

Elements of Dystopia in *Fahrenheit 451* & *The Handmaid's Tale*

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* both take place in a dystopian society located in future versions of what was once the United States.

Although both texts take place in futuristic societies, *Fahrenheit 451* takes place long after the fall of the United States, while *The Handmaid's Tale* takes place within the few years following the fall of the United States. This difference in timeframes is evident in how the characters within each respective society deal with their realities. Characteristics of dystopia contained in both *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Handmaid's Tale* include restricted freedoms, dehumanization, individuality being looked down upon, and rebellion.

The restricted freedoms in *Fahrenheit 451* mostly revolve around the banning of books; however, there are other laws in place to control the masses. The original disappearance of books began not because of the government, but because of the people. As Beatty explained, the popularity of books declined because of "technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure" (Bradbury 55). Eventually, after books became more and more censored and less desired by the citizens, the government banned books altogether in order to adhere to the wishes of the people. In addition to not being able to read, the people are no longer allowed to be pedestrians. The roads are now incredibly dangerous because another law disallows motorists to drive slowly; Clarisse's uncle "drove forty miles an hour [on the highway] and they jailed him for two days" (Bradbury 6). The objective of these laws is to prevent people from moving too slowly and having the time to think about one subject for too long and too deeply.

The society of *The Handmaid's Tale*, The Republic of Gilead, placed restrictions on the reading of its citizens. However, in this society, the women are not allowed to read but the men are still permitted to. This restriction even goes so far as to change the signs on storefronts to

pictures instead of words when the leaders of the society “decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us [the women]” (Atwood 25). Another restriction of Gilead is that women are not allowed to have money of their own or to have jobs. These were among the first restrictions placed upon the women when the United States government fell and Gilead rose. Women had their money drained from their bank accounts and it was transferred to the closest male relative. Women also no longer have control over their own bodies because the fertile women are forced to be Handmaids for the Commanders. This society thinks of men as superior to women and, therefore, allows them more freedoms.

In both societies’ cases of restricted freedoms, those in power claim that life is better in the present time than it was in the past. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Beatty claims that life is better without books because they upset people. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Aunts claim that the women in their society now have more freedom than in the past when men would harass women on the street. As Aunt Lydia explains, “There is more than one kind of freedom... Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from” (Atwood 24). Another commonality between the two societies is that there were people who allowed the takeover and governmental shift to happen. Although, in the world of *Fahrenheit 451*, Guy Montag does not remember a time before book burning, Faber does remember when the shift began. Faber admits to Montag that he “saw the way things were going, a long time back. I [Faber] said nothing. I’m one of the innocents who could have spoken up and out when no one would listen to the ‘guilty,’ but I did not speak and thus became guilty myself” (Bradbury 78). Faber decided to mind his own business and relied on the consciences of others to do the right thing to prevent the banning of books, which obviously did not work. This is similar to *The Handmaid’s Tale* when people found complacency in what society was becoming. Rather

than being outraged that Offred lost her job and did not have access to her own money, Luke accepted his wife's fate by stating that he'll take care of her. Offred also mentions how people began protesting and marching for the rights of women to be restored, but she did not participate in the protests in fear of her life and the lives of her family members. Both novels offer examples of the dangers surrounding inaction in an unjust government and the responsibility of each citizen to fight these injustices before it is too late.

The dehumanization within *Fahrenheit 451* is particularly startling because the people have come to accept their lives being as many are unaware of the aspects of a society before the present one. As a result of books being illegal, thinking is looked down upon—especially independent thinking. The only thinking that one is supposed to do is in regards to the television programs on the parlor screens. Even still, the programs on the screens are short because people do not have long attention spans as a result of never being allowed to have a program with any content depth in fear that this would produce independent thoughts. The family dynamics within this society are also dehumanizing. Not many families have conversations with one another and children are seen as nuisances rather than being valued by their parents. Mildred's friend Mrs. Bowles says that she sends her children away to school and they only come home for a few days each month. Rather than spending time with them when they are at home, she says that, "You heave them into the 'parlor' and turn the switch. It's like washing clothes; stuff laundry in and slam the lid" (Bradbury 93). Familial relationships are nearly unheard of in this society. Humans are seen as disposable, which is evident in that funerals do not exist and bodies are simply cremated and forgotten about—much like the books. Montag exemplifies this disposable nature because he does not care if Mildred lives or dies; he realizes that he has no feeling towards her because he has never been given the opportunity to feel anything real in this society. Another

dehumanizing trait of this society is the surveillance. The people who still possess books are forced to hide them because someone will likely report them to the firefighters if they are caught. In addition, Montag's chase following the burning of his house was publicized on live TV. The surveillance was made even more intense when the viewers were instructed to all look outside to find Montag.

The Handmaid's Tale offers extreme examples of dehumanization among the people of Gilead. Bodies are hanged in a public display on the Wall to set examples for others to not go against the law. This public humiliation is made worse by the fact that the faces of these individuals are covered—furthering the removal of their humanity. One of the groups hanged on the Wall are doctors who performed abortions in the United States prior to the formation of the Republic of Gilead. Although abortions were once legal in the U.S., these doctors are being punished in the time of Gilead because of the current decline in birthrates. When the women were in the gymnasium prior to becoming Handmaids, they were being surveyed by the Aunts and the Angels constantly. One of the most dehumanizing details of this surveillance was that the Aunts carried electric cattle prods in an effort to control them. Aside from the Aunts and the Angels in the gymnasium, all members of the society deal with the constant anxiety of surveillance from the Eyes; the Eyes are a looming threat because nearly anyone could be an Eye in disguise. When Offred is transferred to the house of her new Commander, she notices that her room does not have anything that she could use to hang herself with and that her window does not open all the way. Despite suicide being a horribly sad and tragic way to die, not even being given that option is another example of the dehumanization. Offred is also given very little privacy; the door to her room does not shut all the way and her room is searched. Because of this

lack of privacy, Offred cannot keep the lotion given to her by the Commander in her room being as it is banned from the Handmaids.

As is the case in many other dystopian societies, the society of *Fahrenheit 451* looks down upon individuality. The first example of a character displaying individuality is Clarisse McClellan. Clarisse is seen as odd because she does activities such as walking outside, enjoying nature, and talking with her family. These behaviors are seen as suspicious and unhealthy, which is why she is forced to see a psychiatrist to treat these abnormalities. The rest of the society lacks this individuality; people spend much of their time watching television programs and they collectively believe that books are evil.

The lack of individuality in *Fahrenheit 451* is more abstract, while *The Handmaid's Tale* restricts individuality in how people present themselves physically. The women are forced to cover their bodies in long dresses color-coded in correspondence with their places in society; Handmaids wear red, Wives wear blue, Aunts wear brown, Marthas wear green, and Econowives wear stripes. In this society, women appear the same, which makes the society as a whole look at them as groups rather than individual people. The women lose even more of their individuality by being forced to give up their names. When a Handmaid is placed in a home, she takes on the name of the man of the house. When this woman eventually leaves and a new Handmaid takes her place, that one takes on the husband's name. For example, Offred was looking for Ofglen to complete their usual shopping trip together when a new woman took her place. Offred asked this new woman where Ofglen was and the woman replied, "I am Ofglen" (Atwood 283). Many women do not know each other's real names because they have been forced to abandon them. This simple transfer of men's names to women further cements the idea of women being treated and seen as groups rather than individual people.

The unfair treatment within dystopian societies often leads to rebellion from at least a select few individuals. Readers of *Fahrenheit 451* learn of this society's rebels through Faber. Although Faber tries his best to lead a private life as a former liberal arts professor, he is pulled into the rebellion when Montag enlists his help to make a copy of the Bible. The relationship between the two deepens when Faber gives Montag radio transmitters to listen in and give Montag advice on how to deal with Beatty. Once the pair agrees to go on the run and get in touch whenever possible, Montag meets other rebels outside of the city. These men are intellectuals and they have each memorized books in order for the books to be written down again in the future. They revealed that there are countless other people across the country who have pieces of literature memorized, waiting for the day when people will listen and recognize the importance of books again. Hope is offered when a bomb is dropped on the city; despite the deaths of citizens, the bomb signifies the destruction of the corrupt system. Even though there are more than likely other cities untouched by bombs and destruction, the dismantlement of the city known for persecuting Montag is gone and he has been given a fresh start. Montag now has the opportunity to live a new life as a memorized book rather than as a book burner; he has become what he formerly longed to eliminate.

The members of *The Handmaid's Tale* society are more reluctant to accept their situations because they have lived through a time before their oppression. At first, Offred feels alone in her dissatisfaction with Gilead because the women are forced to remain quiet and obey the laws. Offred is later reunited with her friend Moira who had escaped the Center and learns about the "Underground Femaleroad" (Atwood 246). This system was established by religious people who felt a moral obligation to help women escape The Republic of Gilead and get them to Canada. Although Moira's attempt to flee the country was unsuccessful because she was

caught and brought to work at the club, she brings the information about the Underground Femaleroad to Offred. This newfound knowledge instills a bit more hope in Offred because she is now aware that there are good people out there who want to help the women. Earlier on, Ofglen tells Offred of the code word “mayday” used to tell “Who is and who isn’t” (Atwood 202) part of the rebellion. This word becomes particularly important near the book’s conclusion when Serena discovers the events that have been taking place between the Commander and Offred. Right before the men in the van take Offred away, Nick tells her, “It’s all right. It’s Mayday. Go with them” (Atwood 293). Offred goes with the men because she does not have much other choice. Although readers cannot be sure of Offred’s fate after stepping into the van, it is assumed that she did escape and find sanctuary elsewhere being as the Historical Notes section stated that the testimonies of this woman were found on cassette tapes.

The works of Bradbury and Atwood exemplify dystopian societies plagued by restricted freedoms, dehumanization, lack of individuality, and rebellion. They show the dangers of complete government takeover and the negative effects on members of these societies. These novels serve as warnings to not sit idly while the government implements changes that contrast with one’s morals.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Anchor Books, 1986.

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. Simon & Shuster Paperbacks, 1951.