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Ray Bradbury's "Parlor People"

Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 is a futuristic tale about a dystopic society in which books are forbidden, and it is the job of firemen to burn them. The story follows fireman Guy Montag as he begins to question the legitimacy and irony of his occupation. Through the course of the novel Bradbury suggests that television – this was a new invention when Bradbury was writing the novel in the early 1950's – or his "parlor walls" have the capability to transform people into passive, mindless creatures.

Captain Beatty, the seemingly omniscient fire chief and chief antagonist, talks to Montag about how firemen came to burn books in their society. "What do we want in this country after all?" Beatty rhetorically asks. "People want to be happy isn't that right?" (59). He also says that "everything to do with automatic reflex" (61) is what makes the people happy. "If the film says nothing," the police chief continues, "sting me with the theremin loudly. I'll think I'm responding to the play, when it is only a tactile reaction to vibration. But I don't care. I just like solid entertainment" (61). Television was the answer for the people's entertainment addiction; it had the desired narcotic effect. Since all the people's desire for happiness in Bradbury's society was fulfilled through a passive viewing of television, Beatty explains to Montag, they were transformed into a passive people.

Montag's wife, Mildred is an "everyman" of sorts. She represents those made apathetic to real life by television. Like thousands of other TV addicts, Mrs. Montag spends hours daily in the parlor with celluloid people whom she considers her "family"—the mindless characters from the programs she

religiously watches. Nevertheless, the experience of this family is devoid of both content and comprehension. For example, it is said,

Lord, how they've changed it in our 'parlors' these days. Christ is one of the 'family' now. I often wonder if God recognizes his own son the way we've dressed him up, or is it dressed him down? He's a regular peppermint stick now, all sugar-crystal and saccharine when he isn't making veiled references to certain commercial products that every worshipper *absolutely* needs" (81).

All the truths of God and His Son have been removed, and what is left has been used for commercial purposes. Truth or falsity does not matter, so long as it is entertainment for the masses. Mildred and the rest of the society have indulged in the passive motion of watching the screen for so long that they have become inane. They have no true human relationships. They have no desire to look critically at the world around them. They have no motivation in life

In the beginning of the book Montag meets his 17-year old neighbor, the plucky Clarisse McClellan. Just as Mildred was the example of passivity, Clarisse is a perfect example of one unaffected by modern entertainment. Although she had been exposed to television, she was not enamored by its enticements. Since she is able to remain outside of the apathetic culture around her, she is capable of making reasonable comments on it – and does. "An hour of TV class," she explains to Montag about her schooling, "they just run the answers at you bing, bing, bing, and us sitting there for four more hours of film teacher" (29). Televisions, Clarisse realizes, promote submissiveness. The peril of television is not its accessibility; rather the problem lies in the complete lack of thought process: TV gives the answer without stimulating thought, without stimulating a critique of what is presented as truth, only blind acceptance. This blind acceptance strengthens the already existent weak-mindedness. Clarisse, a rebel in Bradbury's dystopia inspires Montag to question his own conventional thinking. Because of her, he

begins to see the world around him, to experience nature, and to realize that the television world of his wife Mildred has weakened the moral fiber of society.

Bradbury's critique dating back to the decade before every American home featured a conspicuous television is especially timely for this generation. Each year TV's get larger and the pictures get clearer; with more channels comes less content, just as the "parlor walls" enclose the viewer but show nothing worthwhile. Despite the lack of content, people in contemporary western society are attached to these parlor walls and accept anything as true if they see it on a screen, just as the parlor people of Bradbury's dystopia are proud to be empty-headed. Case-in-point: The majority of adults today no longer read for entertainment; rather, they watch TV, browse the internet, or play video games. It seems as if America is becoming passively stupid as Bradbury predicted – three centuries too soon.