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English: Professional milieu

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Fahrenheit 451 Essay

Individualism in an assimilated world

In today’s society, we have a growing sense of understanding of the importance of individualism. Today, that’s expressed through the ways that we dress, that we act and that we talk, but true individualism is much more tied to how we think. In Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451, Guy Montag is living in a world of assimilated people. Everyone around him goes about their life in the same way every day, doing things that have no meaning in their lives. Throughout the story, we get the impression that this assimilation and suppression of individualism isn’t what people want, yet people are too scared to make any changes. Bradbury is arguing that individualism is critical to people’s sense of self, and along with that, their mental state and ability to live happily.

Montag’s wife, Mildred, is the epitome of conformity. She spends all her time in front of the TV, watching soap opera’s and talking about it all as if it were real. She even refers to the people in the shows as her family at multiple points. When Mildred isn’t watching TV, she’s usually listening to the radio in her seashells, so she’s constantly distant. *“’You always dread the unfamiliar. […] We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against’”* (Bradbury, 28). This is Beatty speaking to Montag as Montag lies in bed, not wanting to go to work because of the events the previous day, when the woman was burned with her books. Mildred is around for most of the conversation and blindly agrees with what Beatty is saying, about how books make people sad, and this way, everyone is happy. Yet Mildred is horribly depressed, and we see this right from the beginning when she attempts suicide. She tries to kill herself, and then buries it down, acts like it never happened because she’s so caught up in trying to be happy that she doesn’t want to approach reality and talk. She puts on this guise of being happy, and Montag knows she isn’t, but she claims that she is, because in this society, everyone is supposed to be. *“’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, 29). This is spoken once again by Beatty in the same conversation with Montag, though several pages later. He argues that people are happiest when they don’t have choices in life, because then they don’t have to worry about a decision. Yet the lack of decision is clearly making people unhappy. When Montag pulls out a book later on, and reads it to Mildred and her friends, Mildred follows the law and reports Montag to the firemen. In her point of view, she didn’t have a choice in the matter, and instead did what everyone said was the right thing to do. She walks away from the house, not unhappy with Montag, but unhappy because she’s lost the parlour, her ‘family’.

Clarisse is the complete opposite of Mildred. She’s young and enthusiastic, she’s engaged and out there with her ideas and she isn’t afraid to let people know what she believes in. When Montague first meets her, she asks him some questions that really make him think, and question the world around him. This is completely unlike any other character in the story, who all try to not think, not question the way that things are.

*“‘Good night!’ She started up her walk. Then she seemed to remember something and came back to look at him with wonder and curiosity. ‘Are you happy?’ she said.*

*‘Am I what?’ he cried.*

*But she was gone-running in the moonlight. Her front door shut gently.”* (Bradbury, 4)

This quote is from the very first time the Montag meets Clarisse. She’s very enthusiastic about talking to him, but Montag doesn’t know what to think of the encounter. Just before they left, she asks him if he’s happy, because the thinks that ultimately, being happy is what’s important. Clarisse, unlike most other characters in the book, is actually happy. She’s a complete contrast to Mildred in personality and she’s happy while Mildred is depressed. I think that this says something about how Bradbury wanted to portray happiness and individualism being very tightly coupled.

*“’I'm anti-social, they say. I don't mix. It's so strange. I'm very social indeed. It all depends on what you mean by social, doesn't it? Social to me means talking about things like this.’ She rattled some chestnuts that had fallen off the tree in the front yard. ‘Or talking about how strange the world is. Being with people is nice. But I don't think it's social to get a bunch of people together and then not let them talk, do you? An hour of TV class…’”* (Bradbury, 13-14)

Clarisse freely admits to being weird and different, deviating from the social norm, and yet she’s the happiest character in the story. She recognizes that to be happy, you also need to have moments of sadness and hardship. For her, being alienated is probably one of those things. Montag is just beginning to realize this as well.

Montague is interesting because he’s the only real dynamic character in the story. In the beginning, Montague was like everyone else. He went about his life unquestioning and just doing his job. When Clarisse challenged his happiness, his way of thinking changed. He became like her, questioning everything around him in life. *“He was not happy. He said the words to himself. He recognized this as the true state of affairs. He wore his happiness like a mask and the girl had run off across the lawn with the mask and there was no way of going to knock on her door and ask for it back.”*(Bradbury, 5). Right after his first encounter with Clarisse, Montag questions life enough to realize that he isn’t as happy as he thought he was with his life. He has a wife, a house, a good job, and is respected, yet isn’t happy. While we never get to truly see Montague happy in the story, we know that the need to conform to the social norms was making him unhappy, even if he didn’t realize it at first. Once he realized that thinking for himself was so important to him, he began immediately to fight for that right, for himself, and for everyone around him because he knows that it was the path to actually being happy. *“The numbness will go away, he thought. It'll take time, but I'll do it, or Faber will do it for me. Someone somewhere will give me back the old face and the old hands the way they were. Even the smile, he thought, the old burnt-in smile, that's gone. I'm lost without it.”*(Bradbury, 36).This is Montag’s thought on his way to meet Faber for the first time since their encounter in the park a year earlier. He’s determined that books will make him happy, and that Faber can help him with this. He knows this is what he needs to do, and remembers his conversation with Faber, knowing that he’ll be willing to help him.

In conclusion, the characters in Fahrenheit 451 get progressively happier the less conformist they are. Mildred is completely conforming to social norms and lets it absorb her life, yet she’s undeniably unhappy, while Clarisse is the complete opposite. She lives her life and doesn’t care what others think, yet is the happiest character in the story. Montag is going through the transition from one to the other throughout the entire story, and once he learns to think for himself, we get the impression that he’s happier too. Bradbury is making a point in this story that people’s happiness in life is very closely related to their sense of individualism, and its people making the choices that suit themselves that makes them happy.