

A Metaphor of Human Enlightenment in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

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Fire and Knowledge are the two indistinguishable and emancipating elements that have the power of creation and destruction. It is left up to human beings to decide how this power could be employed in their journey of life. Ray Bradbury's iconic novel *Fahrenheit 451* adduces a symbolic connection of fire, knowledge and the life of Guy Montag who struggles for existence and volition for thinking. Montag a fireman in a dystopian society is devoured with the task of destroying the past culture by burning outlawed ideas and knowledge stored in books. Being an agog partaker he says "It is pleasure to burn" (Bradbury 3). As an inconsiderate Montag does what has been told and this adventure comes to an end when Clarisse a seventeen year old girl questions "Are you happy?" (Bradbury 10). Even though he dismisses Clarisse's question as nonsense the aftermath of this question takes Montag to another life which he had never dreamt.

His self-exploration happens immediately when he finds his wife unconscious due to overdose of pills. He calls for paramedics and technicians arrive at home, and give Mildred a complete transfusion with various technological instruments. To his surprise he finds that neither of the paramedics are doctors. However they explain that they perform the same procedure and that it is a very regular occurrence. Though relieved yet shaken Montag speculates on the impersonal and tragic nature of the society. He struggles in his two worlds together and tries to maintain his old life and humour his wife, who is the manifestation for this unthinking self-indulgent, ignorant embracing society. Montag seeks mental support from a former professor Faber as he swaggers towards the unknown self-knowledge.

Montag life changes when once he goes to perform his duty of burning books stored in a old house. The recalcitrant woman in the old house lights the match that eventually takes her life along with her home and her books. Montag steals one of the woman's books and takes it home that evening. He tries to share the terrific event with Mildred, but "suddenly she was so strange he couldn't believe she knew him at all" (Bradbury 42). Montag is psychologically shattered and becomes physically ill. He stays home from work and Beatly the threshold guardian convinces Montag to return to work. He lectures Montag on how society has evolved into the current technological age. As he leaves he avows, "At least once in his career, every fireman gets an itch. What do the books say? . . . I have had to read a few in my time . . . and the books say nothing!" (Bradbury 62).

Society however discourages curiosity of individuals since it leads to knowledge and knowledge leads to questions. Montag is not convinced and is ready to face a road of trials. He starts to steal books from his victims hidden libraries and these thefts are instinctual. He does not have true awareness of his action. Montag stores his usurped books at an air gate in his home. He decides to read a book at night and tries to make his two worlds collide. He encourages Mildred to listen to him read but she recoils from the process and tries to burn the books he has stolen and pleads him to give up his pursuit of knowledge. Montags' hostility from Captain Beatly his harassment by the mechanical hound who

guards the fire station, and the resistance he receives from Mildred are all a variety of trials that he has to overcome along his journey towards self-knowledge the freedom to think.

The only living soul to guide Montag is Professor Faber who does not welcome Montag. Montag blackmails Faber by ripping page after page out of the Bible, one of the last copies in existence. In order to prevent Montag destroying the text Faber agrees to listen to him. Montag plans to destroy the fire department with the help of a working mechanism that communicates with others in a long distance founded by Faber. The ear shell that Faber gives Montag is a talisman that he can access to get supernatural aid from Faber. This ear-shell stucked neatly in his ear and helps Faber to talk with him through his transformation from social drone to free-thinking human being.

Montag's wife Mildred turns a traitor to him by sending an alarm to the fire station. Montag and his crew are sent to his own home to destroy books in his home. Captain Beatly orders, "I want you to do this job all by your lonesome, Montag ... with a flame thrower. Your house, your clean up" ((Bradbury116). Montag torches every room of his house and enacts a ritual death of his old life. Beatly knocks the earpiece from Montag's ear and Montag is left alone without the help of Faber. He throws the flame thrower on the captain and the mechanical hound who faces a horrible end.

Montag takes off the city through magical flight and is hunted by mechanical hounds, helicopters, and police. He navigates through the streets and holds the Bible which he has begun to memorize. He finally meets Faber and takes off the river that separates the city. When Montag floats on the river, he realises a sudden peacefulness which kept him away from city and the lights. He was moving from unreality that was frightening him and moving to the world of reality. This was the time of reflection and rebirth for Montag. The river washes away all remnants of his former life, baptizing his new developing identity.

In the country Montag meets men of learning and knowledge who introduced themselves as book titles. These men were former educators, social leaders, who were away from this modern culture and took refuge in the forest. Everyone memorizes a book and burns his copy. They have a book in the head and no one can accuse them of having contraband material. They hurdle around a small fire for warmth the fire in which they sat before seem to be strange to Montag, because instead of burning it gave warmth. Montag has to learn from them how fire could be used for protection rather than destruction. Montag joins them and promises to memorize the Ecclesiastes. These learned men have a small portable battery run television through which they watched the city which is seiged by dropping of bombs. Everything in Montag's past life is destroyed and the whole city is leveled to the ground. The men work together and put off the campfire with water and dirt and began to cross the threshold. They will rebuild the city from the ground up. They use fire to create civilization not destroy it. They are the representative of past culture who will the sow the seeds of knowledge which they have protected in the new culture.

Montag is successful in his journey. Now he has the freedom and responsibility to create his own identity and be the hero of his life. He sloughs the destructive nature of fire to burn his old life and creates a new one. He will create a new civilization that values the freedom to think and feel by using his spark of knowledge that he has. Like Prometheus he risks everything to bring a warming fire to his life and that of a new society.

References:

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