

*Fahrenheit 451: The Burning of American Culture*

A Senior Project

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by

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At a time when the Red Scare could utterly destroy the lives of any non-conformist (yes, this is undeniably part of United States history), Ray Bradbury rebelliously wrote *Fahrenheit 451*. This was a difficult time in American history when loyalty oaths, an irrational fear of Communism, and Cold War ethics reigned supreme. Ray Bradbury used Science Fiction to explore, “the art of the possible... to look into the future but it’s really looking at a reflection of what is already in front of us.”<sup>1</sup> With *Fahrenheit 451* Bradbury realized this aim.

My mission is to build off of the multitude of previous works by synthesizing their interpretations and extending them to illuminate the value of Bradbury’s novel. My work will stand in contrast to the existing literature by using a decidedly more *intention lectoris* (intention of the reader) interpretation style.<sup>2</sup> *Fahrenheit 451* was a product of its time and ours. Every novel operates and is rooted in a certain time period and it even remains relevant today. It served as Bradbury’s vehicle to instruct Americans on the reality of a sociopolitical world dominated by mutually assured destruction, mass homogenization of culture, and Cold War strife.

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<sup>1</sup> Weller, Sam. “Ray Bradbury, The Art of Fiction No. 203.” *The Paris Review*. Spring 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Umberto Eco. “Interpretation and Over Interpretation: World, History, Texts.” (Paper presented at Claire Hall, Cambridge University, March 7-8, 1990): Umberto Eco talks about the fact that meaning can be attained not only through the creative process of the author but also through the interpretive process of the reader. When reading a text it is important to read not only literally, but also metaphorically and symbolically; that is to say, a reader must take part in both semantic interpretation and critical interpretation when reading a text. Yet, if an interpretation does not fit within the limits provided by a text and the type of reading being done, the interpretation could be invalid. Eco defines interpreting a text as discovering something about the text itself. However, to use a text is to read a text for some other purpose than just reading the text itself. He uses the vocabulary of “*intention operis*” (intention of the author) and “*intention lectoris*” (intention of the reader) to talk about different interpretations.

Analysis on *Fahrenheit 451* can be divided into three major camps. The first of these camps analyze the novel's themes of censorship. However, they mainly focus on motivations for the novel in Bradbury's personal life (i.e. the burning of the Library of Alexandria that had an affect on him as well as Nazi book burning). These sources rely too much on Bradbury's own interpretation of his novel. Bradbury claims that *Fahrenheit 451* shows that "danger is what is *not* going on in our schools," referring to growing illiteracy that makes people vulnerable to propaganda. Additionally, issues like contradictory minority group agendas and the importance of libraries against mind numbing mass culture that is "moronic at the lowest level" shows Bradbury's true feelings.<sup>3</sup> This emphasis that Bradbury has pushed in most interviews guides the discourse to focus too much on literacy censorship and the fate of libraries/ignorant masses.<sup>4</sup>

Another camp evaluates the novel as a triumph of Science Fiction literary flair and subject matter. However, it lacks historical context that is so crucial in understanding *Fahrenheit 451*.<sup>5</sup> Yet from those sources it is important to understand the literary value of the novel as it connects to its genre. A lot of background information comes from the fact that the novel is rooted in the specific historical moment of the 1950s "Golden Age" of Science Fiction.

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Aggelis ed. *Conversations with Ray Bradbury*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004: 141-142.

<sup>4</sup> The works that examine the biographical connections and rely on Bradbury's interpretation of his novel are: Sam Weller. *The Bradbury Chronicles*. New York: William Morrow, 2005; Sam Weller. "Ray Bradbury, The Art of Fiction No. 203." *The Paris Review*. Spring 2010; Sam Weller. *Listen to the Echo: The Ray Bradbury Interviews*. Brooklyn and Chicago: Melville House Publishing, 2010; and Jonathan Eller and William Touponce. *Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction*. Kent and London: The Kent State University Press, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> The works that look at the literary value and science fiction are: Robin Anne Reid. *Ray Bradbury: A Critical Companion*. London and Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000; Peter Sisaro. "A Study of Allusions in Bradbury's 'Fahrenheit 451'." *The English Journal* 59, no. 2 (February 1970): 201-205+212; Adam Roberts. *The History of Science Fiction*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; and George Bluestone. "The Fire and the Future." *Film Quarterly* 20, no 4 (Summer, 1967): 3-10.

Lastly, some fit the novel into the historical context of the time when Bradbury was writing. These authors draw on specific historical events like McCarthyism, Cold War politics, and the rise of mass culture through advertising. However, they do not go into significant depth (based on the wealth of historical parallels) and at best offer a cursory oversimplified analysis of the historical issues that Bradbury could have drawn on for inspiration.<sup>6</sup> For example, Paul Bryan's article, "Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and the Dystopian Tradition" only gives random historical facts about the 1950s and doesn't synthesize the information well. Other works like McGiveron's article touches on the 50s but likewise misses building the foundation for *Fahrenheit 451* in any historical depth.<sup>7</sup>

While there are various ways of looking at *Fahrenheit 451*, they need to be brought together by understanding the contemporary swell of events that moved Bradbury to write in a rebellious tone. These events will best be understood by also synthesizing the sociopolitical reality surrounding the publishing of this novel. This synthesis will lead to a more holistic view of the novel. The only way of approaching Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* is by combining context, genre, and historical evidence. Sam Weller, his most extensive biographer, seems to be striving for that ideal but his pitfall is that he focuses too much on biography and is too cautious about offending Bradbury by defying his interpretation of his own novels. Bradbury cleverly created a "lesson plan" in *Fahrenheit 451* by drawing on

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<sup>6</sup> The works that quickly examine the historical motivations are: Paul Brians. "Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and the Dystopian Tradition." 31 October 2007; Eric Wetzel. "The firebrand: fifty years after its publication, Ray Bradbury's classic *Fahrenheit 451* shows no sign of flaming out." *Book* (Oct. 2003); Rafeeq O. McGiveron, "Bradbury's FAHRENHEIT 451". *Explicator* 54, no. 3 (Spring 1996):177-180; *Ibid* "What 'Carried the Trick?': Mass Exploitation and the Decline of Thought in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*". *Extrapolation* 37, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 245-256; and Kevin Hoskinson. "The Martian Chronicles and 'Fahrenheit 451': Ray Bradbury's Cold War Novels". *Extrapolation* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 345-359.

<sup>7</sup> Rafeeq O. McGiveron, "Bradbury's FAHRENHEIT 451". *Explicator* 54, no. 3 (Spring 1996):177-180

contemporary thought and events. My analysis will bring together the works that show that Bradbury opened the eyes of his fellow citizens to the realities that he saw in his society and government at that time in America.

*Fahrenheit 451* is set in a future that is “immediate, personal, and intimate, to create an atmosphere that is ‘strange rather than extravagant.’” Bradbury wanted the book to remain relatable, so he created the, ““world as we know it, but with a slight anticipation in time.””<sup>8</sup> It chronicles the life of a fireman in the future, Guy Montag, who actually sets books on fire to keep the public ignorantly happy. Guy is the main pusher of this sensory driven, hedonistic society. His wife Mildred is the main consumer. She always has “seashell” radio buds in her ears, is engrossed by mindless short sitcoms (with characters which she affectingly calls “family”), and has an irrational fear of the subversive nature of books. Guy’s life completely changes when he meets a “troubled” young girl Clarisse McClellan, who prompts him to evaluate his life and work. The novel traverses Guy’s constant inner-struggle and outward battle between conforming to social norms while flirting with the subversive desire to read books. He meets both obstacles and supporters (fire captain Beatty and former professor Faber, respectively) in his quest for knowledge. The novel chronicles Montag’s spiral downward, out of his respected position as a fireman; it also follows his rise to a “wannabe” academic trying to find like-minded individuals to salvage the world. This all culminates in a very public police chase which stops only after an innocent man is killed and the city is destroyed by an atomic bomb. The final scene is a poignant reflection on the possibility that

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<sup>8</sup> George Bluestone. “The Fire and the Future.” *Film Quarterly* 20, no 4 (Summer, 1967): 3.

Guy and his hobo academics can rebuild the world anew, like a phoenix rising from the ashes.<sup>9</sup>

*Fahrenheit 451* cemented Bradbury as one of the most impressive writers of the mid-twentieth century and his novel contributed immensely to the development of the troubled history of Science Fiction. “The only book I’ve written that’s science fiction is *Fahrenheit 451*. That’s political and psychological science fiction,” a surprising claim from a man who is often identified exclusively with the Science Fiction genre.<sup>10</sup> In various interviews, he is contentious about being labeled as any sort of author bound by a genre because writing under a formula is too restrictive because according to Bradbury, “a good writer creates out of need.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the reader is able to fluidly place him among different genres based on their perceived understanding of his stories. With *Fahrenheit 451* he considered himself a Science Fiction author because he saw the need of something he “dislike[d] in our society and explode[d] on spot about it.”<sup>12</sup> Understanding the literary time period and genre preceding *Fahrenheit 451* is important in grounding it in terms of historical development.

During the Depression Science Fiction served as a “literature of distraction” that was quickly and cheaply published for mass consumption.<sup>13</sup> His early impression of Science Fiction revolved around wild stories that were set in “exotic and wonderful locales” which were almost entirely devoid of literary wealth; these were simple entertainment stories for people in the gloomy days of the Depression.<sup>14</sup> These cheap stories interested and entertained

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<sup>9</sup> Ray Bradbury. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950: 1-150.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Aggelis ed. *Conversations with Ray Bradbury*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004: 192.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 174-175.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Bradbury. However, there was a void left in the genre for a good writer who could create Science Fiction literature with substance that would spur intellectual discourse.

This early era of “mainstream” Science Fiction was packaged and sold to the public in “such magazines as *Weird Tales* and...*Amazing Stories*.” The literary structure was discredited as a “branch of escape reading” and the reception of Science Fiction as a genre was treated as such.<sup>15</sup> Outside of the realm of Science Fiction, Bradbury’s fellow Golden Age Science Fiction author Fredrick Pohl noted that, “there was no television, radio showed little interest in science, even the daily newspapers covered it scantily and not very well.”<sup>16</sup> Prior to what is known as the “Golden Age of Science Fiction” (the 1940’s through the 1960’s, when *Fahrenheit 451* was published) many literary critics assumed that Science Fiction would only cater to “the adolescent mind” with “glorious action stories filled with blasters and super-rockets and energizers.” The main reason why one school district rejected the genre in the classroom was because “good science fiction, like the good man, is hard to find.”<sup>17</sup> However, Science Fiction did engage in current issues and concerns before the “Golden Age.” The rise of Science Fiction as a genre of social criticism was due to the desire to leave the, “currently inhospitable field of the present to the more secure area of the distant future or the past.”<sup>18</sup> A major difference between early Science Fiction and the “Golden Age” is that the stories were less pessimistic, less fatalistic, and more about exploring the exciting “what ifs”

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<sup>15</sup> August Derleth. “Contemporary Science-Fiction.” *College English*, 13, no. 4 (Jan., 1952): 188.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Pohl, “Astounding Story,” *American Heritage* 40, no. 6 (September/October 1989) [http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1989/6/1989\\_6\\_42.shtml](http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1989/6/1989_6_42.shtml).

<sup>17</sup> L.W. Michaelson, “Social Criticism in Science Fiction.” *The Antioch Review*, 14, no. 4 (Winter, 1954): 504; Francis Abernethy. “The Case for and against Sci-Fi.” *The Clearing House*, 34, no. 8 (Apr. 1960): 475.

<sup>18</sup> Michaelson, “Social Criticism in Science Fiction,” 502.

about a material technical age.<sup>19</sup> Bradbury was drawn to Science Fiction and was able to build on the stories that came before him.

The context of the “Golden Age of Science Fiction” is important to examine in order to understand the mutual contributions that *Fahrenheit 451* had on this genre and how the genre’s moment in time affected the novel. Bradbury certainly looked like the typical “white, male North American writers” that completely dominated the Golden Age.<sup>20</sup> His publications before *Fahrenheit 451* were highly praised throughout the Science Fiction genre. *Fahrenheit 451* was a “win” for popularizing the Science Fiction genre, as well as breaking through its ranks and having mass appeal. With his novel, Bradbury changed from the “‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ mode of outraged anger” and was able to achieve social criticism in the Science Fiction genre with “under the skin oddness...that is gentle.”<sup>21</sup> Bradbury was able to burst onto the scene with *Fahrenheit 451* to help change the attitude toward Science Fiction and it was reviewed well.

True, this novel got more attention than other Science Fiction works. Yet it still defined the genre by offering a shining example of the element that other Science Fiction novels should incorporate to be successful. Just because it was popular across genres did not remove it from the fact that it was still a Science Fiction novel. In fact, it more so acted as the catalyst that tapped in to what the readers wanted. It brought in a new hoard of people that previously did not pay attention to Science Fiction because they did not realize its potential before *Fahrenheit 451*. He did give the literary community an example of a writer who could

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 505.

<sup>20</sup> Roberts, 203.

<sup>21</sup> Roberts, 218.



“stand head and shoulders above all other Science-Fiction [writers] in our time.” He was still writing “escape literature” but the difference was that Bradbury’s stories were “bound to the credo that the primary study of the author is man.”<sup>22</sup> This “humano-centric” focus that Bradbury utilized in *Fahrenheit 451* helped Science Fiction gain its due respect.<sup>23</sup> In *The History of Science Fiction*, Adam Roberts gives this concise summary of the Golden Age that was characterized by stories “that appeared in Campbell’s *Astounding*” magazine:

The sorts of stories that Campbell liked were the idea-fictions rooted in recognizable science (and later in his long career, in pseudo-sciences such as telepathy); can-do stories about heroes solving problems or overcoming enemies, expansionist humano-centric (and often phallo-centric) narratives, extrapolations of possible technologies and their social and human impacts... ‘it is the man, not the idea of the machine, that is the essence.’<sup>24</sup>

This “Golden Age” philosophy perfectly describes *Fahrenheit 451* and shows how this novel really “made” the genre. The “recognizable science” of TVs (yes, larger than they were in 1953 but not too much of an abstract idea), the familiar suburban setting, and “reverse” firefighting in *Fahrenheit 451* are all things that were easily processed by Americans at that time. The “can-do” story culminates when Guy realizes that “the fireman structure itself could be burnt” and sets down the path to restore an academic society.<sup>25</sup> The “social and human impact of technology” is prevalent throughout the book as well. For example, the mechanical hound would monitor suspected book readers and bring the offenders to justice when the

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<sup>22</sup> August Derleth. “Contemporary Science-Fiction.” *College English*, 13, no. 4 (Jan., 1952): 191.

<sup>23</sup> Roberts, 195-196.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 195.

<sup>25</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 86.

“four-inch hollow steel needle plunged down from the proboscis of the Hound to inject massive jolts of morphine” to subdue a subversive book reader.<sup>26</sup> Another terrifying human impact of technology that is showcased in the novel is the atomic bomb that turns the city into a “heap of baking powder” (but curiously enough Bradbury manages to turn this into a positive thing).<sup>27</sup> It seems that Bradbury had the recipe for success. He operated within the “Golden Age” of Science Fiction, his political stance as a liberal intellectual and his hard-line against unregulated technology allowed him to explore his political stance in the literary Science Fiction world.

While Sam Weller seems to accept Bradbury’s idea that his writing is balanced and avoids overtly socially liberal ideals, it is clear that Bradbury’s novels were strongly influenced by his more liberal slant during this time. Bradbury “volunteered for the Adlai Stevenson campaign” and worked on Eugene McCarthy’s presidential bid in the 60s, so there is tangible evidence that throughout his early years he had strongly aligned with the Democratic Party.<sup>28</sup> In 1952, Bradbury was fed up with politics as usual in Washington, DC. A very telling speech that shows his liberal leanings was given before the National Women’s Committee of Brandeis University. This came directly after the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower, a decidedly conservative victory. The speech, “No Man is an Island”, was a risky, “rallying cry extolling the virtues of free speech, the power of the written word” to which Bradbury has even remarked he, “was on a roll” while railing against the closed

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>28</sup> Weller. *Listen to the Echo: The Ray Bradbury Interviews*. Brooklyn and Chicago: Melville House Publishing, 2010, 173.

political conservative climate.<sup>29</sup> Bradbury's publications that came before *Fahrenheit 451*, like "The Big Black and White Game" examine race relations and show his more socially liberal values.<sup>30</sup> It is undeniable that even the novel directly preceding *Fahrenheit 451* is influenced by a liberal slant on issues. In his famous Science Fiction novel, *The Martian Chronicles* there are, "musings on environmental issues, nuclear proliferation, colonization, and war."<sup>31</sup> The novel shows that Bradbury could not separate his political ideology from influencing his books. Even so, Bradbury is hesitant to apply any political labels to himself or his writing, but the affect that his political slant has on the themes in his novels before *Fahrenheit 451* proves how Bradbury was not afraid to make statements through his fantastic stories.

The themes in *Fahrenheit 451* were shaped by Bradbury's status as a post-WWII liberal intellectual and honorable representative of the Science Fiction genre. In order to more clearly evaluate how Bradbury's political ideology influenced his writing it is important to look at one specific subject, such as technology. Bradbury undoubtedly understood that the atomic bomb and the growing interest in a world full of technological advancements helped Science Fiction (and *Fahrenheit 451*) to "break out of its 'literary ghetto,' as [it] began to appear in mass-circulation magazines like *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*."<sup>32</sup> However, unlike many of his contemporaries (think Isaac Asimov), Bradbury seemed "violently opposed to machinery in almost any form" because of what he thought it could do

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<sup>29</sup> Weller. *The Bradbury Chronicles*. New York: William Morrow, 2005, 195.

<sup>30</sup> Weller. *Listen to the Echo: The Ray Bradbury Interviews*. Brooklyn and Chicago: Melville House Publishing, 2010, 168.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Boyer. *By the Bomb's Early Light*. (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985): 257.

to the masses.<sup>33</sup> This peculiar stance against technology, while not completely foreign to Science Fiction, can best be understood in the tension created by Bradbury's place as a liberal in this conservative age in America. In addition to his "Island" speech, Bradbury's liberal stance is showcased in his 1952 "Letter to the Republican Party." In the letter, he publicly declared that there is "too much fear in a country that has no right to be afraid" and demands that the Republican's "leave our individual rights alone." He even goes as far to say, "God help us if you lay a hand on any one of us again or try to twist the Constitution...to your purposes."<sup>34</sup> It was impossible for his stance as a liberal thinker not to cross with his dislike for technology. True, for some the idea of more technology brings liberation and happiness. Bradbury and *Fahrenheit 451*, however, operate on the assumption that technology has the power for good but is oftentimes used for evil at the hands of the masses.

This idea of being reserved on the issue of technology was ingrained in Bradbury when he saw the abuses of his government and mass thought, even before such advanced technology that he was dreaming up became a reality. Technology would only exacerbate the abuses against the masses. In *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*, Richard Pells describes *Fahrenheit 451* and Bradbury's motivations perfectly. His thesis is that liberals (and by extension liberal literature) during the 1950s rebelled against cultural and social norms and were "ever more skeptical of grandiose projects to remodel...human nature."<sup>35</sup> Although, *Fahrenheit 451* never abandons the liberal political activism that Pells deemphasized.

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Donovan. "Morals from Mars". *The Reporter*, IV June 26, 1951, 38.

<sup>34</sup> Sam Weller. *The Bradbury Chronicles*. New York: William Morrow, 2005: 195-96.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Pells. *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s*. Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989: 119.

Bradbury harmoniously integrates the social critique *along* with the political critique to create a well-rounded piece on American thought from a liberal perspective.

*Fahrenheit 451* could be seen as a socio-political treatise while Science Fiction served as the perfect genre to make Bradbury's intellectual case. The novel extrapolates the power of technology in the hands of the aforementioned oppressive conservatives who could disguise the dumbing down of America through mass culture.<sup>36</sup> Bradbury was a self-taught intellectual, which fundamentally required his novel to be "opposed to the insidious, leveling forces of mass culture," in the words of brilliant historian George Cotkin.<sup>37</sup> This charged him with exposing, for example, the "suburban phenomenon of inexpensive and bland housing, [which] represented the future as conformity and complacency."<sup>38</sup> No man who was so attuned to the realities of his world to such a degree as Bradbury would ever feel comfort in a future of conformity. Therefore, Bradbury used *Fahrenheit 451* to "tear down" the things he hated about society while trying to purport this "great truth [he] want[ed] to tell, without pontificating."<sup>39</sup> However, it is worth noting that many SF writers, "have chosen to work in this medium for artistic reasons and are, only incidentally, social reformers," but social reformers nonetheless.<sup>40</sup> It seems like Science Fiction both lends itself easily to make socially reforming stories and attracts talent that is often interested in making a change. This tactic of using Science Fiction as a way to speak out was well received by many and scrutinized by others.

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<sup>36</sup> Aggelis, 141; Weller. *The Bradbury Chronicles*: 202.

<sup>37</sup> George Cotkin. "The Tragic Predicament: Post-war American Intellectuals, Acceptance and Mass Culture." In *Intellectuals in Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to Salman Rushie*, Edited by Jeremy Jennings and Anthony Kemp-Welch, (New York: Routledge, 1997): 250.

<sup>38</sup> George Cotkin. "The Tragic Predicament: Post-war American Intellectuals, Acceptance and Mass Culture.": 251.

<sup>39</sup> Sam Weller. "Ray Bradbury, The Art of Fiction No. 203." *The Paris Review*. Spring 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Michaelson, "Social Criticism in Science Fiction," 504.

In 1953, book reviews and literature commentators had plenty to say about the novel; some critics hated it, some loved it, while others were confused and cautious about it. To be certain, in most circles the “book was warmly received in 1953.”<sup>41</sup> Even though it was widely reviewed in a positive light Bradbury has publicly stated that, “none of my books sell worth a damn when they first come out.”<sup>42</sup> Those that positively received *Fahrenheit 451* admire the novel for helping people understand that the United States was not too far from the reality of Bradbury’s story. They also admiringly praised Bradbury as a talented Science Fiction writer with a penchant towards exposing the near future in new ways. Doug Guzman of the *LA TIMES* said that, “Bradbury has taken today’s fear of dangerous thoughts and words...and he has projected this fear...Bradbury does not like the civilization in which we exist”; he praises Bradbury for waking people up to reality with such stylistic prose and engaging storytelling.<sup>43</sup> Orville Prescott from the *NY TIMES* claims, “Mr. Bradbury’s account of this insane world, which bears many alarming resemblances to our own, is fascinating.”<sup>44</sup> While still another reviewer commented that *Fahrenheit 451* should “step out and take hold of you” because “recent tendencies” in American history point to the fact that Bradbury examined fundamental problems with American society and “simply carried these ideas to their logical conclusions.”<sup>45</sup> These positive reviews indicate that there was a receptive audience in 1953 that had the same cautionary eye as Bradbury. This novel came at the tail end of McCarthyism so the American public saw the rise and fall of radical censorship and witch-hunt tactics.

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<sup>41</sup> Paul Brians. “Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* and the Dystopian Tradition.” 31 October 2007. [http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/science\\_fiction/451.htm](http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/science_fiction/451.htm). (Accessed 17 January 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Aggelis, 192.

<sup>43</sup> Don Guzman. “Storyteller of Future Also a Social Critic.” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 October 1953, D7.

<sup>44</sup> Orville Prescott. “Books of the Times.” *New York Times*, 21 October 1953, L27.

<sup>45</sup> Earl Heath. “Reading and Writers.” *The Stanstead Journal*, 15 October 1953, 4.

Other reviewers, representative of another typically more conservative segment of the population, understood the points of *Fahrenheit 451* but criticized it on multiple levels.

The negative reviews and reception of *Fahrenheit 451* came from people who were angered that Bradbury would even try to make such dastardly claims against the United States during the Cold War.<sup>46</sup> For example, in *The Denver Post* in 1953 Roscoe Fleming believed that the story put “man’s ego...under direct attack” while another critic lambastes the novel because it “predict[ed] a future grim enough to please the sourest of contemporary pessimists.”<sup>47</sup> While this doesn’t sound outwardly critical, the way many reviewers write makes it sound like Bradbury had personally offended all Americans. These negative reviews didn’t necessarily attack Bradbury’s interpretation of America at that time, but rather hated what Bradbury exposed. J. McComas from the *NY TIMES* thought that the book was uncomfortable because it portrays many fundamental parts of American culture (technology, automobiles, and tv) in a way that is “grisly” and “unsettling.”<sup>48</sup> The substance of the numerous reviews, both positive and negative on *Fahrenheit 451*, show that Bradbury was particularly adept at making meaningful connections that were obvious to his audience through the genre of Science Fiction. By sticking to the principles purported by Campbell, Bradbury was able to make claims and model his novel around political and social statements that the public actually understood. Whether or not the public cared to apply the criticisms to their lives is another story. *Fahrenheit 451* was a controversial novel that was written at a difficult time in American history because it elicited strong emotions on both sides of its

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<sup>46</sup> Other critics that negatively reviewed *Fahrenheit 451* are: August Derleth. “Vivid Prophecy of Book Burning.” *Chicago Sunday Tribune*. 25 October 1953. 6; Stanley J. Kunitz ed. Twentieth Century Authors: First Supplement. New York, 1955. 111-12.

<sup>47</sup> L.W Michaelson. “Social Criticism in Science Fiction.” *The Antioch Review*, 14, no. 4 (Winter, 1954): 305.

<sup>48</sup> J. Francis McComas. “The Spaceman’s Realm.” *The New York Times* 8 November 1953.

interpretation. However, it was not as hated or polarizing some might think. Bradbury has even stated that, “few people attacked me for writing an anti-McCarthy novel. I was able to propagandize without getting myself stoned or pummeled.”<sup>49</sup> Yet it wasn’t overlooked. This is further evidenced by the fact that the U.S. government investigated him and there was an FBI file made on him.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, Bradbury subjected himself to a lot of risk that was involved with publishing this type of “in your face” novel that challenged mainstream American values.

One of the reasons that the novel was such a risky hit and has continued to resonate with readers was the legacy of McCarthyism that gripped the United States right as Bradbury was writing. In letters to Rupert Hart-Davis, a prominent editor at that time, Bradbury discussed how “urgently BB [Ballantine Books] wants to publish this new volume with things as they are with Senator McCarthy in this country.”<sup>51</sup> He had worked in Hollywood and knew the power of the government over authors of subversive literature. This risky political climate was unfriendly to anything that even hinted at being subversive which forced Bradbury to take innovative steps to get *Fahrenheit 451* published. When he “couldn’t sell to any magazine because they were all running scared” he defiantly published excerpts in one of the first issues of *Playboy* in 1953. Luckily, the editors were brave enough to say “the hell with what McCarthy thinks.”<sup>52</sup> The defiant tone of Bradbury and *Fahrenheit 451* shows that he was aware of the repercussions but was either very dedicated (and possibly too rebellious) to pull back or tone down his role as America’s cautionary teacher. However, it was a good thing that

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<sup>49</sup> Steven Aggelis ed. *Conversations with Ray Bradbury*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004: 19.

<sup>50</sup> Sam Weller. *Listen to the Echo: The Ray Bradbury Interviews*. Brooklyn and Chicago: Melville House Publishing, 2010: 178.

<sup>51</sup> Ray Bradbury and Hart-Davis, Rupert. "Ray Bradbury's Letters to Rupert Hart-Davis." (*The Missouri Review* 27, no. 3, 2004): 131.

<sup>52</sup> Aggelis, 162.



the “genre was also marginalized and not widely regarded as serious, mainstream literature” in the very early 1950s. So when Bradbury published *Fahrenheit 451* simply the fringe aspect of the genre kept it out of the direct brunt of the House Un-American Committee hearings.<sup>53</sup> While the novel itself was very popular and gained a lot of notoriety the ideas toward Science Fiction as a genre, in the eyes of the old men running the government, helped prevent it from being seen as an immediate threat. Still, after publishing *Fahrenheit 451* Bradbury found out that he had an FBI file. He simply responded, “the book was pointing the finger at the Communists too...I don’t care if the FBI spies on me.”<sup>54</sup> The context of the novel and Bradbury’s place in 1950s American culture sets the stage for the many issues that he deals with directly. One major issue set shows how the 1950s audience deals with the reverberations from World War II.

World War II affected the American psyche and resulted in mass geopolitical stress in the late 40s and early 50s (when *Fahrenheit 451* was conceived and written), which shows through in the novel. Direct historical motivation from WWII is illuminated early on in Bradbury’s life when he was “sitting in a Los Angeles movie theater when he first saw newsreel footage of Nazis burning books.” This image stunned him because he said they were, “burning my alma mater” (Bradbury had no formal college training) and he decided then and there that, “I hated book burners and I loved libraries.”<sup>55</sup> With post-WWII issues, it

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Schwartz. “Family, Gender, Society in 1950s American Fiction of Nuclear Apocalypse: *Shadow on the Hearth, Tomorrow!, The Last Day, and Alas, Babylon.*” (*The Journal of American Culture* 29, no 4 December 2006): 409.

<sup>54</sup> Sam Weller. *Listen to the Echo: The Ray Bradbury Interviews*. Brooklyn and Chicago: Melville House Publishing, 2010: 178.

<sup>55</sup> Eric Wetzel. “The firebrand: fifty years after its publication, Ray Bradbury’s classic *Fahrenheit 451* shows no sign of flaming out.” *Book* (Oct. 2003): 1; Sam Weller. “Ray Bradbury, The Art of Fiction No. 203.” *The Paris Review*. Spring 2010.

is interesting to see how *Fahrenheit 451* deals with the rising tension in the more militarized society of the 1950s after the dropping of the Atomic Bomb and the rise of containment.

On one hand technical advancement showed American ingenuity and superiority in the Cold War. Yet it forced people to “contemplate the destruction of the entire human race as a plausible, short-term scenario for humanity,” which became a terrifyingly real possibility when the USSR acquired the H-Bomb in 1953.<sup>56</sup> Montag’s society in *Fahrenheit 451* is constantly bombarded with violent war propaganda about how: “We have mobilized a million men. Quick victory is ours if war comes” while bombers light up the sky as the society is always on the brink of another war.<sup>57</sup> Later in the novel, Montag gets fed up with the pervasive military presence at all times. In front of Mildred’s friends he exasperatingly asks, “how the hell did those bombers get up there every single second of our lives! We’ve started and won two atomic wars...we’ve forgotten the world” and continues to ponder how the world became so aggressive and hateful.<sup>58</sup> This constant tension shows how clearly this novel is a post-WWII book and Bradbury was using it to speak for his fellow Americans who were constantly on edge after seeing the astounding destruction that brought the war to an end.

Montag’s experience sheds light on the attitude that some people felt towards the militarization of societies in the Cold War. In a survey of thousands of American high school students who were prompted with questions about a possible nuclear war, “time and time again, the students described their universe as a highly uncertain one, its people greedy and irrational, its future questionable.” These students in the 50s sound like they’re describing the

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Schwartz, 406.

<sup>57</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 91.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

world of *Fahrenheit 451*! Furthermore the study concluded that, “the terror and horror of nuclear war are immediate and vivid for young people and the threat of nuclear war contributes to their tendencies toward impulsivity and immediacy” which shows possibly why Bradbury would have such a strong anti-war protagonist.<sup>59</sup> In a more immediate way, Bradbury uses Montag to show that “the growing political and cultural authority of science in the nuclear age meant that science itself came to be feared as a potentially totalitarian force.”<sup>60</sup> By looking into the issues that are important to Montag, *Fahrenheit 451* becomes a case study that illuminates the conversation that the scientific community was having right after the Atomic Bomb was dropped. The Manhattan Project scientists, along with many people in society, started to ponder the “international ramifications of the atomic bomb and the steps necessary to avoid future nuclear warfare” and “they carried on a lively and imaginative campaign for civilian and international control of atomic energy” which successfully culminated in the McMahon Act.<sup>61</sup> No wonder there was such a constant tension between seeing technology as a saving grace and as a powerfully destructive world ending force.

However, not all of this attention on political consciousness and world issues spurred great political activism in the United States during the time directly preceding WWII. In fact, it often had the opposite affect on people who were simply trying to ignore the reality. According to Sam Weller, “it appeared as if economically prosperous Americans had

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<sup>59</sup> Richard Zweigenhaft. “Providing Information and Shaping Attitudes about Nuclear Danger: Implications for Public Education.” *Political Psychology* (9 sep. 1985): 462, 463.

<sup>60</sup> Jessica Wang. “Scientists and the Problem of the Public in Cold war America, 1945-1960.” *Osiris* 2, 17 (2002): 325.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 328, 329.

forgotten the war years,” which Bradbury illuminated in *Fahrenheit 451*.<sup>62</sup> When Mildred has a viewing party, Montag notices that the women’s husbands are away. When he inquires about their husbands, one woman says “Army called Pete yesterday. He’ll be back next week...quick war...I’m not worried” and continues to nonchalantly talk about how “it’s always someone else’s husband who dies.” Absolutely devoid of emotion and desensitized to the violence of war she continues to say, “Pete and I always said no tears...he said, if I get killed off, you just go right ahead and don’t cry, but get married again.”<sup>63</sup> Montag gets so upset at the disinterest in the militarization of the world, he yells, “Why doesn’t someone want to talk about it!”<sup>64</sup> Bradbury wanted to spur a rational dialogue on war and the justification for use of violence to achieve American sociopolitical aims. He was, “frightened by the new atomic world and potential consequences of what society would do with modern technology.”<sup>65</sup> It is true that there was a trend of, “general absence of Cold War politics from 1950s television programming [which] may have been a response to the horrifying nature of the subject.”<sup>66</sup> Paul Boyer, in *By the Bombs Early Light* talks about a cooling off period where the subject of nuclear war and military build up was taboo, immediately proceeding WWII (but this trend was quickly reversed).<sup>67</sup> Today, WWII seems like a major force that could not have possibly been “pushed under the rug”, but the sheer horror of war made it difficult to swallow for people living at that time.

In *Fahrenheit 451* we were given a glimpse into how Americans showed both ignorance and anxiety when facing the hostile and aggressive geopolitical stressors of the 50s.

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<sup>62</sup> Weller, *The Bradbury Chronicles*, 202.

<sup>63</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 93.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Weller, *The Bradbury Chronicles*, 202.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Schwartz, 407.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Boyer. *By the Bomb’s Early Light*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

When it was written, the novel showed the American public the dangers of engaging in such a tense quasi-war like the Cold War; it could lead to the American public being shut off from activism and desensitized to the horrors of war that was a political reality. However, even in the face of all the negative geopolitical stress that came with the dropping of the Atomic Bomb and the beginning of the Cold War, there was a movement in America to cast these developments in a positive light.

*Fahrenheit 451* plays on the fears of American nuclear war possibilities somewhat favorably. This positive trend is often something that is lost in our historical understanding of this time period. However, the novel astutely captures the philosophical reasons why some may have seen the militarized society in such a positive way. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag's group of outcast intellectuals are "waiting for the war to begin and quickly end...when the war's over, [then] perhaps we can be of some use" and after a quick scene of "bombs drifting with dreadful swiftness" the city is utterly destroyed.<sup>68</sup> The intellectuals in the novel see the bomb as a positive thing and use the well-known phoenix motif to talk about the city. They quickly realize that it is now their *opportunity* to use this as "a time to build up."<sup>69</sup> This positive view of the atomic bomb complicated the geopolitical stress of the 1950s and helps bring a new dimension to understanding the Cold War. The reverberations of the Cold War have been well documented; this idea of happiness, peace, and confidence in the face of the Atomic Bomb and further militarization of 1950s society is no exception. According to John Mueller's study on "Expectations of War During the Cold War," he noted that "although war optimists (as doves) think the hydrogen bomb should not be used and should be restricted by international agreement, they nevertheless are optimistically inclined to think its existence

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<sup>68</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 139, 144.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 150.

makes war less likely,” and by implication are happy to lend legitimacy to the arms race.<sup>70</sup>

These positive feelings are confirmed by Paul Boyer when he talks about how some Republicans at that time thought that dropping the bomb was “morally praiseworthy.”<sup>71</sup> Boyer goes on to talk about all of the inventive things (like atomic cars, artificial suns, etc...) that were dreamt up along with the highly militaristic geopolitical reality.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, an upbeat article in the *St. Luis Post-Dispatch* in 1945 declared, “imagination leaps forward to visualize the use of atomic power for man’s comfort and enjoyment in generations to come.”<sup>73</sup> *Fahrenheit 451* is valuable because it does a great job at showing both sides of the political debate. It artfully tackles the varying feelings surrounding the implications of the atomic bomb, as evidenced by Montag’s exasperation at the bombers to the wives nonchalance. All of this culminates in a nuanced showcasing of the rise of technology that was motivated by an aggressive geopolitical climate. The novel also showcases the issues surrounding the rise of mass culture in the 1950s and gives the audience an unprecedented critique of American social thought.

Mass culture and TV cemented a strong bond in the 1950s when Bradbury was writing his novel. Yes, there was once genuine concern over this idea of mass culture and homogenization through TV and the suburban ideal. To help put this invasion of TV into perspective, when Bradbury was writing in 1945 there were 10,000 TV sets in the U.S. By 1950 there were 5,500,000 TV sets which constitutes a 550% increase!<sup>74</sup> TV was centered around a “new visuality, there was a growing emphasis on appearing bright, fresh, and new”

<sup>70</sup> John Mueller. “Expectations of War During the Cold War.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 23, no. 2 (May 1979): 326.

<sup>71</sup> Paul Boyer. *By the Bomb’s Early Light*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985: 195.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

and it “toppled old values and rolled over traditional hierarchies.”<sup>75</sup> This view of TV is most clearly represented in Mildred, Guy’s wife in *Fahrenheit 451*. She describes the characters in her TV programs as “my family...they tell me things; I laugh, they laugh! And the colors!”<sup>76</sup> She even installed a converter that “automatically supplied her name whenever the announcer addressed his anonymous audience.”<sup>77</sup> She constantly nags Montag to use 1/3 of his salary to build a 4<sup>th</sup> wall of a TV so she could be completely surrounded and inundated by “exotic people.”<sup>78</sup> In *The Dark Ages*, Marty Jezer confirms that “no other single force has as much effect in socializing the American people, in shaping their tastes, habits” while also, “smoothing out their regional and ethnic differences as did television.”<sup>79</sup> While this seems like a fatalistic approach to TV, this mode of thinking was prevalent in Bradbury’s time.

*Fahrenheit 451* is such a groundbreaking novel because Bradbury keenly exploits social norms that he wants to criticize by using extreme characters (like Mildred) to critique society. Cotkin furthers the idea that, “the new medium of television promoted middle-class cultural values as normative through commercials and family-oriented shows.”<sup>80</sup> When asked about the reality of *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury has repeatedly said that he was trying to warn that constant simplifications of visual and print media would force “total culture to [become] ignorant and idiotic.” He believes mass thought contributes to a totalitarian concept where society is “at the beck and call of everyone with a flimsy idea.”<sup>81</sup> Many scholars posit that TV

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<sup>75</sup> Norman Rosenburg. “Everyday Culture in the 1950s: Between the Lines—and Beyond.” *Reviews in American History* 24, no 1 (March 1996): 152.

<sup>76</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 74.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>79</sup> Marty Jezer. *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States 1945-1960*. Boston: South End Press, 1982: 129.

<sup>80</sup> George Cotkin. “The Commerce of Culture and Criticism.” In *The Columbia History of Post-World War II America*, Edited by Mark C. Carnes. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2007: 180.

<sup>81</sup> Aggelis, 141.

and visual advertising helped promote mass produced consumer items, which helped only to further the mass homogenization that *Fahrenheit 451* cautions against.

Cheap products produced in bulk and sold to the masses as “must have” items helped lead to mass homogenization and conformity in the 1950s. The economic boom after WWII when *Fahrenheit 451* was written is evidenced by the fact that “household furnishings and appliance purchases climbed 240 percent...the median family income rose 30 percent in purchasing power and the suburban population increased at a faster rate than the general population.”<sup>82</sup> There was a huge market for mass produced goods, but “prosperity was eroding the class identity of the American worker.”<sup>83</sup> In Montag’s world, there are “two-hundred-foot-long billboards in the country” and the virtue, “the bigger the market...the less you handle controversy” reigns supreme.<sup>84</sup> Even religion in *Fahrenheit 451* is subject to mass commercialization when priests make “veiled references to certain commercial products that every worshiper absolutely needs.”<sup>85</sup> Anywhere Montag goes he feels like he is “vomited upon” with advertising (i.e. Denham’s Dentifrice) and recognizes that advertising is trying to sell everyone on conformity through products that “level down” and help everyone agree.<sup>86</sup> Bradbury was using *Fahrenheit 451* to wake America up to show the concerning view that, for example, “Europeans saw Americans as ‘a race of materialists...successes are described in

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<sup>82</sup> Shelly Nickles. “More is Better: Mass Consumption, Gender, and Class Identity in Postwar America.” *American Quarterly* 54, no 4 (December 2002): 584.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 24; 64.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 80; 61.



terms of automobiles and not in terms of worthwhile cultural works of any kind. Spiritual and intellectual values were deemed to be almost nonexistent in our country.”<sup>87</sup>

Mass culture, fed by the amazing power of the American workers to create mass products at a rate of production that grew 50% from 1947-1953, was seen as a possible avenue to “totalitarianism by cheapening life, by denying to human beings ‘any real satisfying experience.’”<sup>88</sup> This novel complicates the romanticized vision of the 1950s as a utopia by assuming that mass consumption and productivity that led to consumer wealth is always a good thing. *Fahrenheit 451* showed it as hedonism and ignorance joined. Mildred and Guy’s hedonistic society would have resonated with readers from the 50s and made them realize that America in the 1950s was not too far off from the unsettling society in *Fahrenheit 451*. Bradbury was able to use his characters to showcase the consequences of mass culture as it relates to the numbing of individuals in American society.

Bradbury does not stop at showing Americans how it is it wrong to buy in to the mindless consumer culture just by the virtue of it crushing individuality and leading to boring materialism. *Fahrenheit 451* demonstrates the issue of adolescent rebellion and suburban unhappiness as a result of mass cultural expectations in the 50s. In 1954, adolescents and stay at home mothers needed to conform to the ideal of having goals or run the risk of “get[ting] nowhere simply because they do not know where they want to go. They have no clear-cut,

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<sup>87</sup> Greg Barnhisel. “Cold Warriors of the Book: American Book Programs in the 1950s.” *Book History* 13, (2010): 190-191.

<sup>88</sup> Steve Muffatti, *Opportunities Unlimited*. Forbes and Time Magazine, 1956, 16 min., 38 sec.; MPEG. [http://www.archive.org/details/opportunities\\_unlimited](http://www.archive.org/details/opportunities_unlimited); George Cotkin. “The Tragic Predicament: Post-war American Intellectuals, Acceptance and Mass Culture.” In *Intellectuals in Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to Salman Rushie*, Edited by Jeremy Jennings and Anthony Kemp-Welch, 248-270. New York: Routledge, 1997: 254.

precisely defined purpose.”<sup>89</sup> Bradbury exploits this rise in unhappiness and rebellion in these two disenfranchised groups (adolescents and suburbanites) when he talks about how “a car full of children, all ages...out whistling, yelling, hurraing” who saw Montag and thought “Let’s get him” and made a game out of trying to hit him with the car.<sup>90</sup> In Bradbury fashion, he is able to use an extreme character, Clarisse, to demonstrate and call out the current issue of adolescent rebellion that he saw around him while he was writing *Fahrenheit 451*.

The deeper issue that *Fahrenheit 451* explores is that of a society that is unfeeling and uncompassionate. This novel illuminates the concerns of society when Clarisse tells Montag how the isolationist school system has made her “afraid of children my own age. They kill each other...six of my friends have been shot.” She’s even deemed abnormal because she doesn’t “bully people around or break windowpanes.”<sup>91</sup> In America in the 1940s and 50s the growing rate of adolescent rebellion showed that “the young were learning the underlying values of postwar society while ignoring the glossy suburban image.”<sup>92</sup> Families that gave into this mass culture idea of suburbia allowed the “fragmentation of the family...with the decline of agriculture [and] small towns.”<sup>93</sup> This interpretation complicates the often-cherished fantasy that to have achieved American suburban life in the 50s was equal to self-actualization. Guy and Mildred too live in a neighborhood with rows of tract houses where everyone is self-absorbed and keeps to themselves. As far as *Fahrenheit 451* acts as a broad look at the issues of mid-century America, it’s clear that Mildred’s unhappiness shows in her numerous attempts to kill herself and the EMTs response that (in regard to suburban suicides)

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<sup>89</sup> Irene Thompson. “Individualism and Conformity in the 1950s vs. 1980s.” *Sociological Forum* 7, no 3 (Sep., 1992): 503.

<sup>90</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 119.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>92</sup> Jezer, 237.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

“got so many, starting a few years ago, we had the special machines built.”<sup>94</sup> Mildred simply wakes up and goes about her business, ignoring her suicide attempt and not wanting to even admit it to Guy. This scene is telling in that it brings out the prevailing thought that in the 50s that, “no allowances are made for individual idiosyncrasies” so speaking out about unhappiness was not as suitable as it is today.<sup>95</sup> Part of this unhappiness could be seen by people in the “1950s [who] not only face internal conflicts, they must also deal with the difficulties of the ‘compartmentalized self.’...the domestic self, the business self, the religious self...housed in one body but remain strangers to one another.”<sup>96</sup> This is just as suburbia and mass culture has dictated that Mildred should concentrate on her fake family, which leads to her isolation from Guy. Mass culture and homogenization in the 1950s led to unprecedented pressure to conform, which is one of the Cold War values that dictated American political life and is so clearly shown in *Fahrenheit 451*.

Cold War politics, polarization, and conformity were at its height in 1953 when *Fahrenheit 451* was published. As mentioned previously, Bradbury’s status as a liberal thinker during this conservative age put him at a precarious position to speak out about McCarthyism and Cold War political conformity that worried many Americans. The era of McCarthyism thrived on mass spectacle, a theme that is confronted in the novel as well. Montag notes that, “always at night the alarm comes. Never by day!” and convincingly purposes that the reason is, “more spectacle, a better show?”<sup>97</sup> When they stop to burn Montag’s house, the equivalent of a government worker being put on trial by the House Un-American Committee in the 1950s, the “lights flickered on and house doors opened all down

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<sup>94</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 29.

<sup>95</sup> Thompson, 502.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 501.

<sup>97</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 49.

the street, to watch the carnival set up.”<sup>98</sup> Even when Montag is on the run the government pushes “thousands of faces to peer into yards.”<sup>99</sup> Just like the typical ending to most McCarthy cases, an innocent man is killed in Montag’s place.<sup>100</sup> *Fahrenheit 451* gives readers an inside look at the steps and processes that showcase the persecution under McCarthyism. It gives us a glimpse at a totalitarian consumer society. An article that recounts the victimization supported by McCarthy and his thugs found the, “House Un-American Activities Committee hearings were mass spectacles of the media where people would confess and then ‘demonstrate their rehabilitation to prove their allegiance to the new world order of cold war domestic conformity.’” Furthermore, the “Committee's theatrical politics borrowed from the spectacle of game shows that came into their heyday with the advent of TV,” which shows how closely Cold War politics were connected with mass culture and homogenization of thought.<sup>101</sup> *Fahrenheit 451* critiques two major facts of life that were dear to audiences in the 50s: TV and Communist ousting as shown by Mildred’s obsession with her “walls” and the bigger issue of hunting out the subversive book readers. The Committee hearings came at an especially bad time for those who were accused because with “television, it seemed almost impossible not to be touched in some way by the barrage of official and unofficial Cold War publicity.”<sup>102</sup> Government secrecy, as an extension of other abuses, worried Americans.

On top of the reverberations from the McCarthy hearings, government secrecy was an issue that shaped American minds during the 50s. Montag’s flight from the city borrows its context from the “right to know” movement. This was basically the call from the public for

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>101</sup> Jim Finnegan. “Edwin Rolfe’s Historical Witness to the Spectacle of McCarthyism.” *College Literature* 33, no 3 (Summer 2006): 138.

<sup>102</sup> Tony Shaw. “The Politics of Cold War Culture.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no 3 (Fall 2001): 59.

freedom and transparency of information from governmental organizations that occurred in the early 1950s. Bradbury was concerned that the “American press ‘voluntarily’ withheld information for patriotic reasons”, so through the killing of an innocent man in Montag’s case he gave American’s a classic example of why freedom of information should always be respected.<sup>103</sup> The real tragedy of McCarthyism was the affect of the “us vs. them” polarity that was created out of this mass spectacle.

In a “nation that was ready for witch hunts” a paranoia-fueled toxic divide formed between those who were loyal to the United States and its mission in the Cold War and those that were supposedly subversive. True, this witch-hunt mentality did build a community by excluding some as “other”, but this destructive mode of building bonds for an exclusive group was troubling. This split parallels the gap in *Fahrenheit 451* between the hedonistic pleasure seekers that never questioned the government and the subversive book reading intellectuals.<sup>104</sup> The McCarthy period pushed Americans to view, “all non-Americans as undifferentiated ‘foreigners,’ different from us but like each other” thanks to the government using “culture as a form of political persuasion and the even greater onus placed on propaganda” during the Cold War.<sup>105</sup> In *Fahrenheit 451* insidious propaganda by the government led neighbors to report each other for being subversive. It even convinced Mildred to call an alarm on Guy because of the irrational fear that she holds (instilled by the government) to the contradictory ideas in books.<sup>106</sup> The fire captain Beatty can be seen as the most closely identifiable figure to McCarthy. He comes to Montag’s house to reassert the importance of the book burning

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<sup>103</sup> Kiyul Uhm. “The Cold War Communication Crisis: The Right to Know Movement.” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no 1 (Spring 2005): 131-134.

<sup>104</sup> Kevin Hoskinson. “The Martian Chronicles and 'Fahrenheit 451': Ray Bradbury's Cold War Novels”. *Extrapolation* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 346.

<sup>105</sup> Shaw, 74; Lucian Pye. “Political Culture Revisited.” *Political Psychology* 12, no 3 (1991): 489.

<sup>106</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 46, 107.

(subversive idea destroying) profession. Beatty rails against “books” which can easily be replaced with the word “subversive thinkers” and it’s right back to the 1950s witch-hunt culture that Bradbury was satirizing. To Beatty, books “say *nothing*” and ruin the idea that “we must all be alike” as he goes on to assert that firemen need to keep the public happy by not allowing diverse opinions. For example, if “you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides...give him none.”<sup>107</sup> *Fahrenheit 451* critiques the silencing of Communist opinions during the difficult Red Scare era. In the novel, when someone is found with books the police come in and “adhesive-tape the victim’s mouth” and the firemen berate the subversive people for holding books and thinking that they can defy the law that demands conformity.<sup>108</sup>

Finally, when Montag is revealed as a subversive who likes to read books he is forced to flee to the hobo camps. These are located on the outskirts of the cities where people with Harvard degrees have been hunted and exiled from the cities. This is a visual representation of the “us vs. them” polarity and shows that Bradbury’s characters basically meet the same fate as those whose careers were ruined during the McCarthy era.<sup>109</sup> These “blacklisted” intellectuals are similar to the “Hollywood Ten” who were “‘unfriendly’ witnesses who refused to answer HUAC’s questions on the grounds that their First Amendment rights protected them from being questioned about their political beliefs.” There were also 208 actors who were blacklisted just for supporting the Hollywood Ten.<sup>110</sup> *Fahrenheit 451* also pokes fun at the idea of the loyalty oaths through characters like Beatty who constantly harasses and lectures Montag to make sure that he remains committed and loyal to upholding

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<sup>107</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 61-68.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 46, 48.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>110</sup> Schwartz, 408.

the fireman's oath. The real United States Federal loyalty oaths were created in, "March 1947...a program that would dismiss any federal employee found to be disloyal" and required employees to sign a contract that they will be faithful to American values.<sup>111</sup> The well documented clash of ideology and cultures between American democracy and freedom versus Communist repression pushed the government to turn to bureaucracy to promote "home-front mobilization" through patriotism that turned common American's into Communist ousters.<sup>112</sup>

It was difficult being an American intellectual during the Red Scare because even the Office of Education created a program of "Zeal for Democracy" that attempted to distort and bias education (through purges and biased material) that created a hoard of young children who were overly fearful of Communism.<sup>113</sup> *Fahrenheit 451* helped to throw the dehumanizing Communist witch-hunts back in the face of overzealous patriots by painting a world that had been extrapolated out with leaders like Joseph McCarthy. The mass spectacle of the accusations and trials, thanks to the mass culture movement, only served to make the "us vs. them" polarity more resilient. All of this came at a time when Americans needed to come together to have a civilized discourse on the validity of differing opinions. *Fahrenheit 451* helped to call out those Americans who allowed the government to reign supreme during the McCarthy Cold War era.

In a contemporary sense, the novel helps to caution American's against extreme and sensational political movements that obscure true democracy. *Fahrenheit 451* allows 21<sup>st</sup> century readers a chance to step back from our heavily inundated advertising culture. The novel is so relevant today because we have seen an even stronger trend toward self-absorption

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<sup>111</sup> Uhm, 135.

<sup>112</sup> Andrew Grossman. "The Early Cold War and American Political Development: Reflections on Recent Research." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 15, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 481.

<sup>113</sup> Jezer, 88-89.

with social media. This growth creates a false feeling of virtual friendship, which devalues true human connection; this is something that anti-isolationist Clarisse McClellan would have railed against.<sup>114</sup> In the same vein, the sensational 24 hour news networks that have taken a hold of rational political discourse as predicted by Bradbury have felt a pushback from, for example, the recent Washington, DC “Rally to Restore Sanity” that had a record turnout.<sup>115</sup> The novel allows us to evaluate the militaristic world as it is today, to see the similarities and potential outcomes of unrestrained aggression. The crises and ongoing violence in the Middle East forces Americans today to live in that constantly violent culture that Montag despised. Most importantly to Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* helps us realize that the public’s willingness to support the decline of reading and library usage will lead to a hedonistic and ignorant society. This has manifested even more today, with the current rate of technology and varying ways that students are seeking information. In a tangible sense, “forty-one percent of states report declining state funding for U.S. public libraries in fiscal year 2009” with some budgets being slashed up to 30%.<sup>116</sup> Contemporary America is really the beneficiary of the world that Bradbury was satirizing.

*Fahrenheit 451* is an absolute historical goldmine, which is why it is absolutely crucial to synthesize the interpretations in order to better understand the context of the novel and the difficult time in which it was written. Ray Bradbury helped to expose America to itself, for better or worse, when many other authors were afraid to do so. The brilliant way the novel shows extremes that are easily relatable to the 1950s culture makes it immensely valuable for

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<sup>114</sup> “*Fahrenheit 451*-Relevance in the Age of New Media”, Wordpress, accessed May 20, 2011, <http://blog.felinemusings.com/2009/09/08/fahrenheit-451/>.

<sup>115</sup> “The Rally to Restore Sanity Causes a Mainstream Media Meltdown,” Politics USA, accessed May 15, 2011, <http://www.politicususa.com/en/restore-sanity-media>.

<sup>116</sup> “State Funding for Many Public Libraries on Decline”, American Library Association, accessed May 13, 2011, <http://www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/news/pressreleases2009/february2009/orcosla.cfm>.



historians who want to learn what people thought about their society. Enough years have passed since the novel was published that it can be praised for how well it painted the future while critiquing the realities of society at that time. The combination of the various scholarly works along with the primary source of *Fahrenheit 451* shows how America was shaped and changed by the ideas of mutually assured destruction, mass homogenization of culture, and Cold War strife.