Fahrenheit 451 Novel Analysis

Posted on October 8, 2022

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Fahrenheit 451 is a 1953 novel written by Ray Bradbury, and it depicts the story of a dystopian society that is governed by the burning of books to curb the dangerous ideas that people develop through reading. The protagonist, Guy Montag, is a fireman who, instead of putting out fires, starts them to burn books. Instead of indulging in activities that foster independent thinking, people are hooked to a fast-paced life, with continuous exposure to wall-sized television sets and radio transmissions. The story starts with Montag's encounter with a 17-year-old girl named Clarisse McClellan. The impact of this meeting and the events that follow leave a transformational impact on Montag. The story progresses, and Montag's wife, Mildred, attempts suicide. He is further shocked when he sees an old woman choosing to be burned alive with her hidden stash of literature. His anguish increases as he learns about Clarisse's death in a car accident. Montag begins to search for answers in the stolen books to somehow ease his growing dissatisfaction with life. He indulges in a frenzy of reading after being discovered by his chief, Beatty.

With an ultimatum of twenty-four hours to read the stolen books, Montag asks his wife for help, who prefers to watch television instead. He then visits a retired English professor, Faber, who tells him that mere leisure reading is not enough; rather, he should develop the freedom to act upon the ideas presented in these books. Together, Faber and Montag come up with a plan to challenge the status quo. Amid the threat of war and his wife's betrayal, Montag escapes the city, reaching the "Book People". After the city is completely obliterated by the enemy's bombing, Montag, along with his friends, searches for survivors to rebuild a new world (Bradbury, 1953). Throughout the story plot, readers observe the character development of Guy Montag as he moves past the basic physiological needs and strives for higher-order needs. This essay aims to explore the character transformation of Montag in relation to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The essay further analyses the actions and conflicts resulting from these needs and their significance to Montag's journey towards self-actualization.

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Guy Montag

Before analyzing Montag's character in light of the hierarchy, some basic tenets of this theory are elaborated for clarification. Abraham Maslow introduced the concept of the hierarchy of needs, which postulates that human behaviour is driven by certain universal desires. These needs are presented in the form of a pyramid, with the base representing our basic needs. The basic physiological needs

encompass food and clothing, whereas the safety needs pertain to shelter, job security, etc. Moving up the hierarchy are the need to belong, esteem needs, and self-actualization. It is important to satisfy the basic needs before moving towards the higher-order needs (McLeod, 2020).

The narrative of Fahrenheit 451 follows the transformative journey of the protagonist, Guy Montag. A fireman by profession, he performs the role of censorship through book burning. At the beginning of the novel, Montag reflects upon the feeling associated with the burning of books and how, for him, it was a "pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed" (p. 11). These lines befittingly capture the character's initial disposition and fulfilment of safety needs. The character also identifies himself as a man of authority, as his position as a fireman commands respect and fear. This, too, is observed in his initial encounter with Clarisse, who realizes he is "just a man, after all" (p. 15). Montag takes pride in his work, and when Clarisse asks him if he reads the books before burning them, he laughs in disbelief at such a question as it is "against the law!" (p. 15). He ignores her when she inquires about the real purpose of a fireman's occupation of putting out fires rather than starting them. He appeals to his authority in response to her excessive questioning by saying, "Haven't you any respect?" (p. 16). Throughout this encounter, Montag displays amazement and confusion as Clarisse's questions challenge his worldview. Towards the end of the encounter, they witness an unlikely sight – a family sitting outside their house and talking. Montag reacts to this with a puzzling question, "But what do you talk about?" (p. 17). It is, however, Clarisse's final question, "Are you happy?" that makes Montag reflect on something more personal, i.e., his dysfunctional relationships, including his marriage (p. 17). This exchange between Montag and Clarisse makes him question not only his own beliefs but also the society he lives in. He transitions from a fireman who burns books to a reader who seeks comfort and consolation within them. He moves beyond the norms of society as a criminal who kills his boss and becomes an outcast, joining the book-readers community.

In the society where Montag lived, his basic physiological needs were met through the provision of food, clothing, and leisure, and safety needs were satisfied through a house, a job that commanded authority, and job safety, which he depicts in his initial interaction with Clarisse. However, the simple state of being unhappy pinpoints the presence of unmet needs. His unrealized frustration can be attributed to his need for love and belongingness, a desire to have a family, which he shares that his wife "just never wanted any children at all" before changing the topic altogether (p. 36). His need for love is also observed in his interaction with Mildred when he is incapacitated by depression and asks his wife to turn off the parlour and give him an aspirin. To this, the wife responds, "That's my family" (p. 56). This interaction gives the readers an insight into his relationship with his wife and his unsatisfied need to be nurtured.

Since the hierarchy of needs suggests that love and belongingness must be fulfilled before moving to esteem needs, Montag's introspections made him realize that he did not have any true relationships. He could not associate any true meaning with anything that he did. Consequently, he no longer wanted to be a fireman and lost his sense of identity, which was formed by societal demands and based on his fear of rejection. The esteem needs that seem to be fulfilled initially crumble as the

character faces extreme isolation. During this time of despair, Montag seeks a life purpose and reaches out to Faber, who guides him toward a rebellious scheme. This gives Montag a renewed purpose – the purpose of reaching a state of self-actualization that started the moment Montag stole his first book from the burning house. Faber's role in helping the character's development is also important as he helps Montag understand the importance of literature and freedom of thought. He instilled in him the spirit to challenge the status quo and find the true meaning in life. Although Montag becomes an outcast and is chased by mechanical hounds, it gives him the "strangest pleasure", and "he watched the scene, fascinated" (p. 148). This exhilaration is what he had never felt before – the "purpose" that was missing. In the end, Montag joins the reader's community, where he feels a sense of belonging and dreams of building a new civilization.

References

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McLeod, S. (2020). *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*. Retrieved from Simply Psychology: https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html