A Study of the Allusions in Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451

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RAY Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 is more than just a readable and teachable short novel that generates much classroom discussion about the dangers of a mass culture, as Charles Hamblen points out in his article “Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 in the Classroom” (English Journal, September 1968). It is an excellent source for showing students the value of studying an author’s use of specific allusions in a work of fiction. While writing excellent social criticism, Bradbury uses several direct quotations from works of literature, including the Bible; a careful analysis of the patterning of these allusions shows their function of adding subtle depth to the ideas of the novel.

Fahrenheit 451 is set five centuries from now in an anti-intellectual world where firemen serve the reverse role of setting fires, in this case to books that people have been illegally hoarding and reading. Literature is banned because it might potentially incite people to think or to question the status quo of happiness and freedom from worry through the elimination of controversy. “Intellectual” entertainment is provided by tapioca-bland television that broadcasts sentimental mush on all four walls. The novel, first written in a shorter version for a science-fiction magazine in 1950 and published as a novel three years later, concerns itself with one fireman, Guy Montag, who commits the heresy of questioning his role and seeks to learn why books are considered dangerous.

If we take this imaginary world of the twenty-fourth century as a commentary of our contemporary society, we can interpret the novel on one level as the oft-heard argument that mass media, as evidenced by television and popular magazines, are reducing our society to very mediocre tastes. The mass media must keep watering down the intellectual level of its material as it attempts to reach an increasingly larger and intellectually diversified audience. Bradbury takes this problem to an extreme to show the potential effects of such a course on our culture. Television spans four walls, soap
operas and sentimentality abound, and books, the carriers of ideas, are burned.

But if we look more closely at the novel, noting specifically the literary and Biblical allusions, we see a deeper message in the novel than simply the warning that our society is headed for intellectual stagnation. The literary allusions are used to underscore the emptiness of the twenty-fourth century, and the Biblical allusions point subtly toward a solution to help us out of our intellectual “Dark Age.” Bradbury seems to be saying that the nature of life is cyclical and we are currently at the bottom of an intellectual cycle. We must have faith and blindly hope for an upward swing of the cycle. This concept of the natural cycle is most explicitly stated by Bradbury through the character of Granger:

And when the war’s over, some day, some year, the books can be written again, the people will be called in, one by one, to recite what they know, and we’ll set it up in type until another Dark Age, when we might have to do the whole thing over again (p. 137).¹

The major metaphor in the novel, which supports the idea of the natural cycle, is the allusion to the Phoenix, the mythical bird of ancient Egypt that periodically burned itself to death and resurrected from its own ashes to a restored youth. Through the persona of Granger, Bradbury expresses the hope that mankind might use his intellect and his knowledge of his own intellectual and physical destruction to keep from going through endless cycles of disintegration and rebirth.

This image of the Phoenix is used in the novel in association with the minor character Captain Beatty, Montag’s superior. As an officer, Beatty has knowledge of what civilization was like before the contemporary society of the novel. In an attempt to satisfy Guy’s curiosity and hopefully to quell any further questioning, Beatty relates to Guy how the twentieth century began to decline intellectually, slowly reaching the point in future centuries of banning books; schools stopped teaching students to think or to question and crammed them with factual data in lieu of an education. Psychological hedonism became the most positive virtue; all questioners and thinkers were eliminated. It is crucial that Beatty wears the sign of the Phoenix on his hat and rides in a “Phoenix car.” He has great knowledge of the past yet ironically and tragically does not know how to use his knowledge, treating it only as historical curiosity. He is interested only in keeping that status quo of uninterrupted happiness and freedom from worry. He imparts his knowledge only to firemen who are going through the inevitable questioning he feels all firemen experience. He tells Guy that fiction only depicts an imaginary world, and all great ideas are controversial and debatable; books then are too indefinite. Appropriately, Beatty is burned to death, and his death by fire symbolically illustrates the rebirth that is associated with his Phoenix sign. When Guy kills Beatty, he is forced to run off and joins Granger; this action is for Guy a rebirth to a new intellectual life.

Bradbury employs several specific literary quotations to illustrate the shallowness of Guy’s world. By using references to literature, Bradbury carries through a basic irony in the book: he is using books to underscore his ideas about a world in which great books themselves have been banned.

After Beatty has given Guy a capsule history of how the world reached the anti-intellectual depths of the twenty-fourth century, Guy goes to a book he

¹ (New York City: Ballantine Books, 1967.) All page references are to this paperback edition.
has concealed but has not yet had the
courage to read. He reads several pages;
then Bradbury has him quote the follow-
ing passage:

It is computed, that eleven thousand
persons have at several times suffered
death rather than submit to break their
eggs at the smaller end (p. 62).

The quotation is from the first book of
Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, "A Voyage
to Lilliput." At the point of the quota-
tion Gulliver has learned of a long-stand-
ing feud in Lilliput, between those who
have traditionally broken their eggs at
the larger end, and the edict of the King,
ordering all subjects to break their eggs
at the smaller end because a member of
the royal family had once cut his finger
breaking the larger end. The struggle
between being reasonable and being sad-
dled to tradition even to the point of
ridiculous suicide is perhaps what Brad-
bury is after here. The twenty-fourth
century is just as saddled to the status
quo, and Bradbury has been careful to
point out the dangers of intellectual
deadness. The example from Lilliput is
an excellent one for him to choose, since
it represents an absurd situation taken to
a gross exaggeration, a basic device of
satire.

As Guy and his wife read on, a quo-
tation is taken directly from Boswell's
*Life of Johnson*:

> We cannot tell the precise moment
when friendship is formed. As in filling
a vessel drop by drop, there is at last a
drop which makes it run over; so in a
series of kindnesses there is at last one
which makes the heart run over (p. 63).

Guy makes the point that this quote
brings to his mind the girl next door,
Clarisse McClellan, who was labelled a
"time bomb" by Beatty because she was
a sensitive, observant person who ques-
tioned society, and was consequently
eliminated by the government. Montag
made an emotional attachment to Claris-
se, an attachment that was sincere and
ture in a world hostile to honesty. It was
his relationship with Clarisse that was for
Guy the first "drop"; she started his
questioning of the status quo, and sub-
sequent events after her death made Guy
think and question more and more se-
riously, until he completely breaks away
from his diseased society at the end of
the novel.

Guy continues to read, and quotes
again from Boswell, this time from a
letter to Temple in 1763: "That favourite
subject, Myself" (p. 64). Curiously
enough, Guy's wife Mildred, who has
not received any inspiration from this
secret reading session, says that she
understands this particular quote. Her
statement is juxtaposed against Guy's
saying that Clarisse's favorite subject
wasn't herself, but others. He realizes
the truth of the statements he has been
reading from authors who wrote hun-
dreds of years ago; his wife can only
understand the literal level of one state-
ment, the one reflecting the self-interest
of her society.

The only other direct quote Brad-
bury employs from literature comes in
the second part of the book, and serves
to underscore the emptiness of the world
that the three preceding quotes have
shown. After Guy returns from having
visited Faber, he talks with his wife and
two of her friends. The conversation of
the women reflects the shallowness of
the women's thinking, since they are the
products of this empty culture. Their
discussion of politics, for example, has
to do with voting for a candidate for
president because he was better looking
than his opponent. Guy has a book of
poetry with him, and Mildred's visitors
are shocked that he has a book. In a
scene reminiscent of the banquet in *Mac-
beth*, Guy's wife attempts to cover for
him by telling the women that firemen
are allowed to bring books home oc-
casionally to show their families how silly books are. Guy reads from Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"; the last two stanzas are quoted, and the last one is particularly apt, since it shows two lovers looking at what appears to be a happy world, but recognizing the essential emptiness that exists:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here, as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night
(p. 90).

Guy's world, too, rests on happiness, a happiness of psychological comfort and freedom from controversy, but Guy is finding that beneath the exterior is a vast emptiness, a "darkling plain."

Thus far, we have seen how Bradbury has used several allusions to literature to describe the situation of the contemporary world of the novel. It might be wise at this point to note an historical reference made, one that serves to underscore some basic ideas in the book.

EARLY in the book, when Guy is first beginning to undergo doubts, he and his squad are called to the home of a woman discovered owning books. The woman refuses to leave her home, choosing to die in the flames with her books. On the way back to the firehouse, Guy, shaken by the experience, mentions to Beatty the last words of the woman, "Master Ridley." Beatty—and note again that he has the knowledge—tells Guy that the woman was referring to Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London in the sixteenth century, who was arrested as a heretic because he allowed dissenters to speak freely. He was burned at the stake with fellow heretic Hugh Latimer, who spoke the words to Ridley that the woman in the novel alludes to as her last words: "We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out" (p. 37). These words recall the Phoenix idea of rebirth by fire, since the woman's death proves to be an important factor in Guy's decision to investigate books. The words are ironic in the sense that the intellectual candle in Montag's world is burning rather dimly at the time, but the words are at the same time a fine statement of the indestructibility of questioners and thinkers in any society.

There are four specific Biblical allusions in the novel, and an examination of them shows that they both support the idea of the natural cycle and contribute to Bradbury's solution to helping us out of, or rather avoiding, the type of world pictured by the literary allusions. This solution would be the natural philosophical outlook that would be held by those who believe in a natural cycle to life and are in the midst of the bottom of a cycle: one must wait and have faith, since things will eventually improve.

Two of the Biblical allusions that support the idea of a philosophical faith in the renewal of cycles are the references to the Lilies of the Field (Matthew 6:28) and to the Book of Job. Saint Matthew's parable of the Lilies illustrates that God takes care of all things and we need not worry; the Lilies don't work or worry, yet God provides for them. This submission to faith, this feeling that God will provide all in due course is also affirmed by the reference to the Book of Job, one of the strongest statements of faith in the face of adversity in Western culture. Both of these references come at significant points in the novel. The allusion to the Lilies of the Field comes
as Guy is on his way to see Professor Faber. The Lilies are juxtaposed in
zeugma-like style with Denham's Dentifrice, an advertisement Guy sees on the
subway train. Both flash through his head and form an excellent contrast:
the faith and submission of the Lilies
and the artificiality and concern with
facades of the contemporary advertise-
ment jingle. After his clandestine meet-
ing with Faber, at which the professor
agrees to help Guy learn about books
and plan for the future, Guy gets a mes-
sage from Faber through the small ear-
plug he wears to keep in contact with
the teacher. The message simply says,
"The Book of Job," in a sense reminding
Guy that he must have faith, for the
going will be rough on his new venture.

THE two other Biblical allusions
come at the end of the novel, when
Guy has joined Granger and his col-
leagues. This group of men memorizes
great works of our culture as a means
of preserving ideas until literature is
once again permitted. Guy is assigned to
read and memorize the Book of Ecclesi-
estes, the Old Testament book that as-
serts the need to submit to the natural
order of things. The only direct quota-
tion from Ecclesiastes comes from Chap-
ter Three, the well-known chapter that
echoes the natural cycle idea in its open-
ing line, "To everything there is a season
..." The line comes to Guy as the men
trudge along in Canterbury-like pro-
cession away from the destroyed city,
each man being required to recite aloud
from his assigned work in order to bol-
ster their spirit and comradeship. Guy
thinks first of some phrases from Ec-
clesiastes, appropriately enough, "A time
to break down, and a time to build up,"
and "A time to keep silence and a time to
speak." Another quote then comes to
Guy, this one from the Book of Revela-
tions, which Guy had told Granger he
partially remembered:

And on either side of the river was
there a tree of life, which bore twelve
manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit
every month; And the leaves of the tree
were for the healing of nations (22:2) (p.
147).

This last book of the New Testament,
also known as the Book of the Apoc-
calyse, tells us that a victory of God is
certain, but that much struggle must
come first; we must have faith and en-
dure before we can enjoy the fruits of
victory. The lines Bradbury has Guy
recall not only reinforce the idea of a
cyclical world, but also give us a key to
Bradbury's hope that "the healing of
nations" can best come about through a
rebirth of man's intellect. We must use
our minds to halt the endless cycles of
destruction by warfare and rebirth to a
world of uneasy peace and intellectual
death. The twelve tribes of Israel wan-
dering in the desert seeking a new nation
can be recalled here as Montag, Granger,
and the others wander away from the
city with hope that their new world will
soon be established.

THE literary and Biblical references
cited form a pattern at first describing
the intellectual "darkling plain" of the
twenty-fourth century and then of fu-
ture hope and guarded optimism through
passively waiting. There are countless
references to the names of great books
and writers, all of whom were noted for
major ideas. The many specific lines
quoted on pages 94-97 constitute a spe-
cial case worth noting, since Bradbury
does not employ these passages in the
same way in which the other literary
quotes are used. On these pages, Beatty
tells Guy of a dream he had in which he
and Guy were engaged in a verbal duel
about the value of books, and for each
point Guy makes by citing a quote,
Beatty refutes him with another quote.
Again, Beatty's phenomenal knowledge

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enabling him to guide his destiny, goes, and he gives himself up to the logic (whatever it may be for the moment) of the exterior. For Pym, and perhaps this is truer of the modern condition than we care to admit, the world represents "the spirit of destruction"; it is a "world of functions and reactions only, a world without substance and human beings without individuality, an absurd world and essentially a nonhumanist one" (Laura Hofrichter, "From Poe to Kafka," p. 419). For Poe, it became imperative, having destroyed the world of appearance, to create a new world based on imagination and intuition. The test of Poe's world later rests in the consistency of the artistic order he establishes.³ For us, in a world of militarism abroad and increasing violence at home, it may also be imperative to attempt to impose order on chaos from a more imaginative and creative mental process than we now appear to be exercising.

³Suggestion conveyed orally to the writer by Prof. Arthur Robinson, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, 1968.

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is shown, as well as his tragic attitude toward the use of ideas and the value of dissent and controversy. Practically all of the lines cited on these four pages are from authors who were writing several centuries ago, men like Shakespeare, John Donne, and Robert Burton, perhaps showing Bradbury's affirmation of the timelessness of great ideas.

Fahrenheit 451 can serve the teacher in several ways in the classroom other than a study of the allusions. The use of reference works such as Bartlett's Familiar Quotations and the Concordance to the Bible could be taught by having students find the sources of specific quotations. Some of the major quotes could form excellent writing assignments, wherein students might be asked to show the relation of a particular quote to some of the major ideas in the book.

By studying the patterning of specific quotations in this novel, students can be made more aware of the need to read more closely and more intelligently. The novel provides a "good story" to be sure, yet the teacher can also use Fahrenheit 451 as a way of illustrating the difference between a good plot that makes a book readable and a carefully structured work of literature.