

Posthumanist Reading of *Fahrenheit 451*: A Critique of Human Ideals in Dystopian Context

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Abstract

This article tries examines Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 through the lens of posthumanist discourse, contrasting the philosophical ideals of humanism and posthumanism in a dystopian context. The novel presents a critique of dehumanisation and the erosion of critical thinking. Ray Bradbury represents humanist values through characters like Clarisse McClellan and Faber. In contrast to them, characters like Beatty and Mildred Montag represent posthumanist ideals. Guy Montag serves as a bridge between these two ideologies and highlighting the tension between posthumanist and humanist experience. The article suggests that Fahrenheit 451 serves as an alarming tale, urging a return to core humanist ideals in order to preserve the essence of humanity in an increasingly technologised world.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Humanism, Dystopia, Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451, Humanist Ideals, Humanist Values, Posthumanist Discourse

Discussion

Posthumanism is a critical thinking and a philosophy which evaluates human nature and redefines it in a posthumanist and technologically advanced society. Ray Bradbury is one of the most famous writers of America who wrote many novels in several genres including science fiction, fantasy, mystery, and horror. This research article tries to analyse Fahrenheit 451 with the point of view of posthumanistic discourses and to redefine human value system. It also brings out various insights about posthumanism and posthumanist critical and philosophical ideals.

Fahrenheit 451, by Ray Bradbury, is a dystopian novel set in a society where books are banned and burned by firemen. It depicts a dehumanised society lacking emotion, autonomy, critical thinking, humanity and the human ideals. It represents two contrasting characters Guy Montag and Clarisse McClellan. Dystopia is an antithetic term to ‘utopia’, an ideal and imagined place. Dystopia is defined as “an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives” (Merriam Webster, “Dystopia”). Dystopias are often filled with pessimistic views of the ruling class or a totalitarian government that is inhuman, brutal and uncaring of the people or the society.

In such a dystopia, Clarisse McClellan, through her character and thinking, represents the humanist ideals. Humanism centres on the

individuals' capacity for reason, morality, and self-expression. It is a philosophical ideology that emphasises the individual and social potential. It also emphasises the agency of human beings and human supremacy in the universe. It considers humans to be the starting point for a serious moral and philosophical inquiry. In twentieth century, humanism focuses on human well-being, freedom, happiness, autonomy and progress, human rights, freedom of speech, progressive political policies, and democracy.

Whereas, Guy Montag represents posthuman ideals. Posthuman ideals criticises the humanist ideals and believes that human beings are non-autonomous beings, lacking critical thinking and emotional values. It tries to deconstruct the idea of 'the human' and redefines humanity in the posthumanist era.

Posthumanist criticism tries to analyse how literary works or art represent society in posthuman condition and how humans connect themselves with the non-human members of the society. This also tries to analyse how human character, ideals and understanding has changed or evolved in the posthuman condition. Robert Pepperell defines posthuman condition as "a condition of existence in which we find ourselves once the posthuman era begins" (Pepperell, iv). According to Matthew E. Gladden, "Posthumanisation comprises the process by which a society comes to include members other than 'natural' biological human beings who, in one way or another, contribute to the structures, dynamics, or meanings of the society" (Gladden, 35). According to Braidotti, posthumanist critical theory starts from the assumption that "a new, subtler, and more complex relationship to our planetary dimension is now needed and a more egalitarian relationship to nonhuman others is called for" (Braidotti, 10).

Fahrenheit 451 opens with a very strong line "It was a pleasure to burn" (Bradbury, 1), which shows that the society is destructive in nature and people find pleasure in destruction in the dystopian condition. The burning of the books is not simply the destruction of the objects but of critical thinking and empathy.

The meaning of the word 'fireman' has also changed in the dystopian condition. Firemen, who usually serve and extinguish fire in the normal society, burn books in the dystopian society in the novel. They are the henchmen of the government which has banned and burns books. Rather than serving the society, they bring destruction to the society by burning books.

Ray Bradbury criticises the inverted human ideals in the dystopian society and contrasts humanist and posthumanist values. He tries to evaluate the human ideals of the past and how they have changed in the present society. The representatives of humanist ideals are a woman who hides books, Clarisse McClellan and Faber are criticised and seen as heretics of the society. A woman having some books in her house is found by the firemen. So, Montag and other firemen rush there to burn her house along with her books. The woman stays there with her books to be burned alive. She commits suicide. Rather than living a meaningless life in a dystopian and destructive society, she chooses death over life. On dying in fire along with her books, the woman says "We shall this day light the candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out" (Bradbury, 54), which was said by Latimer, a man burnt alive at Oxford in 1555 for heresy. They are the representatives of critical thinking, autonomy and emotion, which were once considered the important aspects of humanist ideals. But now these aspects are considered heresy in the dystopian society.

Beatty and other firemen represent posthumanist ideals. They have no critical thinking, sense of history and empathy. When asked about the nature of firemen of the past, Beatty does not bother about answering or understanding. Rather he is concerned only about the present conditions and blindly believes in rules and laws of the present government, which is autocratic and destructive.

Guy Montag stands as a bridge between posthumanist and humanist ideals. He begins to understand the real humanist values and ideals and what humanity is. His transformation from a

conforming fireman to a self-aware rebel begins after he burns a woman who keeps books with her along with her house. His transition from posthuman to human values is shown in a glimpse of an empathetic moment. He says, "I've tried to imagine just how it would feel. I mean to have firemen burn our houses and our books" (Bradbury, 46). He understands about the woman who died in fire along with the books she had kept and says, "She was as rational as you and I, more so perhaps, and we burned her" (Bradbury, 68).

Montag's lack of critical thinking is shown through his inability to read and understand books. So, he seeks the help of Faber, a Professor of English, to read and understand the books that he has taken from the houses he had burnt and kept in a secret stash. When Montag is found reading, Beatty asks him to burn his house. As Beatty tries to arrest Montag, he kills Beatty with a flamethrower and attacks other firemen and escapes with some books. Eventually, Montag becomes a heretic of the society and the government tries to hunt him down.

Montag manages to escape from their clutches and jumps into a river to drift downstream towards an abandoned and secret countryside. He meets a group of intellectual people called the "Book People", who have read and memorised the works of literature and philosophy. They hope that one day they may get a chance to dispense the knowledge they have gained through books and reinstate the old humanist ideals in the society of the future. Montag is also assigned to memorise the books and they have a mission to rebuild the civilisation.

Posthumanist ideals, represented by the characters Mildred, her friends, Beatty, and other firemen, are destructive, lacking critical thinking, emotions and empathy. According to these ideals, human beings are not distinguished from other members of the society. The mechanical hound, parlour walls and the beetles have become part and parcel of their lives. People fear the mechanical hound more than they fear the firemen or the government. The three-dimensional "parlour walls", a virtual screen on the walls of the house, and the "families" shown in the walls have become the members of the families of Mildred Montag and her friends. Mildred and her friends get addicted to the families and believe them to be real families rather than the fictional one.

Humanist ideals, represented by Clarisse McClellan, Faber, and the metamorphosed Montag, are autonomous, critical and constructive. They represent emotions and feelings and give importance to humanity and differentiate humans from other members of the society.

This research article understands that the human ideals in the dystopian condition is bifurcated by humanist and posthumanist ideals. They contrast with each other and present a stark reality that human condition and ideals are degenerating and needs an alarming change. The society has to revert to the old humanist ideals in order to save humanity from the destruction.

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