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Of Salamanders and Phoenixes

Salamanders and phoenixes. Mildred and Clarisse. The memory of a better past alongside a dystopian future. Ray Bradbury has many contradictory ideas in his novel *Fahrenheit 451,* swirling about in a vortex of confusion as Montag becomes increasingly perplexed by the rights and wrongs of society. However, this muddying and mixing of opposing ideas was deliberately and masterfully done by Bradbury to show that what might so simply be considered "right" and "wrong," or "good" and "bad," are not so easily distinguished. With the paradoxical society of *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury demonstrates that no two poles of any subject are so conflicting as they might outwardly seem; in fact, it is the subtle details dominating the direction of an idea.

An ideal in the world of Montag is the salamander, a creature believed to live through fire; the problem is that their society is instead a phoenix, similar in idea but opposite in result. To the common people, fire is good. Fire is clean. Fire is necessary. And they could survive fire. As Beatty puts it, "its real beauty is that it destroys responsibility and consequences. A problem gets too burdensome, then into the furnace with it" (115). Montag and Faber consider the idea of "destroy[ing]," and they realize that burning books destroys more than it benefits — that firemen are given too much power and the succeeding responsibility. As a person "destroys responsibility," their use of fire is unstoppable, uncontained, irresponsible. From Beatty's ideal of such a handy clean-up tool comes the idea of the phoenix, a bird who "burnt himself up … but every time he burnt himself up he sprang out of the ashes, he got himself born all over again. And it looks like we're doing the same thing … making the goddamn funeral pyres and jumping in the middle of them" (163). It quickly becomes evident that fire, such an "antibiotic, aesthetic, [and] practical" (115) force, can turn into a cycle of suicide and renewal that gathers more ignorance with each iteration. But the interesting part is that there is no major difference between the phoenix and the salamander. They both defy fire as a child might reject a warning, ignorant of the danger; but of the two, the phoenix is even more inexperienced and burns itself up before it has any true wisdom, whereas the salamander has the chance to learn from past mistakes. Bradbury even went so far as making this connection literal: society explodes in flame as the war

begins and “the city roll[s] over and [falls] down dead” (160). Although society subscribes to the idea of a salamander, its fine distinction from a phoenix never lets society learn and advance.

Although there is a clear contrast between the bubbly personality of Mildred to the dead words of Mildred to Beatty’s eloquent persuasion, they resemble each other in many ways. The main connecting factor is the continuity of their thoughts — they each have the gift of fluid speech, even with Clarisse being young and Mildred with a lower aptitude for response. With Montag they each carry on a cohesive conversation with a stream of thoughts; but their thoughts are where the communication begins to differ. Clarisse says to Montag, “I’m antisocial, they say. I don’t mix. It’s so strange. I’m very social indeed.” (29) — her thoughts are clear, running water, just plain thoughts with nothing to hide. On the other hand, Mildred and her friends tend to repeat words: “‘Doesn’t everything look nice!’ ‘Nice.’ ‘You look fine, Millie!’ ‘Fine.’ ‘Everything looks swell.’ ‘Swell!’” (93), and similarly, her friend Mrs. Phelps was saying, “I’m not worried … I’ll let Pete do all the worrying … I’ll let old Pete do all the worrying. Not me. I’m not worried” (94). Their minds are instead puddles of muddy water, unsure of their thoughts, using the words over and over to fill time. Even Beatty, so articulate and elaborate in his attack on reading, was similarly spitting out the thoughts of society with little independent thinking on his part: he spoke of the greatness of fire and the controversy of books, the general thoughts of society as a whole, that “a book is a loaded gun in the house next door” (58). However, instead of the *books* being the weapon, he *himself* wields the machine gun of society, aiming criticism and fire at books. Similarly, Montag is a mix of Beatty and Clarisse, with a pinch of confusion and inquiry; Faber is an older Montag with a touch of sagacity and reserve. Almost as if spitting out different radio channels from “Seashells,” the characters in *Fahrenheit 451* are all puppets to endless streams of thoughts and words; but these slightly differing mindsets and beliefs from the flow of information subject them to totally different characteristics and different mindsets.

Moreover, what is most interesting about Bradbury’s use of repetitive contrast is that it does not only have to apply to small textual concepts such as characters or symbols; in addition, it can relate to life on a larger scale, comparing broader deviations between cultures, views from different perspectives, and ideologies. It gives us a view from outer space of the contradictions

on Earth, better showing the true nature and patterns that exist between opposites. Most prominent in the story was the divergence from our "normal" society to Montag's Orwellian life.

The society in the novel is warning us of a future in which technology is suppressing the nature of simple life, a negative influence; but it parallels in many ways our society, in which we consider technology to be a generally positive aspect of life. Clarisse points out to Montag, "Have you ever watched the jet cars racing on the boulevards down that way? … I sometimes think the drivers don't know what grass is, or flowers, because they never see them slowly … If you showed a driver a green blur, Oh yes! he'd say, that's grass!" (9). Bradbury paints a high-resolution photograph of their low-resolution life devoid of fun, overly obsessed with speed and modern indulgences that the simplicities of life are often ignored. Even "being a pedestrian" (10), "hik[ing] around in the forest," (23), chatting to be social, or taking your time are all ways of life condemned by society. But is this so different from our own lives? We may seem content and free, but so did Montag and his fellow citizens: he said to himself, "Of all the nonsense … of course I'm happy" (10) — but he soon realizes the extreme dissatisfaction he actually faces. Similarly, technology in our lives has been pushing us all to speeds unprecedented before at an exponential rate, and the speed of innovation is always at a high. Apps, machines, discovery. Besides their focus of using technology to burn books and promote conformity, there are not too many differences between our society and theirs. They focus more on more destructive and less innovative ideas. Flamethrowers, Seashells, superfast cars. The two experiences — Montag's in the frightening life of conformity, and ours in a "free" society — may seem a world apart, but in many ways we may not be so far away, with only a handful of differences keeping us apart.

Bradbury's use of repetition in *Fahrenheit 451* may have been a simple choice to emphasize certain points in the book, but it also had a major effect on pointing out the relationship between similar and repetitive ideas. Through the novel, Bradbury makes it clear that what creates contrast in life is not based on the core of a concept, but instead a few nuances in the fine details. As there are no true synonyms, there are no true opposites — all contrast falls in between. He shows to us that opposites are often of mice and men, of salamanders and phoenixes: outwardly different but merely a few characteristics apart at their fiery core.