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Vinski, Petra

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Petra Vinski

Censorship in Contemporary American Novels:

The Handmaid's Tale and Fahrenheit 451

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Supervisor:

Dr.sc. Lovorka Gruić-Grmuša

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Abstract

When it comes to literature, especially dystopian literature, which is the main focus in this paper, there is a strong relation with censorship. Dystopian narrative, to which the two novels which are the focus of this paper belong, can be seen as the product of the terrors of the 21st century (Moylan xi). Furthermore, Claeys explained the term *dystopia*, claiming how it portrays an extremely negative or evil fictional state usually dominated by fear (7). Those societies are often under a totalitarian regime, which imposes many rules which are supposed to secure the safety and wellbeing of the citizens, but in fact, it just keeps them uncertain and afraid. Furthermore, censorship in dystopian literature is used by government or powerful groups to control societies easily. Well-informed citizen becomes a dangerous one since information and knowledge are power. Thus, books, media, even speech are censored and regulated. This happens in the two novels which are the main focus of this paper - *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Fahrenheit 451*. In these works, literature is perceived as a threat and the inhabitants of the society under totalitarian regimes are not allowed to read or even possess books.

Introduction

Dystopian literature is known for depicting societies which are under a totalitarian regime. The governments use various methods of controlling their citizens and imposing laws which will enable peaceful states in the countries in question. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* belong to that type of novels. In them, among different methods, censorship is used as a way of controlling the society as the inhabitants are not allowed to read and books are forbidden. The focus of this paper is censorship in these two novels and the effect it has on the societies.

First, I shall define censorship and explain it further, providing a historical overview of it, after which my focus shall be on censorship in these two novels. In both novels, censorship is one of the main themes. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the new society is not allowed to read books or write and any opportunity of reading or being exposed to words has been eliminated. The rules regarding censorship and rules in general are especially harsh and strict towards women, making them more oppressed. The society in *Fahrenheit 451* is also not allowed to read or even possess books, which is highly punishable. Thus, the job description of firemen changes, as their new task is to burn all the remaining books. Censorship helped to create societies where the vast majority of the inhabitants follows blindly what they are told. The inhabitants are either too fearful, too powerless or just already too lost to try to stand up against the regimes. I shall describe the societies in the novels, since they are quite peculiar and it is crucial that I explain it in order to understand of the whole novel. I shall discuss reasons why the societies in the novels decided to ban books and who did it and describe the impact it has on the societies. The two novels are my primary literature, but other works will be used as my secondary literature. After discussing both novels, I shall offer a conclusion with a comparison of both novels.

1. Censorship

The most important term of this paper is censorship. It can be found in both novels as a method of controlling the population used by the government. However, apart from being used in novels, censorship as such has been known for a very long time in human history. It can best be defined as the changing or the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is deemed subversive of the common good (Anastaplo 2014). It is imposed by any kind of the authority, such as the government or people in high places. It carries strong political connotations, as its aim is to restrict and control the content proclaimed as inappropriate and potentially harmful. Usually, the governments use censorship to protect themselves and ensure that a certain level of peace will exist among people. Thus, the rules which prevent the circulation of harmful content are imposed and people in charge make sure that others will be aware of punishments awaiting those who break the rules. The content censored usually varies from sexual, political to religious, depending on the function of censorship.

Even though censorship seems as a modern technique, it has been present in the societies dating back to the Ancient period, where it did not have as negative connotations as it has today. In Ancient Rome, it regulated the morals of the citizens counted and classified (Anastaplo 2014).

In Medieval periods, the biggest threat to nations were, among wars, people, intellectuals who tried to provoke the Church about current states of affair. Thus, the aim of censorship was to prevent ideas perceived as heretical and blasphemous. Such ideas were related to distrust in Deities and Christian dogmas. In both periods, those who did not obey the rules were punished and they served as an example and warning to other people. Roman Catholic Church even issued the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Anastaplo 2014), which contained a list of forbidden books. Still today, there are lists of books banned from countries or schools.

Censorship does not only apply to books, but also to newspapers, the media which is, in almost every country, censored up to a certain degree. Restricting news means restricted knowledge, and, in certain occasions, that works for the benefit of the authorities.

Censorship does not end with written language. Speech can also be regulated and censored. Restrictions of racial, sexual or even social nature are implied even in the simplest conversation in almost every community in the world. Still, that is very different from the restrictions the governments place, since each inhabitant is entitled to freedom of speech. Forbidding it is breaking the law by the governments in a way.

Censorship was evident in events before and during the Second World War. Nazi Germany and the kingdom of Italy were under a fascist regime and societies were experiencing severe censorship of spoken and written word. On May 10th 1943, a public burning took place in ten university towns throughout Germany (History 1996). People gathered books which were declared as Un-German, containing ideas which differed from Nazi ideology. Most of the authors were from Jewish descent, but the "cleansing by fire" included authors such as Thomas Mann, Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, Bertolt Brecht, Ernest Hemingway and many others. Among speeches held that night, one could hear sentences as such: *The future German man will not just be a man of books, but a man of character. It is to this end that we want to educate you.* (History 1996).

During that time, Russia was under Stalin's reign. Under that regime, the society experienced serious restrictions, ranging from media censorship, education restriction to the general lack of freedom. Even though the quality of life changed, the price for that was a paranoid atmosphere and a fear of being sent to camps, which were used as a punishment or because someone disobeyed the rules (Trueman 2017).

There are many other totalitarian regimes which used censorship as a method of controlling the population, but for the sake of the topic of this paper, I shall not get into great details, since I believe that the two previous points are enough to make a correlation between censorship in actual totalitarian regimes as opposed to ones in dystopian literature.

2. *The Handmaid's Tale*

2.1. The walking wombs in Gilead

Margaret Atwood said how she had a rule while writing *The Handmaid's Tale*: *I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not already exist.* (Haunted 2012). The novel was published in 1985 and the events in it are taking place some twenty years later. Atwood's dystopian vision depicts a society under a religious totalitarian regime where women are the most oppressed part of the society. The new society is a patriarchy which reminds of Puritan New England. Women lost rights they previously had, such as jobs and financial freedom. Social classes and hierarchy changed and a new hierarchy took place. The narrator of this novel, Offred, is a part of that new society. Even though she is more focused on retelling her own story, it is possible to deduct how the United States of America became Gilead, a fundamentalist Christian theocracy.

Gilead brought forth many new changes, both in form and in spirit. After the old classes became obsolete, everyone had to conform to their new position and to every position, certain forms of behaviour applied. People were not allowed to act in a different way than they were supposed to. Having in mind that Gilead's tenet is returning to traditional values, the society is patriarchal in organisation. Men and women each have their own classes and women depend on the class of their husbands, but also on the fertility and age. Men were divided according to the status they had before and the importance and influence they had or certain military accomplishments. Any marriage beyond the first, accepted by church was annulled and if the couple had any children, they were taken away. According to these divisions, the following classes were created:

Commanders. Highest-ranked men, granted a handmaid. They are valued for their contribution to the society and in the *Historical notes*, the reader is informed that they took part in creating Gilead.

Angels. Highly-valued men who served in war, heroes of the community.

Guardians. Lower status members of a household of a Commander, leading solitary lives.

Eyes. Mysterious figures, who serve the secret police which intimidate people. Their name evokes Christian idea that God sees all.

There are other men, who have not been sent to the Colonies, who work as doctors who are in charge of checking Handmaid's health once a month, but men outside these classes are not mentioned.

Wives. Highest ranked women, elite, due to their marriage to a Commander. They organise a household and hopefully become mothers.

Daughters. They are daughters of the Handmaids, but they belong to the Wives.

Econowives. Wives of lower-ranked men, combination of a Martha, a Wife and a Handmaid; their duties are domestic, they do all the work.

Marthas. Infertile women, a part of the household of a Commander, who clean and cook.

Aunts. After Wives, highest ranked women. Elderly women who chose that job, either because they wholeheartedly believe in the new system, or in fear of being sent to the Colonies.

Unwomen. Women exiled to the Colonies. They are elderly women, or scientists, nuns or lesbians which didn't want to choose any other option.

Women at Jezebel's, prostitutes. Younger infertile women who opted for working as prostitutes at a place which offers such services to Commanders.

Another very important aspect of the society lies in its history, the history of the creation of Gilead. First the President and the Congress were assassinated. It left America with no leaders and the Constitution was suspended. Offred mentioned how people were blaming the Islamic fanatics, but there was no proof. The first changes were subtle but progressive (Howells 52) and very effective. First, women lost all their jobs. Offred also mentioned how she had noticed an increase in the number of army outside. But that army was a foreign one, which implied that somebody else was in charge of the country. Women lost the right to own money or property. All was transferred to their next of kin, leaving women feeling powerless. In the meantime, Rachel and Leah centres, for re-education of Handmaids, were just becoming active. Since the vast majority did not fully understand what was happening and there were no attempts of revolt. The few protests which took place were hushed quickly by the effective military.

In the *Historical Notes*, the epilogue of the novel, the end of Gilead is explained. It is the year 2295 and there is a historical symposium taking place, where professor Pieixoto talks about *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is how they call Offred's story. Originally, it was found in a metal footlocker in a form of cassettes, which were later reassembled by Pieixoto and his colleague, after an antiquarian reconstructed a machine with which they could listen to the cassettes. They tried to uncover Offred's true identity, or the identity of the Commander, but with no success. However, they have crucial information about the constitution of Gilead. Sons of Jacob, a secret organisation provided the ideas for the foundations of the society and philosophy of Gilead Sexually transmitted diseases, birth control pills, abortions, but also environmental problems such as air pollution, toxic waste, all of that caused the decrease in fertility rate. Pre-Gileadean period had alternate birth services, such as fertility clinics and artificial insemination (Atwood 243) but they were outlawed as irreligious. However, surrogates, i.e. Handmaids, were kept as the only legitimate option. The idea of Handmaids

comes from a line from the Bible. Since one of the main ideas of the founders of Gilead was to increase the number of population and they used a "more Christian" concept for it.

Despite the fact that Gilead is organized as a patriarchy, when it comes to re-education of the Handmaids, Aunts are the ones with the authority because it was believed the indoctrination would be more efficient if conducted by a person of the same sex. Aunts' names were taken from domestic products women use, as to establish a false notion of familiarity. Aunts use propaganda to show Handmaids how they were treated unfairly before. The notion of protection is ironic, since the army standing outside is not there for the safety of the citizens, but for ensuring that they would not try to break the rules.

Now Handmaids wear scarlet uniforms, nun-like garb (Theis 138) which cover their whole body. Red is the colour of blood and life. On their heads they wear white wings, which restrict their vision. Perhaps the best sentence to describe the life of Handmaids now would be that on Claeys: *Dehumanization is the essence of the Handmaid's life* (476).

Gilead's founders created social events for the inhabitants, which create a routine, whose purpose is occupying and controlling. Every household which has a Handmaid has a monthly ceremony during Handmaid's fertile days when they must engage in an intercourse with her Commander and hopefully become pregnant. There are other events, such as Prayvanzas, where women gather, Birth Ceremonies or even Salvagings, where Handmaids are forced to kill a person, accused of rape, which serves as their outlet.

People as nuns, older women who aren't married and fertile, scientists, homosexuals and racial minorities were unwanted and removed from the society. They were sent to the Colonies, to clean toxic waste or to pick cotton or fruit. To the rest of the society, Colonies were portrayed as hell for living people, which became an effective method of control by fear.

Since the inhabitants cannot publicly express their unhappiness and reach others, they can only talk in secrecy about it. There are two organizations, the Underground Femaleroad,

whose main task is smuggling women across the borders of Gilead, usually to Canada, and *Mayday*, secret organization which is trying to show resistance to the regime, which allegedly has members among the highest ranks. The leaders are unknown, but seemingly everyone knows about it.

In the society like this, living under strict surveillance after previous brainwashing, the ideology of the architects of Gilead came to life just like they previously wanted. People are highly disciplined and the vast majority does not even try to break any rules out of fear. Offred does her daily duties seemingly with no resistance, but in her mind, she would like to try to do something. During the novel, the impacts of the regime can be noticed in every thought she has. Even though she is surrounded by people, the isolation she experiences is extreme. The calm, rigid and almost brutal way of Gilead's politics stand in contrast with Offred's thoughts, full of despair and anger, longing for any proper human contact. Retelling that story is in a way, rebellion against the society and patriarchy (Day, Green-Barteet, Montz 11), since she has no other way of rebellion. After all, her thoughts are not hard to understand having in mind all that has happened to her.

2.2. Nolite te bastardes carborundorum

In the end of the novel, in *Historical Notes*, the reader realizes that Offred's story was recorded after she went into the Black van. The reason her story did not come in a form of diary or letters is because she was not allowed to read or to write. Any books, magazines or any written published materials are banned in Gilead. Thus, censorship became a very efficient method for controlling the society, keeping them focused only on Gilead's propaganda and their own mind.

Much like any other restriction in Gilead, literary censorship is also well thought-through. There are no letters or words anywhere, in houses or outside. When Handmaids go on their daily grocery shopping trips, they are given tokens for supplies. They identify shops by the signs hanging outside, with drawn items on them. The consistency in removing words from their everyday life is evident everywhere. *They put the picture in the window when they have something, take it away when they don't. Sign language.* (Atwood 131). Reading became a forbidden past time activity.

In her room in Commander's home, she noticed the carving on the floor which says *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.* (Atwood 43). That small carving on the floor gives her pleasure and even joy and in that way, it becomes her prayer. It felt like a revolt against the regime, to read in secret. In her mind, that is a message, possibly in Latin, which the previous Handmaid left for her. Later she discovers that it means *Don't let the bastards grind you down*, which Commander showed to the previous Handmaid.

There is another thing in her room which has a word on it. It is an older, worn out cushion with a word FAITH on it. She wonders, *it's the only thing they've given me to read. If I were caught doing it, would it count?* (Atwood 47). The Commander and his household would not overlook such a thing and place a cushion with a word on it, so the word *faith* given to a Handmaid feels like an irony.

Reading is only allowed during the Ceremony by the Commander. First, he opens the box with a key, since the Bible is kept locked up. *It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read.* (Atwood 70). The comparison with a weapon shows how powerful books are, but also how dangerous they seemed.

A change came for Offred when the Commander wanted to see her alone in his study, which was highly punishable. Commander's wish was a simple game of Scrabble. In the

society where reading is forbidden, it is very interesting that Commander chose a game where each player has a few letters and needs to form a word on the board in front. Moreover, his room contains books: *But all around the walls, there are bookcases. They're filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in the plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of forbidden. I try not to stare.* (Atwood 111). Keeping books might be purely sentimental, but also a way of making himself powerful; he owns something forbidden and he feels like he cannot be harmed because of it. Also, he says how literature in his possession is dangerous, while masses could use it to do harm. However, in Historical Notes, it is mentioned that Commander Waterford, who is believed to be the Commander Offred is talking about, was accused in one of the earliest purges for owning literary material.

However, since Offred is not allowed to see books and read, the decision to play Scrabble is perhaps a way of protecting himself. By choosing precisely that game, the Commander made sure that Offred could not tell that to anybody else, as she would also be punished because of the contact with words. The motivation for such an act turns out to be a simple wish to make Offred's life more bearable. The impact of censorship is evident while Offred was trying to remember the words while playing Scrabble: *It was like using a language I'd once known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world.* (Atwood 123).

On one occasion, he gave her a glossy magazine and Offred remembered she used to read them before but not paying much attention and forgetting what she read the next day, stressing how she did not consider such magazines noteworthy. Now, she felt something different: *I wanted it with a force that made the ends of my fingers ache.* (Atwood 124). She was cautious while reading them, but noticed the Commander looked at her as if it was a sexual act, not reading.

Besides not being able to read or write, the citizens of Gilead experienced other

aspects of censorship. Spoken language also became censored. The biggest change were the fixed phrases which people were supposed to use, such as comments about the weather: *We have been sent good weather., Which I receive with joy* or greetings: *Blessed be the day, Under His Eye, Praise be* and such. Deviating from the prescribed conversation is highly suspicious and people can notify the authorities about any suspicious behaviour. Offred felt afraid to ask something more from Ofglen, her shopping partner. Going in pairs serves as a protection, company, but ultimately, they are each other's spies, making any friendly relations almost impossible. Although Offred managed to establish a contact with Ofglen, it took a lot of time, good timing and courage to even try to deduct if another is truly a religious Handmaid. She was afraid that she may have been reported to the authorities. The spoken censorship is in fact, a highly effective method. People cannot share information about the regime so they cannot start a rebellion that easily, due to the constant supervision.

Every society has taboo topics or things that usually are not discussed out loud. With freedom of speech being restricted, certain words became too dangerous to be said out loud. Thinking about the national anthem made Offred wonder about the word *freedom*. Such songs and words became forbidden: *They are considered too dangerous. They belong to the outlawed secrets.* (Atwood 44). The idea of freedom is dangerous, since people can realize just how restricted they are.

Another word which became forbidden was *sterile*. When Offred came to the monthly appointment to the doctor, he suggested he tries to impregnate her, since the Commander might be *sterile*. It shocked Offred, since *there is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law.* (Atwood 50).

One of the rules concerning Handmaids includes the change in their names, since they are not allowed to use their birth names. Their new names, such as Offred, Ofglen, Ofwaren,

consist of the prefix *Of* and the first name of their Commander. Thus, the names are identification tags, reminding them whom they belong to. So, even their own names are, in a way censored. Offred does not reveal her real name during the novel, but she does wonder about not being able to use her own name: *This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past.* (Atwood 68). For her, it became a memory, a coping mechanism. Not being able to use your name and using a name which makes a person feel like someone's property is an effective method of oppression used by Gilead.

Finally, as expected, the media is highly censored too. In Commander's household, the only instance where watching the news is allowed is on the day of the Ceremony. They watch the operatives cracking an underground espionage organization successfully. Making a live broadcast seems like a brave decision, but as Offred wonders: *They only show us victories, not defeats. Who wants bad news?* (Atwood 66). Since the country is in charge of the media, the inhabitants are kept under control; they cannot get access to any useful information about state of affairs in Gilead, which is the aim of the authorities.

Atwood decided to finish Offred's story on an uncertain note. Perhaps the Black van which came for her was Mayday, so she was able to tell her story, perhaps she recorded it differently. The futuristic society of the 23rd century seems to have learned from the events before, as there is no censorship. However, there is a hint of irony in Professor's Pieixoto and his colleague being the one to present her story. The two of them arranged the cassettes in an order which is logical to them, but not necessarily correct. Once again Offred's story, and life, was in hands of men who were allowed to do with it how they pleased. Pieixoto does not even try to hide the dissatisfaction he feels because Offred was too focused on her emotions, not the state of the country, making her, long time after she lived, again misunderstood and laughed upon, showing that some issues are still left untouched.

3. *Fahrenheit 451*

3.1. Society of the three-walled television

In the beginning of the novel, the protagonist Guy Montag says: *It was a pleasure to burn.* (Bradbury 4). He experiences that pleasure during his job as fireman in America in the 24th century. In Bradbury's futuristic vision, firemen's job is not to put down a fire; they are the ones who cause it by burning all the remaining books ever since they became banned. Besides working, he spends his days at home with his wife, Mildred. However, their relationship is very far from marital bliss. It seems very cold and distant, since she is only interested in her three-walled television, which provides daily entertainment. Montag does not seem so affected by the entertainment, which makes him different from the rest of the society. The vast majority of his society seems infected with one quite modern disease, entertainment, through which the authorities can control the society and impose ideas which they unknowingly accept.

Seemingly, there is no government or authority which is imposing these rules. There is no mention of a strict dictator whose figure frightens people. The inhabitants just seem to already be living in a regime which completely brainwashed them years ago. The blame for the state of the country is placed on someone else. Zipes wrote: *Humanity is the issue.* (Zipes 190). All that the government does at that point in time is simply monitoring the rest of the inhabitants to make sure that all rules are followed. Also, the eventual breaking of rules is always punished. What the reader sees is the aftermath of a totalitarian regime which succeeded and the society after years of living under such a regime. The society seems eerily quiet, with no protest and rebellions.

The society has a few main notions which define it. The first one could be the notion of *happiness*. Here, a happy citizen means a quiet, obedient citizen who will believe he is

living a happy life. Thus, the citizen will not spend his time wondering about the true state of his country because the realisations could lead to dissatisfaction and revolt against the regime.

In order to keep citizens quiet and content with their lives, the authorities decided to use entertainment. The television sets got larger and larger and the programs eventually became interactive.

The effect of television is evident in Mildred, Montag's wife. She calls people on television her family, while her relationship with her husband is extremely cold. For her, television is her life, nothing important waits outside of her three walls. Another form of entertainment is the Seashell radio. That is a radio in a form of small headphones which emit radio signals. She uses it before sleep. The purpose was to keep people occupied all the time, from the moment they leave their television, they can just put on the Seashell radio and unknowingly continue listening to the same propaganda as before.

The technological advancements in this novel are used for controlling and monitoring the society, but also for further implantation of propaganda and ideology.

Apart from happiness, another notion is the one of *sameness*. Individuality is negative, everyone should be equal. *Each man the image of every other; then all are happy.* (Bradbury 45). The intellectuals were starting to get looked down on. It is also another highly effective way of controlling the society. If everyone is the same and everyone follows the same rules, there should be no problems, since people would not try to rebel if nobody else does. Officer Beatty talks about “nipping people who are different in the bud” early so that any chance of them growing up and defying the rules is brought down to zero. Children are taken from a very young age and placed in kindergartens, where the brainwashing starts in order to enable the successful creation of obedient and ignorant citizens.

As mentioned before, the relations between people are almost non-existent. The biggest difference is seventeen-year-old Clarisse McClellan, Montag's new neighbour. To a

modern reader, Clarisse is just a normal teenager, curious, talkative and up to a degree, peculiar. However, in Montag's society, she is an anomaly. She asks him if he ever observed nature, tells him her family is odd because they talk a lot to each other and asks him if he knew that long time ago, firemen used to put down the fires and she wonders if he truly is happy. She is aware of more things than Montag, even though she is much younger.

When Mildred tried to commit suicide, two technicians who used a snake-like machine explained: *We get these cases nine or ten a night. Got so many, starting a few years ago, we had the special machines built.* (Bradbury 11). The suicidal tendencies show how truly unhappy the society is. The majority of the society is just empty and lacking any idea of purpose. Perhaps the best term to describe the society is *the living death* (Bloom 11).

The lack of any literature created a society without imagination, with no respect for anything other than present time. Front porches do not exist anymore since people do not talk to each other. People drive fast cars and there are no pedestrians. With no ability to think critically or to grasp serious ideas, the population does not even seem to be aware of the fact that the new war is on their doorstep. There is news about the war, Mildred's friend's husbands will be gone to war, but they are not worried. They believe that it's always someone else's husbands that die. While discussing such topics, there is a lack of emotion in people, as death does not seem very problematic or sad. They burn people after death and spray their ashes in the air. There is no grief in death, but there is definitely no joy in life either. Just plain emotionless and purposeless existence which reminds of a puppet. The puppeteer pulls the strings and the population dances to the music of puppeteer's choice. However, here the music is replaced by the tones of commercials and dull TV shows and the puppets are just floating in the void of nothingness. Ironically, the only faith lies within a man who works on the side of the oppressors, Guy Montag.

3.2. Salamander, Mechanical Hound and public bonfires

In this new society, a sight of a house on fire no longer worries people. It is now a sign of someone breaking the law and owning books. It is possible to observe not only the impact the censorship has, but also to understand the perspective of someone who is aiding the authorities in conducting censorship. Montag at first has no doubts about his job, he loves the smell of kerosene and the feeling of burning books. That lasts until two events, when he talked with Clarisse and when he was called to burn books owned by an elderly lady, who decided she would rather burn with her books than live without them. Montag felt shocked by the woman's deeds and found himself stealing a book from her. Both as a fireman and as a citizen, Montag broke the law. In society where numbing entertainment is the main aspect of life, there is no room for literature, but nobody is missing it.

Even though there is no depiction of the government, the firemen have the role of the authority and *keepers of peace* (Zipes 187). They remind of secret agents and they maintain the censorship. Their helmets have a number 451 written on them, which is the temperature at which paper burns. Their uniforms are fireproof, with symbolic phoenix and salamander on it and the hose they carry spews kerosene, not water. They answer the calls, which other citizens make, and they rush to a house, which is fireproof and burn all the books they find there. As Montag notices, *Always at night the alarm comes. Never by day! Is it because the fire is prettier by night? More spectacle, a better show?* (Bradbury 30). Just like the offenders were publicly hung in *The Handmaid's Tale*, to serve to others as a warning, here, the burnings are like a bonfire, a public spectacle where people would join to observe the destroying of books, which serves also as a warning to others what can happen to them.

Firemen possess one of the most advanced devices, called the Mechanical Hound. *The Mechanical Hound slept but did not sleep, lived but did not live. ... Light flickered on bits of*

ruby glass and on sensitive capillary hairs in the nylon-brushed nostrils of the creature that quivered gently, gently, gently, its eight legs spidered under it on rubber-padded paws. (Bradbury 19) Its purpose is to catch any fugitives with a *nose so sensitive the Mechanical Hound can remember and identify ten thousand odour-indexes on ten thousand men without re-setting!* (Bradbury 99). Just like the police has the tracking dogs, the firemen, which took over the role of the peace keepers, have their Mechanical Hounds which can either tranquilize or kill a subject with an injection.

When Montag stole a book, Beatty explained that this was not a sole incident he had, *A natural error. Curiosity alone," said Beatty. "We don't get over-anxious or mad. We let the fireman keep the book twenty-four hours. If he hasn't burned it by then, we simply come and burn it for him.* (Bradbury 48). But would the firemen get curious in the first place if they have read books before and formed an opinion about them themselves? They are, in a sense, fighting against something they do not understand. In Montag's case, he says that both his father and grandfather were firemen, which is where his urge to join the firemen's division comes from. Moreover, even though what they are fighting against is forbidden, most of them are not even slightly anxious or curious to discover more about their "enemy".

The official history about banning books is explained by officer Beatty, Montag's boss. He claims that the minorities became offended by certain books and these books got banned first. Writers had to turn to a different kind of literature for larger masses, making the quality of books very low. That could be seen as the first step of censorship, banning certain themes. After that, people just lost interest in books in general, as the technology got more and more advanced and books were replaced by three-dimensional pop-up magazines, some of them containing sexual topics and comic books. Finally, as the writers stopped writing, the overall literature was banned. *Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. Today, thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time, you are allowed to read*

comics, the good old confessions, or trade journals. (Bradbury 44). The goal of life, presented by the authorities, was happiness, and books stood in the way of an individual living a happy and fulfilling life.

From Beatty's presentation of the issue, censorship was the people's fault. Indeed, somebody had to ban literature and order a statement to burn it, but the fact remains that the initial displeasure came from the people. *Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord.* (Bradbury 65). However, this is the version presented to Montag by Beatty, whose intentions are not always clear, and since he provided information about firemen which are not true, his story about the banning of the books does not need to be true, since he is the only one who presented it. On the other side, he is an officer and to have him believing in the regime and its history is needed so that he can control others.

The character of Beatty stands in the opposition with Montag. As Montag becomes a hero, Beatty's character grows more and more sinister. Montag's odd behaviour triggers Beatty and he realizes that Montag stole a book. They have a 24-hour policy on returning the book. Beatty does not hide the fact that he read before, but he claims: *I've had to read a few in my time, to know what I was about, and the books say nothing! Nothing you can teach or believe. They're about non-existent people, figments of imagination, if they're fiction. And if they're non-fiction, it's worse, one professor calling another an idiot, one philosopher screaming down another's gullet. All of them running about, putting out the stars and extinguishing the sun. You come away lost.* (Bradbury 47). His understanding of books has a few very important notions. First, the fact that books are a work of *fiction* is negative in their society. The fact that books contain imagined people and situations makes them so hard to understand, which is a problem to the society which wants fast solution with less thinking. He also explains how *the people in those books never lived* (Bradbury 30) even though that is

completely understandable and expected, but to him, it is a strong argument against books. That is why he mentions getting lost; books just became too complex for people and openness for interpretation stopped being positive. From their perspective, non-fiction books do not have anything useful and they deepen the gap between people, since writers argue about their theories in books.

As Wood wrote, *Television concerns itself with the ephemeral present and thus follows the trend towards forgetting the past.* (Bloom 48). For them, books are the humanity's past, written by authors who are mostly deceased and the topic deal with something relevant long time ago. They do not see a reason to read books and learn from them, as they are only concerned with present and only able to focus on it.

Almost every character in the novel presents a unique position towards literature and censorship. The lack of interest in books is especially evident with Mildred. Even though she is not interested in anything besides television and her "family", Montag managed to persuade her to read books he stole. She proved to be incapable of understanding literature by saying: *Books aren't people. You read and I look around, but there isn't anybody!* (Bradbury 50).

Mildred's two friend came over and after a heated discussion, Montag decided to recite a poem *Dover beach*, which left them baffled and speechless. The end result is that they became really angry, calling poetry *silly words, silly words, silly awful hurting words... Not enough hurt in the world, you got to tease people with stuff like that!* (Bradbury 76). The fact that the words hurt them means that it indeed provoked a reaction, and it was a negative one in the end.

For Mildred, Mrs. Bower and Mrs. Phelps, the only thing they will read are the scripts for the shows they watch, which ask them to contribute to the show by reading one of the suggested answers. The purpose of it is more than interactive, as the government can impose certain ideas over a show like that and people will accept them while being entertained. It is

also important to note that even though books are forbidden, it is allowed only because the purpose is further indoctrination. The two of them, along with Mildred, represent that part of the society which is already lost, they are empty shells living on easy entertainment and saying yes to further brainwashing without even realising it. That makes them the role-model citizens in the eyes of the government.

There is another character who definitely is not the ideal citizen. His name is Faber and he is a former English professor, still in love with books. Montag decided to contact him since he needed guidance and help in understanding what he read. Faber is portrayed as a voice of reason and Montag's teacher. Faber presents, with Clarisse and Montag, hope for literature and hope for future generations, since he had already devised a plan to print forgotten books in a nearby town.

Throughout the novel, Bradbury gave one of the most peculiar thoughts about literature to Faber. While talking to Montag, he said: *The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us.* (Bradbury 61). *So now do you see why books are hated and feared? They show the pores in the face of life. The comfortable people want only wax moon faces, poreless, hairless, expressionless.* (Bradbury 62). The importance of books is that they show the reality. Negative aspects are still a vital part of life. He also noticed how there is no leisure time, since television has people occupied from the moment they come home. The complexity of books stands in contrast with numbing entertainment. *It is immediate, it has dimension. It tells you what to think and blasts it in. It must be, right. It seems so right. It rushes you on so quickly to its own conclusions your mind hasn't time to protest, 'What nonsense!'* (Bradbury 62). Faber is the true intellectual, who has to fight from shadows, since he became a part of the endangered human species.

Since there are no books anymore, the events from the past cannot be validated, so the society slowly becomes the one living on oral tradition only, allowing the passing of false information. It also allows people to alter a story to their own benefit. Thus, the book on the rules on firemen says: *Established, 1790, to burn English-influenced books in the Colonies. First Fireman: Benjamin Franklin.* (Bradbury 27). Even though this is untrue, people will still believe it.

That raises another problem, even false knowledge is power, if used correctly (Bloom 33). Officer Beatty, perhaps the most interesting character, knows how to use information to his benefit. He is ruthless and intelligent, using knowledge to manipulate people and even altering information if he needs it. He does not try to hide his knowledge about books, claiming how it is needed because of his position. Beatty took over the role of the antagonist of this novel. He is the authority which is not to be doubted or undermined and most of his perspectives on literature weren't proven wrong. He believes that *a book is a loaded gun in the house next door.* (Bradbury 41), which can be taken ironically since his knowledge of books is, from Montag's perspective, a danger to Montag. Beatty is a dangerous man, due to his high position in the society and knowledge. Another interesting point is his influence in the society. While discussing about certain topics with Montag, he says: *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 46). He is the representation of the regime and he knows how the society and the government function.

Beatty's almost tyrannical nature is best shown the firemen are called to a new mission. Montag soon sees his house; Mildred set the alarm. There, Beatty makes Montag burn his own house and while doing so, he feels extreme pleasure in destroying the television. During an argument, Montag burned officer Beatty in self-defence, just like he burned all those books in his ten-year career. However, Beatty showed no resistance, even seemed

pleased to die, making him another character with vast knowledge which ultimately made him unhappy and suicidal.

However, one part of Montag is utmost peculiar. Montag revealed that he has around twenty books hidden in his house. Since he took only one from the old woman, it is hard to believe that he would take all twenty from one place. Thus, he must have been taking them for some time, even before he talked to Clarisse. That makes him a character with rebellious instincts even before the beginning of the novel, and his instinct and willpower helped him in achieving the rest.

After Montag escaped the Mechanical Hound, he found the outcasts on the other side of the river. There he met Granger, former writer and intellectual. Granger explained the purpose of their group; their aim is to preserve books. Each of them took up a task or memorizing a book, after which they burn it, so that they could not be harmed. Then they orally transmit it to others. *We're nothing more than dust-jackets for books, of no significance otherwise.* (Bradbury 113). The future of literature lies in the hand, or to be more exact, minds, of these people. They identify themselves by the names of the books they represent. They will take care for themselves because their lives have very important goal. Zipes wrote that the real hero *is not Montag but literature*. In essence, these intellectuals became books and Bradbury would prefer to have a world peopled by books (Zipes 193). All of them are acting for a higher purpose, a better world in the future.

As a final note, one quote would be interesting to take into consideration: *Bradbury's real concern in Fahrenheit 451 is not that we will become television addicts but that we already have become so anti-intellectual, so afraid of thought, that we refuse to learn and make fun of those who do learn.* (Bloom 28). Ultimately, the real question could be, did that society deserve what happened in the end? The lack of seriousness led to the destruction of the entire city, even though they were aware that the threat of war was imminent. Every

change that happened, which they did not stand up against, led them to their demise. However, Montag and the book people return back to the town. Perhaps the ashes will be the foundation to the new society, where firemen's job will once again be putting the fires down and the walls in the rooms will be filled with bookcases where all the forgotten literature will once again be.

Conclusion

Since both books are dystopias, there are similarities between the societies. Both of them are under a totalitarian regime, with the difference of the events in the Handmaid's Tale depicting the first few years of regime, while in *Fahrenheit 451*, the society has lived under such a regime for a certain amount of time, enough to establish a stable regime. Both societies are under a very strong and effective regime, whose methods are intelligent and effective, but also ruthless. The regimes work by inflicting fear and scepticism on people in order to create perfectly obedient citizens who would not try to break the rules or join in larger groups to start rebellions. The method of surviving seems to be conforming to the rules. *You ask why to a lot of things and you wind up very unhappy indeed, if you keep at it.* (Bradbury 42).

However, regarding censorship, there are differences, such as methods or the extent, since in The Handmaid's Tale, women caught reading might lose their hand or end up hung on the Wall, and in Fahrenheit 451, the books will be burned. The purpose of censorship remains the same; which is easier control of the citizens and control over the information they gather.

In this discussion, the ideas of a French philosopher Michael Foucault can offer another perspective. He argued that the knowledge is power (Mason 2017), which means that since the citizens cannot have the knowledge, they are not powerful, while those who control that are more powerful. The most relevant thought of his for this paper is the idea of the Panopticon, a design for prisons, schools, hospitals from the 19th century. Its significance lies in the fact that it is a perfect surveillance architectural design which allowed each prisoner to be constantly observed, making them more obedient. Since prisoners could see others and themselves be observed, they were acting more like each other, while at the same time, the guardians would monitor them and control them. He also wrote about the idea of the

authorities who can control that, since they are the ones with the most power. They can control the whole society and create inhabitants as they please. That is what happens in both novels. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, surveillance is one of the strongest methods used to control the population, which resulted in a state of fear. Meanwhile, the notion of equality and sameness is more apparent in *Fahrenheit 451*. Both societies function like Panopticon. The authorities have made sure that the inhabitants have a watchful eye over other people and they can learn from others as well, which is especially evident in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Also, in both novels, the atmosphere of suspicion and unfriendliness is created by allowing people to turn each other in if someone breaks the rules. Thus, people are extra cautious.

Moreover, in both novels, there are various types of surveillance. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there are guards and the Eyes, secret police, while in *Fahrenheit*, there is the Mechanical hound, technological advancement which enables surveillance. The conclusion is, nobody is safe, unless they follow the rules. Another similarity is the method of punishment, or as Foucault wrote, *the exercise of terror*. (49). In both novels, the offenders are punished, especially when the punishment is public, which is a convenient way to demonstrate power, but also show to others what will happen if the masses do not conform and listen. But the true power of both regimes does not seem to lie in physical punishments. The life under that regime already seems like a punishment, slowly stripping the inhabitants of will to live, as there are instances of people committing suicides in both novels and generally, there is not a single happy and content person in the novels.

Finally, both novels represent futuristic societies whose basic structure has the origins in the societies from the time of both writers. The bleak, passive and half-living society of Montag and fearful, confused and isolated members of the society of Offred are both a result of regimes which are functioning really well. The authors showed that the resistance to the regime, however impossible it may seem, becomes less impossible as soon as a person fights

for a higher cause. Offred's sharing of the story helped future generations to better understand a very dark time in the past and Montag's bravery could lead to the history never repeating itself. The case is such with dystopian literature that it can serve as a warning, since the unsettling feeling while reading these novels does indeed come from the fact that all the events in them truly have the base in the current society.

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