

Burnaby South Secondary School

Individuality versus Conformity in the Pursuit of an Ideal Society

Literary Analysis of Fahrenheit 451

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Individuality versus Conformity in the Pursuit of an Ideal Society

Since the inception of civilization, humankind has been in the constant pursuit of creating a perfect society without discrimination, poverty, violence, and inequality.

Among the many hypothetical approaches towards achieving such a society, the approach of maintaining censorship and societal conformity is in direct conflict with the approach of self-expression and individuality. A society that strays too heavily towards conformity will eventually end up suppressing its population into an apathetic and mindless state, essentially rendering it unideal. Comparatively, a society that prioritizes individuality and self-expression will be in constant conflict and controversy, leading to disunity and a lack of social cohesion, also making it unideal. Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 demonstrates that to truly achieve an ideal society, humanity must strike a balance between maintaining social order through censorship and protecting individuality by promoting self-expression. By analyzing the characters and civilizations in the novel, the differences between societies that prioritize conformity through censorship and societies that prioritize individuality through self-expression will be explored. Additionally, the vital importance of finding a balance between conformity and individuality for the realization of an ideal society will be demonstrated.

A society functioning through absolute censorship prioritizes social cohesion and stability over personal autonomy and self-expression. At first glance, these totalitarian societies fueled by censorship appear to be stable and peaceful, where all citizens live in tranquility and lead conflict-less and unproblematic lives. In the novel, this approach of

societal conformity is symbolized by an oppressive totalitarian regime, known as the Government, that burns all books and suppresses all communication to control all aspects of society. By establishing authority over the media and all communication, the Government controls its own image to craft an illusion of flawless functionality, with citizens that are seemingly content and harmonious. Evidently, the lack of conflict and the suppression of communication creates an environment that is free of social unrest altogether. When the protagonist, Guy Montag, is imprisoned within the constraints of the Government's suppressed society, he describes life as being peaceful and happy, free of any controversy. Montag sees his censored society as productive and orderly, where everyone knows their place and has a clearly defined role to play. Similarly, Captain Beatty, the chief of the firemen who are responsible for burning all books and enforcing the censorship of communication, claims that "thanks to [the Government], [everyone] can stay happy all the time" (Bradbury 55) and assures that it is essential for "[the firemen] to stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought" (Bradbury 59), insisting that a society where people are unaware of the issues they face is optimal since everyone can be happy all the time. Captain Beatty further emphasizes on this sentiment when he reciprocates the following Government ideology: "if the Government is inefficient, top-heavy, and tax-mad, better it be all those than that people worry over it" (Bradbury 58). Using the supposed need for ignorance as justification for its censorship, the Government "impedes on the flowering of knowledge and imagination as it is hazardous to the culture of conformity" (Atasoy,

“Impediment to Knowledge” 401) because critical thinking individuals will rebel against the system, causing conflict and rendering the society unideal.

However, the lack of freedom and individuality in a suppressed society will inevitably ignite a sense of despair and apathy among its citizens. Along with the absence of intellectuality and creativity, the relentless pursuit of conformity will lead to a longing for genuine connection and personal fulfilment that is unavailable for such a suppressed population. Eventually, this growing discontentment will undermine the false facade of stability that is projected by censorship because “in a society marked by propaganda as the prevailing language, the question of war clash [will always] remain” (Forni 14). Similarly, in the novel, Montag eventually “[claims] his own agency and gradually comes to the realization that he is not happy” (Atasoy, “Happiness and Hedonism” 52). He begins to see his community in a whole new light, suddenly noticing how his wife and neighbors are drowning in isolation and being consumed by mindless Government-induced entertainment when he cannot even communicate with them because they “lack fervour for knowledge and imagination” (Atasoy, “Impediment to Knowledge” 406). Eventually, he comes to realize that the Government’s censorship is only in practice to prevent individuals from thinking for themselves, rather than to maintain a socially stable and happy society. Montag recognizes that the Government has established a society that “compensates for alienation... with narcotics and sleeping pills” (Forni 15), making society inherently flawed because “the mass exploitation of easy gratification is the fundamental threat to thought” (McGiveron 1).

Furthermore, through members of the Government's authoritarian regime, like Captain Beatty, it is evident that censorship is only in practice to fulfill their ulterior motive of maintaining a status quo of Government superiority. The deliberate suppression of citizens allows the Government to maintain its grip on power and avoid any challenges to its authority, as demonstrated by Beatty's quote: "If you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none" (Bradbury 58). Evidently, the Government's intention of controlling the communication of ideas is to provide them with a medium to deteriorate society's overall intelligence, corrupt and control all language, indoctrinate all youth and eventually, eliminate political candidates. Ultimately, a society founded on the basis of censoring its own issues and controlling the communication of new ideas for social conformity is inherently flawed and unideal. The fact that "unhappiness and dissent are squelched" also "brings the question of the very feasibility of such a society of total conformity" (Atasoy, "Impediment to Knowledge" 405). Although suppression may stem from positive intentions of establishing a perfect society, it creates a space for blatant authoritarianism. The natural human tendency of building on emotional thought and connection will undermine the illusion of stability that is constructed by this censorship and will set the stage for the downfall of this imperfect society.

In direct contrast to absolute censorship is a society free of all constraints, open to all discussion and fueled by the freedom of expression. This society acknowledges that every person possesses unique perspectives and talents, and promotes the sharing of

ideas, thoughts, and beliefs without the fear of suppression. Within this unrestrained society, open discussions and intellectual exploration become the key to the betterment of civilization by challenging existing norms and pushing the boundaries of knowledge. In the novel, this approach of an idealistic society is originally personified by Clarisse McLellan, an enigmatic and free-spirited girl who breaks away from the confines of the Government's oppressive rule and embraces an unconventional way of thinking. Montag is fascinated by her youthful spirit and her self-confidence, as he becomes increasingly drawn to her intellectual curiosity and her willingness to break apart from the status quo, describing her as "the first person... who looked straight at [him] as if [he] counted" (Bradbury 68). After being treated as a social outcast and alienated from society as a potential threat to the system, Clarisse is evidently still not content with the concept of happiness that is defined by the Government because her perception of happiness implies the opposite of whatever the regime encourages. Clarisse believes that a society founded on this individualistic ideology is ideal as it is based on the idea that "change can be accomplished only through self-betterment... and by looking in the mirror to create a new society in which critical thinking, knowledge and imagination can flourish" (Atasoy, "Happiness and Hedonism" 51).

This hypothetical society evidently values diversity of thought and prioritizes the rights of individuals to think, speak and create freely. As a manifestation of this ideology, Clarisse represents a beacon of hope and inspiration for Montag, also acting as the catalyst for his own self-discovery and introspection. When she asks Montag if he's truly

happy, she ignites feelings of discontent and skepticism in his mind, making him question his own beliefs and inspiring him to think for himself. Montag's self-reflection leads to a drastic transformation of his own idea of happiness, from someone being happy with the existing facilities bestowed upon him by the regime to someone who looks for happiness outside of the realm of the restrictive system. Evidently, Montag adopts Clarisse's ideology that "what must always be at the centre of all communication, are youth, health, physical strength and speed in solving problems" (Forni 15), and he begins the pursuit for a supposedly ideal society "through critical thinking, introspection, self-contemplation, and self-actualization" (Atasoy, "Happiness and Hedonism" 56).

However, a society founded on the philosophy of open dialogue and debate will inevitably fall prey to controversy and division, also making it imperfect. Prioritizing individuality over conformity leads to a lack of social cohesion and increases the risk of conflict, blurring the lines between freedom and responsibility. Throughout the novel, Captain Beatty warns of this occurrence, arguing that a society where people are more concerned with their own personal beliefs rather than the good of the community, will eventually reject all authority and plunge into absolute anarchy. When talking about Clarisse, Beatty describes her as a ticking time bomb, because if "[someone] asks why to a lot of things, [they] will end up very unhappy" (Bradbury 58), which is in direct contradiction to the proposed idea of a perfect society. Although individualism and self-actualization are vital to the functioning of an ideal society, it can quickly spiral out of

control. The expression of all ideas will inevitably foster space for constant conflict and controversy to flourish, making society problematic and unideal.

Through this conflict, it is evident that there must be a balance of individualism and conformity in order to yield success in the pursuit of an ideal society. Although absolute suppression and censorship is a ludicrous philosophy, a transparent and accountable implementation of censorship is essential to protecting social welfare and public interest, while also promoting open dialogue and encouraging diversity of ideas and perspectives. Although Captain Beatty is consistently antagonized, the policies he believes in are necessary to prevent social unrest and maintain stability in society.

Through his narratives in the novel, it is evident that he has positive intentions of maintaining happiness as an enforcer of the regime's censorship, and he truly believes that "[the Government's] culture provides plenty of [happiness]" (Bradbury 56).

However, his acceptance of utilizing absolute censorship to maintain happiness stems from a misguided outlook on the pursuit of developing an ideal society, which is only flawed because of the restrictions on critical thinking and self-reflection that are placed by the Government. Similarly, on the other end of the spectrum, optimistic individuals like Clarisse also provide unsophisticated and hypothetical perspectives of an ideal society. Her belief in the existence of an individualistic society ignores the negative potentialities of such a civilization. It is evident that unchecked individuality will lead to a lack of social cohesion and unity among citizens, creating a fragmented society where communal bonds are non-existent, and people only live for themselves.

Ultimately, for the existence of an ideal society, there must be a harmonic balance between self-expression and censorship. Fahrenheit 451 skillfully presents two contrasting, yet equally problematic societies, demonstrating the positives and negatives of individuality and conformity. Through the novel, it can be concluded that neither extreme societies will flourish, but only a stability of individuality and conformity will lead to an ideal society with consistent peace and tranquility. By striving for this equilibrium, society will gradually approach the idealistic vision of a civilization that fosters communication and self-expression without sacrificing on social order and stability.

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