to be real, a person needs to be able to emotionally connect to the people around them and those they love. While Mildred’s lifestyle is ideal in the eyes of Fahrenheit 451’s world, she is, in a way, failing herself in the sense of the true feeling.

In addition to suggesting, through Clarisse and her death (paired with Mildred), that emotional intelligence is a component of true happiness, Clarisse's absence also catalyzes Montag's increasing awareness of technology and the problematic censorship of information. When a woman burns along with her books rather than be left without them, Montag grows curious about what knowledge means, leading him to take one home. However, when Beatty visits Montag's house due to his not calling in for a sick day, he explains to Montag why it is so crucial that people refrain from reading and obtaining information, explaining that information leads to opinions, which then leads to fights and turmoil. He says, "'Colored people don't like Little Black Sambo. Burn it. White people don't feel good about Uncle Tom's Cabin. Burn it. Someone's written a book on tobacco and cancer of the lungs? The cigarette people are weeping? Burn the book. Serenity, Montag. Peace, Montag'" (Bradbury, 1953, p. 57). Beatty is essentially promoting the idea that "ignorance is bliss."

However, Emrah Atasoy (2015), an associate professor of Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick and Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard University's Department of English, says, "It is paradoxical that the system takes away the opportunity to envisage other systems, solutions, and to broaden knowledge under the pretext of bestowing happiness since imagination is an essential part of human beings" [1]. Atasoy's argument somewhat critiques the "ignorance is bliss" mentality. In this novel, the "ignorance is bliss" mentality is used to hide from the people the reality that they are unknowingly endorsing the fact that the less you know, the less you think by living under the pretense that the less you know, the *happier* you become. When an individual progressively thinks less and less, it reaches a point where they are essentially living in shells that they call bodies, causing them to degenerate. Bradbury wrote the novel during the Second Red Scare and the McCarthy era, both of which involved heightened anxieties about communist ideological repression and censorship. Atasoy's claim reflects the period the novel was written and explains the faults that are highlighted by Bradbury. The only society people know becomes the 'people' in their parlor walls, and the only thing they believe in becomes the fact that they are happy with this lifestyle, leading them to ignore these faults.

### 3. Conclusion

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury remains a celebrated, frequently-reprinted novel acting as a tribute to books themselves. The dystopian novel explores themes of technology and humanity through discussions of happiness, censorship, isolation, and more. Bradbury primarily utilizes the characters of Clarisse Mclellan and Mildred Montag to juxtapose two vastly different ways of life: one valuing true human interaction and emotional intelligence to bolster happiness and the other dependent on apathy that is built upon constant exposure to technology. He uses their roles in the novel to depict an intellectually deteriorating futuristic society.

Clarisse brings forth the motif of happiness, one that is central to Bradbury's critique of such a dystopian society in which technology's ability to manipulate populations is keen. She first presents the image of an untainted happiness to Montag: one derived from relationships and emotional awareness. Her simple question of "Are you happy?" becomes the entire catalyst for Montag's transformation, giving him the initiative to look for such happiness (Bradbury, 1953, p. 10). In contrast, Mildred acts as the perfect depiction of what would happen in a society that has fully embraced artificial pleasure. She demonstrates



dependence on her parlor walls, a shallow approach to relationships, and an extreme level of apathy, conveying to what extent technology has consumed her. In creating these contrasting characters, Bradbury conveys somewhat of a message warning humanity of a possible dystopian future.

Moreover, throughout the novel, Bradbury consistently illustrates a society where censorship is the norm; firemen are not present to help save lives but to destroy knowledge. They exist to serve the government's purpose of achieving total control through the ignorance and merging of people in society. In destroying knowledge and literature, firemen use flawed arguments saying that ignorance is good to build the facade that their goal is to ultimately build happiness. I borrow research from scholar Emrah Atasoy to introduce this idea. However, contradicting this supposed perspective, the firemen are simply controlling what people know to keep them docile.

Bradbury's portrayal of this government censorship is further upheld by Captain Beatty, the antagonist of the story. He fervently advocates for censorship policies, claiming that books and knowledge can only result in unhappiness, reinforcing the theme of the erosion of humanity. His explanation that everyone must be "made equal" highlights the government's use of forced assimilation induced by mass exposure to technology and emotional suppression to expel individual thought. This ideology mirrors Nazi book burnings and McCarthy-era censorship, both of which inspired Bradbury's writing. However, as Atasoy argues, imagination and knowledge are pivotal to human existence; people lose their humanity otherwise. Montag's eventual realization of this idea, catalyzed by Clarisse and reinforced by Beatty, leads him to his final rebellion.

Bradbury's dystopian setting is disturbingly relevant to modern society, where technology and censorship are already extremely present. Both shape the way people interact and consume information, with social media platforms keeping people from genuine interactions while reinforcing beliefs through echo chambers, and censorship being evident in several aspects of the media. Bradbury wrote the novel as a cautionary tale, warning against a future mirroring that of Fahrenheit 451, in which humanity trades knowledge for happiness and individuality for comfort.

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#### **5. Author's Biography**

Jiwon Huh is a student writer and researcher attending Korea International School as a sophomore. She has written extensively on both academic and recreational topics; many of her works have focused on global issues like media usage as a medium for modern propaganda. Jiwon has also been a researcher and writer for a major research project conducted by a psychology professor on the topic of psychotherapy for horses; said research project was later presented at several large conferences including the 18th HETI CONGRESS "From Science to Practice" 18th~22nd June 2024, Budapest, Hungary. In addition to research, Jiwon has also contributed to several service projects and raising animal welfare awareness.

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