

Female Ashes, Knowledge and The Construction of Masculinity

Fahrenheit 451
by Ray Bradbury

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Abstract

In Bradbury's dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451*, knowledge is illegal, and popular culture is promoted as a way to control society. Guy Montag, the central character of the book, undergoes through a journey of liberation from the oppressive system to the further achievement of the forbidden knowledge. The female characters in the book are key to his awakening and evolvment. Unfortunately during the course of the story these women perish. Using the theories of Simone De Beauvoir and Janice Radway, this essay explores the concept of "otherness" and the consumption of popular culture in a patriarchal and oppressive society. This paper also argues that the construction of the masculinity of the protagonist would not be possible without the women, and their death is a violent reaffirmation of a patriarchal order.

1. Introduction

The world of Science Fiction in literature is vast and riveting. It plays with fantasy and technology on such scale that it is a good entertaining tool. It depicts utopias and dystopias so far removed from our day to day basis that they are safe worlds to go into. In some cases these stories have even predicted certain events or advances in technology that were unheard of (walkman, flat TV, cell phones, etc). But due to this entertaining character and (possibly) predictive side, Science Fiction can be somehow deceitful, presenting fantastic stories that distract the reader from perceiving covert ideologies and controversial messages deeply rooted behind narrative.

The book used for this paper is Ray Bradbury's greatly acclaimed *Fahrenheit 451*, a science fiction postmodern novel written in 1953. But even if this book belongs to the Sci Fi genre, its settings does not occur in another world. The future depicted here takes place on planet Earth. There are no robots out there that resemble humans, or spaceships instead of buses. The book is about a dystopian future (set in the US), and it contains a strong criticism towards censorship, subject construction, authoritarian system and even popular culture. The novel deals with the abolition of thinking and the formation of a homogenous and easy-to-handle community. The story revolves around books which people have rejected at first. Later on, the government takes matters into its own hands and instead, it starts burning these books and punishing those who possess any. The books that are burned in the novel are the ones that are considered "cultural capital" and part of the literary canon; in other words, the books taught in schools and universities. The protagonist of the novel is Guy Montag, a man who works in the fire department, whose job is to burn books; in this future firemen start fires instead of putting them out. He is a cell in the system, and he accepts his life without questioning it. He is married and he seems somehow content with his routine. A chain of events makes him wake up from his dormant state and then he begins to fight this system in order to achieve knowledge. He meets several characters that aid him in his awakening. But it is the women he encounters who are key in this awakening and later on freedom/salvation/enlightenment. They are the pillars for his character development and yet, they all perish after having served their function. The book narrates Montag's whole journey from an ignorant state to the ultimate

enlightened consciousness. The novel describes his struggle against the system, his process in actually opening his mind to these books/knowledge, his rebellion, his escape from the authorities, and his later return to rebuilding society right after a nuclear blast destroys where he just escaped from.

Strikingly and as mentioned before, the females of *Fahrenheit 451* perish at some point of the story. It is also unsettling how they are positioned in the narrative (that is in the lowest steps of Montag's journey). Following this line of thought, it does not come completely unexpected that all the precious books that are burnt in the novel are written by men, and that the rebellion to fight the system and to save these books is also formed by men. It seemed a tad strange that popular culture is portrayed as the brainwasher linked to women and (high cultured) books possess the ultimate and irrefutable knowledge. It can surely be discussed that there are women in *Fahrenheit 451* who do not die, who are probably part of the rebellion themselves, and who have written books worth saving too. But there seems to not be evidence of any of this in the story. Even when trying to find scholarly articles sharing these same concerns, proved to be difficult. The previous research written, as I address in this paper, relies mostly on the obvious subjects already mentioned: censorship, the subject construct, etc.¹, but contains little about women and their place in the novel. Some of this research discusses briefly the role of the females in the book, yet no one goes deep into analysing it.

Simone De Beauvoir and Janice Radway provide useful insights for the topic of this paper. Both of them deal with subjects related to what is investigated in this essay: feminism and patriarchy. Their theoretical concepts can explain, question and analyse the female characters in opposition to the protagonist: Montag. Janice Radway, specifically, sheds light on the subject of popular culture and the connection to women and patriarchy.

It is the aim of this paper therefore, to use the theoretical lenses provided by Radway and Beauvoir to explain how Montag's journey would not have been possible without women. At the same time, this essay's goal is to elucidate the fact that Montag's masculinity is built upon these females, and knowledge comes to symbolise the phallogentric domination by the female eradication to an extent. In the next chapters of this paper, I first go through the previous work written about the book,

which provides some understanding of the main character and his journey; then I present the theoretical material which is used as a lens; and lastly I proceed with my analysis and further conclusion, where I argue about how in *Fahrenheit 451* women are used and discarded as a tool while serving to the process of the protagonist's masculinity formation. I also discuss how these women contribute to his achievement of enlightenment, which allows him to become the *saviour* of the ignorant and destroyed society.

2. Previous research

When it comes to previous research and scholarly articles regarding *Fahrenheit 451*, most of the works relate one way or another to the biggest themes of the book: censorship and identity: Joseph F. Brown (2008) who in his article "As the Constitution Says!: Distinguishing Documents in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*" criticises the ignorant and censored society of the novel, or Rafeeq O. McGiveron (1998) who claims, in his article "To Build a Mirror Factory" the subject of self examination, that Bradbury proposes in *Fahrenheit 451*. The majority of critics agree and write extensively about these themes. While they are extremely interesting subjects to discuss, unfortunately they fail to address one of the crucial main issues: gender representation. I have discovered articles that discuss masculinity and individuality, knowledge and rebellion, and the search for enlightenment. These articles, which from a literary point of view treat the philosophical, political and psychological issues in the novel, omit an important subject related to gender: the fact that the feminine role is reduced and limited by the patriarchal system; it is limited to the brainwashed society, popular culture and it is doomed with death.

I have collected three different articles that focus in some ways on the questions this paper raises:

Sunjoon Lee takes the censorship topic to another level. S. Lee points out at the fact that in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* society is predicated on equality, despite of the individual nature of its cells. Lee explains this by quoting Captain Beatty's dialogue where he tells Montag that despite what the constitution says about all being born equally, they are actually all are made to be the same (Bradbury 77). Citing Adorno and

Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (DE 29) which comments on the culture industry, Lee explains that humans are "made identical to one another through isolation within the compulsively controlled collectivity" (142). In this dystopian description of the mind enslaved *Fahrenheit 451*'s society, Lee notes that even when many critics agree that censorship is the main focus of the novel, it should not be reduced to it, since the "... usual definition [of censorship] falls far short of describing the total institutionalisation of the abolition of thinking" (143) constructed in the story. Lee also highlights the fact that as admitted by Bradbury himself, *Fahrenheit 451* is a "social commentary... hidden in an adventure story" (qtd. in Weller 124).

Going deeper into the storyline, Lee discusses key points in Guy Montag's exhausting but liberating journey. Even though she writes about all the characters who have an impact in Montag's existence, Lee mainly highlights the encounter with Clarisse McClellan, the "free spirited" girl who makes a strong contrast against his "living dead" (143) wife Mildred. According to Lee, this encounter is the one that marks a turning point for Montag's awakening, consequent freedom of thought, and later reconstruction of society.

It is interesting that Lee speaks about censorship differently than the "critical consensus" (143) of the majority of writing, which makes the reader understand Montag's story in a different and more nuanced light. She eloquently argues that the novel goes beyond the censorship issue and instead questions thinking and society themselves. Lee does recognise Clarisse as "...one among those few who kept intact their ability to think" (143). Unfortunately, this recognition is not enough since she fails to discuss and question how and why the feminine role, Clarisse included, is reduced to frivolity, shallowness and even death.

The second article I present here is "Ascending from the Ashes: Images of Plato in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*," by James Filler." It provides a philosophical look into Bradbury's novel, analysing in detail the journey on which Montag embarks to set himself free from an oppressive system and the individual suppression of thinking. James Filler seems to agree to some extent to what Sunjoo Lee states about the censorship theme of the book. He takes up this subject by stating that *Fahrenheit 451*'s main focus is not about

ensorship or burning books, these being just mere “by-products.” Filler reminds us that this censorship had been started by the society itself and not imposed by an authority. In order to understand what the book is about, Filler investigates through a philosophical lens (Plato’s Republic) the main recurrent subjects of the book: freedom, knowledge and happiness.

Filler explains how Montag’s development in the story is of an ascendant character: from the dark and the (untruthful?) happiness of ignorance, to his awakening, and final achievement of knowledge. Analysing the characters and how they have an impact on Montag’s life in order to bring him to the enlightenment, Filler positions them on levels according to Plato’s Line Analogy and Cave Allegory², placing the female characters (and most of the unidentified society) on the lower levels of enlightenment. Mildred (Montag’s wife, symbolizing the rest of the society) is the one who is in complete darkness and at the bottom of these levels, followed up by Clarisse who is the one that makes Montag question his happiness and therefore opens the door for enlightenment, though she does not bear the light herself. As Filler puts it: “It is tempting to view Clarisse as an ideal figure, the one who embodies wisdom and whose role is to lead Montag to knowledge and freedom, but this misunderstands her character, and the significant comments Bradbury makes regarding her”³ (536). The rest of the characters in the book (male) give Montag the necessary tools (books) to complete his journey where he finally achieves the higher level of illumination; ergo, he acquires *knowledge*.

While Filler’s article is captivating and interesting in explaining the search for knowledge and the subject from a philosophical angle, it highlights the main issues mentioned before about scholars overlooking the problem of the poorly regarded feminine role in the novel. Again, Filler analyses Montag’s development by looking at his journey from Plato’s imagined cave to the light, but even when he writes about the female characters, he fails to question (or chooses not to) the position these women have in the novel: as the lowest steps towards enlightenment (and subsequent demise).

The last article of this section is about the male archetype. “The society of *Fahrenheit 451* does not allow for a variety of subject positions” states Imola Bulgozdi in her paper “Knowledge and Masculinity: male archetypes in *Fahrenheit 451*.” She

elaborates on how this society constructs subjects in a way where they perform and think to a limited extent. Bulgozdi notes the distinction Bradbury makes in his book between the uncomplaining subject, such as Mildred and Captain Beatty, and the curious, rebel which somehow still complies with the rules to a point, such as Clarisse or even Farber.

Bulgozdi then analyses the journey Montag takes, highlighting that the beginning of this path starts right after Montag meets Farber. She does point out the fact that the three main female subjects Montag interacts with— his wife, Clarisse, and the "martyr woman"—have a great involvement in his actual crisis and subsequent search for free thinking and an identity of his own⁴. Bulgozdi continues by explaining that Montag is actually left out of the discourse of happiness imposed by the society and instead his masculinity suffers from not being able to perform as provider, father, lover, etc. She also states that “Montag finds himself in the only other role the dominant discourse has scripted, that of the enemy of the system...” (I. Bulgozdi).

Bulgozdi focuses then on the masculine construct and its archetype, explaining that even though masculinity by definition is in general determined by opposition to the femininity (as in the Freudian gender formation), sometimes it can be constructed in opposition to being a boy instead (Judy Keagan Gardiner). It is curious though that even when this article addresses the issues with the female characters, the subject is left aside or even replaced by the masculine-boy opposition.

My investigation of these three articles shows that there is not much written in depth about the female role in *Fahrenheit 451* except for the obvious: Mildred's involvement in perpetuating the system and keeping Montag immersed in it, and Clarisse's participation in his awakening and breaking free from it. The lack of investigation about this topic opens a lot of questioning (and why not concern), not only from the story's perspective but from the critics', scholars' and even the author's position. Having said that, in the next sections I will investigate, discuss and argue why it is important to address this void, while presenting an analysis of the women's roles in the novel. But before jumping to the analysis itself, some theoretical work is needed to frame the further discussion.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter two theoretical works belonging to Simone De Beauvoir and Janice Radway are presented. Their theories help analyse and understand in detail the questions that *Fahrenheit 451* posits: whether women in this realm are a mere tool for Montag's liberation and achievement of knowledge, or whether they possess any agency that shows resistance towards the oppressive dynamic and system. But before continuing, it is important to address first that Simone De Beauvoir is surrounded by controversy. Being her work labeled as white middle-class feminism, she has been considered (potentially) racist and sexist at times. Furthermore, her work can also be viewed as dated (due the time it was written). But the theories included in this paper can be read beyond social contexts and can transcend the inequality problems, being these the reasons why I chose to include her in this section.

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone De Beauvoir theorizes “the Other” (9) as a derogatory label given to women when looking at them as binary opposites of men⁵. De Beauvoir writes that “Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought” (9). She further points to how a man is a man as a whole while the woman “... is a female by virtue of certain lack of qualities” according to Aristotle” (Beauvoir 7). She continues by presenting statements by philosophers J. Benda and historian J. Michelet about *man* being an autonomous being, “the Subject,” while *woman* is relative to men, and in other words “the Other” (Beauvoir 8). She argues that “The Other” in opposition to the status of “The One” is introduced indirectly and accepted without opposition or resistance by the latter (in this case the man), so she questions women's position and lack of rebellion towards this “definition.”

In her book, Beauvoir explores extensively how this “Otherness” came to occur. She tries to find biological, psychological, philosophical and historical proof that justifies this hierarchical status between men and women. Unfortunately, as she eloquently writes, there are no actual facts or explanations for this power structure, except for concrete biological differences between both sexes, which as she explains, do not justify the kind of dynamic that results from these differences. Beauvoir insists that men and women stand in opposition “...within a primordial *Mitsein*, and woman has not broken it. The couple is a fundamental unity with its two halves riveted together, and the cleavage of

society along the line of sex is impossible. Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another” (16). As she continues, it is difficult to understand, given this reciprocal dynamic, why women have not yet overcome the oppressive status, at least not completely, considering how many advances and achievements after the feminist movement bloomed have happened since her work was written.

Furthermore, Beauvoir discusses how badly women have been portrayed and treated in (French) literature and by satirists and moralists since old times (focusing primarily on a westernised angle). She notes that in the eighteenth century men started to become more sympathetic and understanding towards the subject of the female subjugation (positioning themselves as more objective and “fair” towards the female’s “inferiority” problematic). This was then when women became recognised by some philosophers such as Diderot (Beauvoir 23) “as human beings”⁶. But of course with this new wave of thinking, and after feminism started rising, new problems showed up, and anti-feminist movements did their best to prove women’s inferiority⁷. Beauvoir even goes further explaining that even “ [t]he most sympathetic of men never fully comprehend[ed] woman’s concrete situation” (31).

Later on in her book, Beauvoir also questions the happiness and support women have attained while being positioned as “The Other.” She wonders what kind of fulfilment someone can get by being “inessential,” as women are considered:

How can a human being in woman’s situation attain fulfilment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman’s liberty and how can they be overcome? (39)

Beauvoir’s work continues going deeper into investigating this subject, but it will not be addressed in this paper; since what was presented so far provides enough information in order for me to analyse the gender issues explained before about the female role in Bradbury’s novel.

These last questions from Beauvoir’s book take me directly to the other theoretical work chosen: Janice A. Radway’s *Reading the Romance Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1991). Radway’s study can be understood as an answer to some of Beauvoir’s

questions about women's lack of fulfilment. Her book is about female incompleteness in a phallogocentric society. Radway argues that the production and consumption of popular culture is one solution that women have found in order to fulfil a void generated by a patriarchal system and dynamic; as she explains, patriarchy does not allow women to be the heroines nor the centre; only men can occupy that place. But when it comes to popular culture and Romance novels, women can safely identify themselves with the hero (as if it were them as heroines) of the story, and be the centre of that male universe at the same time. Radway therefore explains that popular culture is often linked to fiction, escape and fantasy. She goes even further stating that it "... corroborate[s] the familiar assumption in popular-culture study that because it is stereotypical, repetitive and unrealistic, popular literature must be more closely related to fairy stories and myths than to 'serious' considerations of pertinent human problems" (186). While Radway is referring to a particular branch of popular culture (Romance books), it is pertinent for this paper to see beyond this sole subject and extend it to popular culture in general. That said, her statements about pop culture are open and non judgmental; Radway actually questions this form of stereotyping and tries to understand the motivation of such consumption, especially when pop culture, which has been mostly linked to women, has never been appreciated or regarded as something of serious or intellectual value. In this questioning, Radway wonders if the production and consumption of pop culture are in themselves an act of defiance of the patriarchal system or whether they are compensating for the voids this very system provokes (maybe both, would be accurate to say). After some empirical research and evaluation, she explains that women's consumption of pop culture (and even the production of it) has a "...therapeutic value, which is made both possible and necessary by a culture that creates needs in women and it cannot fulfil..." (85). She emphasises that this happens because there are often psychological needs in women, generated by the social structures, that are hard to satisfy: "...needs that have been activated in women by early object-relations and cultural conditioning in patriarchal society" (Radway 84); with regards to the phallogocentric structure like Beauvoir describes (in the form of the female "otherness"), there is a dissatisfaction and incompleteness when it comes to the passive role of the woman, as explained before.

Radway also discusses how the feminine role relates to her opposite (male). She adds that psychologically speaking, women need to create an emotional and nurturing bond with their partners, referring to it as purely in a heterosexual dynamic. This bond is similar to the motherly one (she alludes to the Oedipus complex) and that men often fail to fulfil "...because really men do know how to attend a woman's need" (140), and therefore women have to satisfy their own needs with alternatives, such as pop culture consumption. In other words, Radway states that the very production of this popular culture has a root in the failure of the patriarchal system to satisfy these women (151). That is to say, popular culture offers alternative utopian realities which patriarchy does not provide such as the attentive, heroic, sensitive and supportive (male) partner that makes the woman happy and content (and I would add, that makes her the centre instead of the complement of the pair). These arguments open questions about certain areas of *Fahrenheit 451*: Are the women in the novel aware of this void and need of fulfilment? Meaning, do they demonstrate any consciousness about this connection to pop-culture as a necessity of being complete? And on the other hand, what is the novel actually telling the reader about the role of popular culture against the "Oh-so-valued" knowledge in books that is trying to save? It is difficult to find clear evidence that the "novel" is aware of its women's incompleteness and consumption, though.

As shown above, both theorists present useful psychological and philosophical tools that can be applied as a lens to read the world Bradbury created. Beauvoir provides an understanding of the hierarchical and dependent relation between women and men, while Radway elucidates women's relation with popular culture as a supplement to the failing relation with men. Beauvoir and Radway's works complete each other when it comes to agreeing that being "the Other" in a phallogentric system (Beauvoir) presents incompleteness and dissatisfaction in women (which Radway concurs). Radway adds to this, offering another perspective and a possible understanding of Beauvoir's statement about women not having fought harder against their degraded position; Radway affirms that yes, they have and they are still fighting against it by seeking alternatives that compensate for what they lack, such as in this case, by producing or consuming pop culture, even if this presents the dilemma of mass culture and the reputation it carries vs.

high culture⁸. Therefore, their arguments can be put to work to comprehend how the women depicted in the novel either fit in the “otherness” concept with certain agency (as Radway proposes) or if they are just passive aids (still needed but inessential according to Beauvoir) for Montag’s success. To do that, this paper presents separate analyses of the three main female characters and their trajectory in the story in contrast with Montag’s: Clarisse, Mildred, and Mrs Doe. This essay also includes a close reading of certain key passages that give understanding of the characters’ motivations and demeanour.

4. Analysis

The following analysis has as focus the three most relevant female characters that *Fahrenheit 451* presents: Mildred, Clarisse and Mrs. Doe⁹. I will introduce these women and describe them, as well as point out their relevance to the story. Using the theoretical framework, I will interpret these characters and examine them while performing a close reading of some passages in the book that correspond to each one of them. And lastly after looking into them, it is important to go into the protagonist of the book: Guy Montag, who is in great part focus of this paper.

4.1 The living dead and the pop culture.

Mildred, Millie, is Montag’s wife who is introduced from the beginning through her attempt to commit suicide. Montag has just arrived home late at night to discover their usually cold and quiet bedroom that is, however, colder and quieter than normal. He approaches their bed, and realises that Mildred has swallowed a small bottle of sleeping pills. He panics and calls for help. In a very mechanical and automated way, two futuristic technicians who are prepared to deal with these kinds of “accidents,” come to their house and clean her blood with a small machine. She is now safe. But Montag appears confused. Just from the beginning, he shows some contradictory feelings towards Mildred. For his alarming reaction to the attempt of suicide, one would assume he loves her deeply, but soon after the “paramedics” have cleaned her blood and left, he thinks, “if only they could have taken her mind along to the dry-cleaner’s and emptied the pockets and steamed and cleansed it and relocked it and brought it back in the morning. If only...” (Bradbury 25). Montag is clearly having conflicted feelings about his wife. Montag’s thoughts (or Bradbury’s metaphorical language would be more correct) are poetic, deceitful and cruel.

Beauvoir's "inessentiality" is clear in this fragment: Mildred is important to Montag, She is his wife and she completes him... but to a point. She is not essential if her mind needs to be changed. Mildred is reduced in such way that she is compared to clothes that should be taken to the dry cleaner. Not only her blood should be purified but for Montag's sake, her mind should also have been cleaned or even switched — keeping in mind that she is his "Other," there is seemingly not much value that comes with being the other. In this novel, all the female characters seem to be limited to the inessentiality of being discardable "complements," as well as to be condemned to die. Especially Mildred who is also presented as the direct link to the banality and superficiality that characterises the society of *Fahrenheit 451* with its mass culture and lack of "knowledge."

Looking into Mildred's development throughout the story, after the ill-fated night, she seems not to recall the episode. She shows no remorse nor consciousness about what happened. As a matter of fact, when Montag confronts her, she denies it completely and treats him as crazy for even thinking about it. This negation questions her entire reliability and consciousness. Does she purposely deny what happened because of her failed attempt of "escaping" her reality? But if Mildred does remember, then she would be showing some sort of resistance and agency, even if she could not admit it. It can surely be said that the way Mildred relates to popular culture (TV) could be interpreted in itself as a form of compensation for certain lack of things in her life as Radway explains, but it does not mean that there are no other ways to resist the system. Suicide could be an extreme way of going against oppression. But perhaps Millie is just so lost in a society characterized by the "abolition of thinking" (Sunjoo Lee 143), that she does not even register the episode whatsoever.

The text, being a postmodern work, is not linear, therefore its characters are deep and complex. This is shown in their own actions and contradictions, such as Mildred first being part of a system which promotes popular culture as a reality (which, as I already pointed out through Radway's theory, it is also a way of resisting certain precepts in themselves), but who happens to try kill herself at some point. I choose to think that the attempt against her own life is after all, the ultimate resistance, a cry for help that has gone unattended for a while, and a way

of trying to fix something that might be not fixable after all. Beauvoir understood that the hierarchy between men and women has no real reason to exist so it is hard to fix something under that light. Perhaps the women in this novel are fighting against their limited role in the patriarchal society with the tools it provides (popular culture or suicide), despite of Beauvoir's statements after all. They are resisting their passivity in a more active way, showing agency the way they can, first consuming pop culture (such as Radway suggests), but when it's not enough, then an attempt of suicide like Mildred does. Which is not exactly the way Beauvoir would have pictured, perhaps (since dying is an extreme form of rebellion). But Mildred is showing discontent and the need for something more than TV consumption, in a way agreeing with Radway, who makes it clear that pop culture is *one* option that women choose to fulfil their void and show resistance— And yet, Mildred returns to her life as if nothing had happened. She goes back to her extreme devotion (addiction?) to the TV parlour: a room in where walls are TV screens which stream all the time some kind of interactive shows with characters that are referred to as “the family” (in which she takes a small part as well). According to Radway's theory, women turn to pop culture to satisfy what their lives are missing from their partners and from the patriarchal society. This serves as a way to reconstruct their subjectivity and make them feel as a whole. She emphasizes that it is a therapeutic practice; though in Mildred's case, perhaps this seems to have reached an extreme point. Could it be said that Mildred is replacing her whole life by this consumption, then? Radway only mentions pop culture as a compensation for the unattended needs left by the husband, yet Mildred seems to be using her TV shows and characters as a replacement for her own life it seems. I do not think it is referred as “family” by coincidence. On a side note, perhaps Bradbury would argue with Radway about popular culture being therapeutic or an aid. After all, he is presenting a society which is damaged and continue to be damaged (by the authoritarian system) without clear solution, except for the eradication of women, a nuclear blast, and the resurgence of the masculine literary canon.

On the other hand, how Bradbury portrays their relationship (Millie and Guy), and the TV walls with its shows and characters, is somehow oppressive, loud, and desperate. It is reminiscent of how critical theorists Adorno and Horkheimer describe industrialised

culture, in their essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1940). They strongly criticise the way mass culture has made society lose its capacity of individuality and freedom. I partly disagree with these criticisms when considering Radway’s arguments about how and why popular culture is produced and consumed. Adorno & Horkheimer also discuss (or condemn would be more accurate to say) how society has lost interest in “high culture” in the road of seeking momentary satisfaction and banal pleasures. They also state that: “The culture industry does not sublimate, it represses. By repeatedly exposing the objects of desire...” (38). Which actually coincides with the way Bradbury presents mass culture, as well and how society has turned up in his book¹⁰. It is important to bear in mind that *Fahrenheit 451* and “The culture industry: enlightenment as mass deception” are 10 years apart¹¹. As Bradbury puts it in the novel:

Well, wasn’t there a wall between him and Mildred, when you came down to it? Literary not just one wall but, so far, three!¹² And expensive, too! And the uncles, aunts, the cousins, the nieces, the nephews, that lived in those walls, the gibbering pack of tree-apes that said nothing, nothing, nothing and said it loud, loud, loud. (Bradbury 59)

This excerpt shows more than criticism of the TV culture. It talks about a clear breach between the couple, a wall, a separation or even a replacement. As mentioned before and considering Radway’s arguments, these walls and the “family” are for Mildred what Montag is not. What is interesting is that this issue is voiced by Montag. Mildred has no saying in this, which makes perfect sense when thinking about Mildred as being “the Other” that Beauvoir consistently describes. Montag is the one that has become bothered by the TV and all around it, but Mildred seems to be too oblivious to realise that, or is she? Again, I would like to emphasise that she clearly has not been content for a while, otherwise why would she had tried to kill herself? Or why does she need to keep reaching out for an alternative and “therapeutic” happiness: an alternative way that allows Mildred to reimagine her own subjectivity, her ideal and completed self (as Radway states). But she cannot say this out loud. She will continue in her path. What makes it more remarkable is that Montag does not seem to want to understand Mildred, as “an ideal companion should do.”, according to Radway’s line of arguments. If he did, it would be the exception to both Radway’s and Beauvoir’s theories about men not being able to

satisfy or understand their women. Montag does not even seem to want to assume any responsibility for what is happening with Mildred, or even between them. He chooses to play with the idea of “cleaning” Mildred’s mind instead of trying to find a solution. And of course, she is still his Beauvoir’s Other. Mildred is not there to show him his flaws as a man (such as him having any responsibility to what happens to her or in their relationship). She is there to be Montag's “inessential” complement, and give him the support he needs to be complete as a man, even if that would mean that Mildred should rethink and most likely change her whole existence. In other words, this “complement” does not seem to be fulfilling her purpose any longer but creating conflict instead. And the reason for this conflicting situation, is brought up by Montag’s newest encounter with another “Other”: Clarisse McClellan, the free spirited teenager who teaches Montag that there is something else besides burning books and following the rules.

4.2 The Manic Pixie Dream Girl

...I’m seventeen and I’m crazy. My uncle says the two always go together. When people ask your age, he said, always say seventeen and insane. Isn’t this a nice time of night to walk? I like to smell things and look at things, and sometimes I stay up all night, walking, and watch the sun rise. (Bradbury 14)

Right after the book starts and even before the reader is presented to Montag’s wife, Clarisse McClellan shows up. This dialogue shows how she introduces herself to Montag. Her words are almost the first exchange they both have, right after they meet in the middle of the street late at night. Many would agree that this encounter is romantic and poetic, and that it also sets a theme about her character right away. Her talk can be interpreted as naive and adolescent, playful at times, but also dangerous, curious, and unstable, at least in the totalitarian system they are part of. A *proper* fireman would feel repelled by a character like Clarisse, but Montag seems somehow entertained by her at first, showing little resistance to her behaviour. Later on, he will show how Clarisse affected him and touched him by her seemingly freedom and cheekiness.

Montag is a grown man, a provider, “The One” according to Beauvoir, but is he? He is a formed man and his masculinity is exercised “properly” by his supporting structures (Mildred, work, routine). He is part of the society that keeps things in order. So it does not make much sense that his life and structures are being shaken by a girl. He

clearly presents contradictions within himself (and towards Mildred as shown above). He is also a cell in a system, who does what they tell him to do without questioning it— So perhaps he has not achieved his actual state of “The One” yet. But what about the girl? She seems to be doing what her family tells her to do too, perhaps not in the same way that Montag does by following the authoritarian system but by opposing it. She does repeat the definition about herself as her uncle tells her to, which could be interpreted as “embrace her freedom,” but it could also mean that she has to say this in order to justify herself and be a dysfunctional part of the system. So this makes me wonder about the real freedom and agency behind her character... she might be someone’s *Otherness*. She seems to be completing someone else, having Beauvoir in mind. Because according to Beauvoir, there is no room for women to be just women. They are a complement in a phallogocentric dynamic. So Clarisse is not an exception, or is she? The fact that she does repeat what her uncle tells her as if she had no autonomy of her own is something that stands out. On the other hand, Clarisse also shows herself to be erratic and reckless when changing the subject in a conversation without much sense, talking about staying up all night, night walks, etc. This shows that besides being adventurous and an adolescent, she is showing resistance to structure. Regardless of this, her free spirited attitude is enough to impress Montag, and to provoke in him a feeling of identification: “He saw himself in her eyes, suspended in two shining drops of bright water, himself dark and tiny...” (Bradbury 14). He sees himself through her. He admires her; perhaps he would like to be her and then he would become “The One.” Because so far he is just being “The Other” to this girl, as she exercises some kind of power over him (by being or seeming to be free herself), and that cannot happen according to Beauvoir’s dynamic, which seems to be evident in the story. Clarisse has to become his “Other” in order to enable him to evolve and to exercise his masculinity. Then, it is not difficult to understand why Montag secretly wishes that Mildred have her mind “cleaned,” changed, so she can be more like Clarisse, and regain her function as complement.

The role of Clarisse is what the movie critics call “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl” (MPDG): a young female character who enters the life of a man, and by shaking him emotionally, teaches him how to live and embrace life and its mysteries. The term

was coined back in 2005 by film critic Nathan Rabin and since then it has been used to define this particular character (not only in movies). Even though Clarisse was written long before then, she fits the role perfectly. One of the singularities that happens to this character in general is that in the end, the MPDG disappears (dies, goes away, etc), because this character's function is usually defined as to serve the purpose of the male protagonist, providing some important or insightful life lesson. And Clarisse is no stranger to the format. She helps Montag opening his eyes to life and making him realise that there is something else out there. In addition, and following the convention of the MPDG Clarisse is killed later on. She stays in his life just long enough time to help him in his awakening. And as if she were not needed anymore, she dies tragically (how ironic). Her death shocks Montag greatly. This is not surprising since she was becoming somehow Mildred's replacement in his "unity," as Beauvoir would have put it. When he learns about her demise he falls ill. He gets a fever and it is just too much for him to keep it in. This is when he reveals to his wife that he has been stealing and gathering books. Clarisse's character, even if James Filler (536) writes that she is not the one that brings knowledge to Montag, is one of the characters that pushes him out of the darkness. She is the one that encourages him to take a step out of Plato's cave (Filler 536). Unfortunately and yet like the other women in Montag's life, she has to perish. Because they are a threat to his actual journey. They have to die in order for him to live, for *knowledge* to survive, but he would definitely be incomplete without his women.

4.3 The immolated one

The alarm rings in the firehouse and Montag and the rest of the firemen leave to do their job: burn books. When they arrive at the address, there is an old woman in the house. She is not supposed to be there according to the rules, but the police for some reason have failed to remove her. Someone has called in to complain about her keeping books hidden. This woman, who happens to not have a name, shows no resistance to the firemen's brutality and "childishness."¹³ She is grabbed, beaten and treated with disrespect by Montag's colleague Beatty: "Where are they?" He slapped her face with amazing objectivity and repeated the question. The old woman's eyes came to a focus upon Beatty" (Bradbury 49). They go inside the house with her and start to tear apart the

books and prepare all for the burning. The woman stands there among the books with a silence that makes everyone uncomfortable, mostly Montag, who at that point is somewhat conflicted (he is starting to wake up but is still committed to his position as a fireman). He feels upset about the woman being present though at the same time he cannot not help but empathize with her, because he sees her as a human being and something that can be hurt (not like books). Beauvoir would agree that Montag seems to start thinking like Diderot, who back in the eighteenth century was one of the first to recognise women as “human beings” (24). Montag actually expresses this himself: “You weren’t hurting anyone, you were hurting only things!” (Bradbury 50) when reflecting on this woman. He clearly sees her as an equal, as a human, as Diderot did. As the scene continues, they pour kerosene all over the books where she is kneeling down and caressing them. She even says, “you can’t ever have my books” as a way of showing resistance to the process and to the system.

It is interesting to note such difference between Mildred and this woman, who is here clearly defending the “dangerous” books, the literary canon, not the Romance novels that Radway refers to. She does not seem to have a relation with popular culture as Mildred does (unless if within these books there are some Romance novels that she cherishes dearly). Perhaps her life was already complete and she felt content and free from the patriarchal system, that is why she did not turn to popular culture to satisfy her needs. On the one hand this is the first and only connection Bradbury makes between high culture and women. So perhaps this character and scene is telling that the dynamic of woman-high culture cannot exist in the patriarchal setting, as the novel is already hinting (that is why she is burned along the books). Going back to the exchange she was having with Beatty while defending her books, he replies “where’s your common sense?” (Bradbury 52). So according to Beatty, the woman has no common sense. And of course not, since this dialogue and the whole way of handling the situation with her reinforces a hierarchical dynamic, the *Otherness* and the inessentiality that Beauvoir discusses in *The Second Sex*, where it is the man who sets the rules and tells the woman how to be: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her” (8). These firemen shows no respect or concern about her, not even as a

human being. When they are about to finish their work and set the house on fire, Montag shows opposition because they are ignoring the fact that the woman is still in the house and they will burn her otherwise. Montag argues with his boss about it, who dismisses his plea because “these fanatics always try suicide; the pattern’s familiar” (Bradbury 53). It is interesting that Beatty explains it like that because even if he is referring to the “fanatics of books,” in this case, it happens to be a *woman*, as Montag’s woman Mildred, who also tried to commit suicide. Again the idea of showing some kind of female agency towards the system comes to mind, and Montag seems to be paying attention to this for his own benefit because as Beauvoir explains, men take advantage from their Others (29). In the end, and even after Montag’s insistence, the woman capriciously stands there, refusing to leave, among her books and beliefs. And she ignites the fire, immolating herself, her books and her inessentiality.

4.4 The Ave Phoenix

According to James Filler (528), Montag’s journey is an ascendant one; it is a philosophical experience of the achievement of freedom, in which the character begins entrapped in the “dark,” but with some help ends up earning the so much censored, but also valued knowledge. When the story begins, Montag is presented as an active part of the authoritarian system: he “happily” seems to burn that same knowledge that he will crave later on. He is a fireman after all, and in *Fahrenheit 451*, firemen burn books in order to keep society under control “...as custodians of our peace of mind.... official censors, judges, and executors” (Bradbury 77). But something (or someone) happens to him, and he realises he is not *happy*, so he starts to wake up from his ignorant docility. He begins to understand that there might be something else than what he has been taught, and that those prohibited books might contain some important information. Once the awakening begins, he cannot stop, even if as a result he burns his whole life in the process. The question here is what was keeping him dormant or most importantly, what makes him wake up. Help is, to put it bluntly. And help from women, at first. Because according to Beauvoir, women have always been seen and defined as a complement to men (who cannot be without women), and as I have shown evidence of, in the novel, this dynamic is no stranger to that concept. That is why, when Montag realises that his wife

Mildred tried to commit suicide, he "...was cut in half. He felt his chest chopped down and split apart." (Bradbury. 22), like if he literally could not go on without his "Otherness." As the story progresses and Mildred recovers, Montag's journey evolves and now his "other half" is who is weighing him down in his ascension instead. She does not support him and she resists his changes by trying to keep him in his old path: "'See what you're doing? You'll ruin us! Who's more important, me or that Bible?'" asks Mildred in an argument (Bradbury 100). It is interesting that Mildred raises this question in her discussion. Is knowledge shapeshifting into something else?

Keeping Beauvoir in mind at all times, it is possible to find different female complements that makes Montag whole. Mildred at first, as mentioned before; then, Clarisse shows up, giving him a taste of a different life: "'Are you happy?' She said. 'Am I what?' He cried." (Bradbury 17). Even Mrs. Doe, that is, the immolated one, opens a sensitive door and a deeper curiosity and passion about books in him by choosing her own destiny and committing suicide to honour the cause (saving books). It could be argued that later on and during the liberating experience, Montag does not need the Otherness to be complete, since for one reason or another, the story makes him cut ties with his women— but it can also be argued that even if these women are gone, it does not mean he has got ridden of them, and that now he stands on his own. As a matter of fact, these female characters make his rebirth possible. This new Montag is actually rebuilt on these women's remains. Not innocently— as Beauvoir puts it: "...men profit in many... subtle ways from the otherness..." (29) meaning that men purposely use women for their own benefit, as in this case Montag is doing (such as appropriating Clarisse's free spirit, using the immolated woman to go against the system, etc). He is becoming a new man, sure, completely different than before, but still Montag deep down. He is reborn from his own ashes because he has broken free from the oppressive matrix that contained him. He sacrificed and burned his life to pursue something precious he discovered. He risked all and beat the system and the system beat itself all along, by a nuclear blast... But he is also reborn from his women's ashes, who helped him, pushed him and gave him purpose. He overcame the pop culture remains, and he is now born again from an old life and with a clear mind and a "calling" to rebuild society. He has the future in his hands! I cannot

help but see the “messiah” references in the way Bradbury tells Montag’s story: ““It was coming on for a long time”” says Farber to Montag after his rebellion and before he runs off to the woods, as a sort of prophecy (Bradbury 169); ““Welcome back from the dead”” hails Granger to Montag, as when Jesus resurrects after the crucifixion (Bradbury 193). But women as known before cannot make him whole anymore, for there are most likely no women left out there. So how can he be whole without his inessentiality? Beauvoir would answer that using French philosopher Julien Benda’s words, stating that men do not need women to define themselves, while women cannot think of themselves without a man (8). In other words, according to the French philosopher, Montag could define himself by his own masculine nature but yet, Montag could not have achieved these changes without women, or be whole without “her” either. Because as Beauvoir states “Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought.” (9). Thinking much further about this, perhaps he can be whole, because he has his *Other* already. In this journey, he has ascended from the obscurity of his own ignorance to the final achievement of understanding and illumination. He has slowly formed a relationship with something that is not a woman, but that can complete him and serve to him as such. Something that standing alone cannot be define by itself, just like women, according to philosopher J. Benda (Beauvoir 8). Something that needs the “One” in order to be, just like women, in Beauvoir’s words, that is: *Knowledge*. Because without a human being, knowledge by itself is futile, abstract and it has no purpose; hence the parallel with Beauvoir’s work. Montag has knowledge now, and he will use it to rebuild society, a society that is fundamentally masculine since its foundation will be fundamentally men.

I cannot help feeling pessimistic and fascinated at the same time. Because when thinking about the end of the novel, the message seems to be that Guy Montag the saviour, and his fellow rebels will take the *knowledge* which the former society was built upon (yes, the same society they all come from and that is predicated on the exclusion of femininity) to save the world. They will take those same books that people rejected at some point, and the system burned later on, to rebuild society. And they will try to do this based upon the premise that this time, society built on this masculine knowledge will succeed. In other words, Montag and the rebels will put the books to work on rebuilding a

society that once failed due to these same books. Again, I want to emphasise that it is the knowledge that led once to the abolition of thinking. A clear flawed knowledge with strong patriarchal roots that because its own predicaments took society to its doom. History repeats itself, it is said, so I wonder if Bradbury is really bringing this “loop” idea to the table with a purpose of criticising it (and the patriarchy) or it is just a bitter twist that went unnoticed.

Lastly and before proceeding to the conclusion, it is important to mention that in Montag’s journey there are male characters that help him in his “ascendant” journey. These characters are important in the story as well because they aid him to escape the system as the females do, though they are positioned differently than women. They stand as equals and mentors to Montag, instead of being passive, “manic,” or self-immolating. They are the ones that bring knowledge to Montag by either showing opposition as Captain Beatty does, when he tries to explain to Montag that books are “*nothing!* Nothing you can teach or believe.” (Bradbury 81), statement he does because he has read the books himself (Bradbury 137), or as supporting him in teaching him, as Farber does when he agrees to teach Montag (Bradbury 115). Unfortunately, the topic and length of this paper does not allow me to analyse these characters, but it is worth mentioning them as they are also crucial in Montag’s story.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to explore and understand *Fahrenheit 451* from an angle that has not been used before. With a feminist perspective in mind, I discuss the role of the women in Bradbury’s novel, while questioning the masculinity construction of the main character: Guy Montag. I also provide an interpretation of why these female characters are eradicated from the story, what is the role of pop culture in the novel, and what *knowledge* actually symbolises in this book. Unfortunately, not much has been written about this topic despite the attention *Fahrenheit 451* has had in the past, so I turned to research that dealt with other important topics of the book such as censorship, subject construction and the search of identity, and the male archetype, which were useful for my paper to some extent. On the other hand, the works of theorists Simone De Beauvoir and Janice Radway provided great insights to understand the issues I identified

in the novel. Using their theories as a lens, I have been able to analyse and perhaps also clarify in a way, the mysteries of the female role in *Fahrenheit 451*. Such as the fact that these three women are complicit to Montag, and cannot stand alone in the story. They are complementary characters to his central role. As Beauvoir explains, the formula man-woman cannot function uncompleted. It needs both elements. Though this formula is not linear but hierarchical, as man being central and woman being a complement. That said, all three women have a crucial “task” regarding Montag. They are the ones that allow, provoke, incite, and even push him in his journey of liberation. Without women, Montag could not change the way he does. He would have not read the books to therefore acquire the precious knowledge (which is fundamentally masculine). He would have not escaped and survived the war to save the “world” along with the rest of the educated, male rebels. He would have most likely followed Captain Beatty’s footsteps and kept doing what he was doing: continue to be immersed in the ignorant system. And he would have definitely died in the final explosion. That would have been his fate if women wouldn’t have been involved in his journey.

Furthermore, each woman contributes differently to Montag’s cause. Mildred is the one that shows him the failure of the system and the one that suffers directly from it as well, though Montag does not see it. She is the close connection to pop culture. Her dependence and relation with the TV is the symptom (or the remedy according to Radway) that something is not right. Montag chooses not to reflect on this and try to help or even take any responsibility. If anything, the overall impression about him is that he is somehow the victim. Montag then meets Clarisse. She is the one who makes him aware of something else, like spontaneity and the power of conversation, or just looking up to the sky to see from a different angle. She makes him believe there is something else apart from the busy, confusing world: adventure, perhaps. She indirectly makes him understand that whatever Mildred is, it is not enough for him anymore. Lastly, he met the “immolated” woman. She is the one that shows him commitment and (passive) rebellion, devotion and pride. She makes him feel angry first, and then when she dies, guilty for having participated in what made her to take her own life. Perhaps it is one of the strongest moments of realisation when he shows remorse and culpability of some sort.

On the other hand, these three powerful characters have another thing in common: the fact that they die, terribly. And after having looked into them, it can be said that their demise happens somehow when they show rebellion and go against the system. Surely, it can be discussed that Mildred is the exception to this dynamic, but not entirely. She tries to take her life though Montag does not allow it to happen... Then she most likely dies in the final explosion; at least that is what Montag envisions and the most probable outcome, considering that there is a nuclear explosion in the end. Nevertheless, these female characters must go in order for Montag to live, his masculinity depends on it, so he can become the saviour of knowledge and the literary canon¹⁴. And he achieves this thanks to these women, thanks to their death. So what happens with the formula needed for a man to be a man, then? If women are gone and civilisation is gone, except for Montag and a handful of old professors and erudite men, there is a misbalance that must be equated. Montag and these men are planning to rebuild society with knowledge. A knowledge preserved by the masculine order and predicated upon the eradication of women, fundamentally violent as it is. So the question is, what happens when the “Other” is eradicated. What order is then expected for a new society, when the foundation of it will be the violence of the female eradication?— Perhaps Bradbury did not take this into account. After all, his book is a postmodern piece, rebellious and critical in itself, which deals with subjects of censorship, authoritarian system, and punishment, and which read under a different lens than the one used in this paper (such a deconstructive one), could lead to a total different analysis — or perhaps deep down he fantasised about a homogeneous masculine society, incomplete without its otherness.

Footnotes

¹ S. Lee (2014), J. Filler (2014), and I. Bulgozdi (2013).

² “What incredible power of identification the girl had; *she was like the eager watcher of a marionette show*. . . . How immense a figure she was on the stage before him [Montag]; *what a shadow she threw on the wall*” (Filler on *Bradbury* p.19 - emphasis added).

³ Identity as the representation of “...the processes by which discursively constructed subject positions are taken up... by concrete persons’ fantasy identifications and emotional ‘investments’ ” (Barker *Sage Cictionary* 93-94)

⁴ Book Vi, 509d1–511e3 and Book Vii, 514a1–518b2 (qtd. in Filler 532).

⁵ Similarly to Cixous’ deconstructive look about the binary oppositions: “Activity/passivity. Sun/Moon... Man/Woman,” as she states in “Sorties” (1986).

⁶ Beauvoir does not clarify this statement, therefore the first interpretation that comes to mind is that this statement relates (at least at first) to the recognition as mere existential/philosophical.

⁷ Beauvoir does not establish a clear time line, but she is mentioning this anti-feminism around the Industrial revolution period. I would interpret this as a gradual counter force to the feminist movement from the 18th century on.

⁸ It is extremely important to understand that while popular culture bares a bad reputation for being commercial and mass produced, it has been the voice of many minorities and a field of great creativity.

⁹ This is a fictional name I choose for now since this character is not named in the book, yet has great relevance in the story.

¹⁰ It does seem like Bradbury’s writing agrees to some extent to A&H marxists ideas. He was even investigated by the FBI in the 1950’s under the suspicion of communist activities, but no charges were pressed.

¹¹ I would argue that Bradbury has been probably inspired by these theorists.

¹² In order for the TV parlour be completed Mildred wanted the 4 walls/screens.

¹³ here we can understand Izola Bulgozdi’s reference to the male opposition as in child-adult. 159-160.

¹⁴ Montag was not alone. He was part of the rebellion who were old professors and school teachers. But they took him as leader.

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