

HAPPINESS AND HEDONISM IN RAY BRADBURY'S *FAHRENHEIT 451*

Ray Bradbury'nin Fahrenheit 451 Eserinde Mutluluk ve Hedonizm

Emrah ATASOY*

ABSTRACT: Ray Bradbury's literary dystopia, *Fahrenheit 451* has attracted international attention since its publication with its rich content, subject matter, characterization, and thematization. Relevant critical scholarship on the novella has increased in number radically over the years, but an article discussing the concept of happiness and its controversial nature does not exist yet. This article will therefore discuss how happiness and hedonism are perceived in *Fahrenheit 451* and will argue that it is not possible to reach one fixed definition; instead, it will be claimed that there exist different versions of happiness in Bradbury's narrative with specific references to the key figures: Montag, Clarisse, Mildred and Beatty.

Keywords: Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, Dystopia, Happiness, Hedonism

ÖZ: Ray Bradbury'nin *Fahrenheit 451* başlıklı edebi distopyası, zengin içeriği, ele aldığı konular, karakterize etme ve yansıttığı temalar gibi özellikleriyle yayımlandığı tarihten bu yana uluslararası anlamda ilgi çekmiştir. Eser üzerine yapılan ikincil çalışmalar da yıllar içerisinde bu doğrultuda artmıştır. Ancak, eserde mutluluğu ve mutluluğun tartışılabilir doğasını eleştirel olarak inceleyen bir çalışma bulunmamaktadır. Bu anlamda bu çalışma, *Fahrenheit 451* eserinde mutluluğun ve hedonizmin algılanışını tartışarak mutluluğun sabit ve kesin bir tanımının mümkün olmadığını savunacaktır. Tartışma sonrasında, Bradbury'nin distopik eserinde mutluluğun her birey için farklı olduğu, eserdeki ana karakterler olan Montag, Clarisse, Mildred ve Beatty üzerinden spesifik örneklerden yararlanılarak iddia edilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, Distopya, Mutluluk, Hedonizm

Introduction

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) has attracted tremendous scholarly and intellectual attention since its first publication. Scholars, researchers, and intellectuals have approached it from numerous angles, as it has become one of the pioneering texts of dystopian fiction. Accordingly, critical scholarship on Bradbury's canonical text has also increased

* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Kapadokya Üniversitesi, Beşerî Bilimler Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Nevşehir, emrah.atasoy@kapadokya.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-5008-2636

Geliş Tarihi / Received: 12.06.2020

Kabul Tarihi / Accepted: 16.09.2020

Yayın Tarihi / Published: 29.01.2021

substantially in parallel with the growing popularity of dystopian narratives in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Bradbury's novella was influenced and inspired by the contextual events such as the "McCarthy witch hunts, the Cold War, the Korean War, the rapid rise of television . . . the spread of advertisement, the abuse of technology within the military-industrial complex, the frustration and violence of the younger generation" (Zipes, 2008: 4). Bradbury's text, which is highly critical of censorship, ignorance, misuse of technology, and despotism, has been analyzed in terms of illustrating these and other similar issues, themes, and their repercussions.

To give some concrete examples, Peter Sisario in "A Study of the Allusions in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*" analyzed the literary and Biblical allusions in Bradbury's "anti-intellectual world where firemen serve the reverse role of setting fire, in this case to books that people have been illegally hoarding and reading" (1970: 201). Rafeeq O. McGiveron in "'To Build a Mirror Factory': The Mirror and Self-Examination in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*" perused and closely examined the metaphorical use of the mirror imagery in the novella to demonstrate the "necessity of using mirrors for self-examination," and "to discover the shortcomings" in society (1998: 287). In a similar vein, McGiveron in his other article, "Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*" brought a new perspective to the analysis of the text, as he centered upon the imagery of hands, regarding them as "reflectors of conscience" (2010: 177).

Furthermore, Joseph F. Brown in his article, "'As the Constitution Says': Distinguishing Documents in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*" applies a close reading to Bradbury's text, which can be "posited and lauded in libraries and classrooms . . . as the great shield against a slide into illiteracy and ignorance," focusing on a specific phrase that Bradbury borrowed from the Declaration of Independence (1776) (2008: 58). Sunjoo Lee in the article, "To Be Shocked to Life Again: Ray Bradbury's *FAHRENHEIT 451*" dealt with the residual "utopian hope on the reclaiming of the sensual," and

the relationship between suppression and the body in Bradbury's envisioned social order (2014: 144).

Considering the rich quantity and quality of relevant research, numerous critical insights into the narrative have been introduced and presented. However, interesting enough, there does not exist an article that analyzes the perception of happiness and hedonism in Bradbury's dystopia. The articles that relate to happiness focus partially on what happiness is not rather than what it is. Therefore, this study explicates the controversial nature of happiness and hedonism, as illustrated in the text. Through this portrayal, I argue that there does not exist one single fixed definition and perception of happiness and hedonism in Bradbury's projected society; on the contrary, it has multifaceted sides and serves various purposes, which I will discuss and exemplify through the characters Clarisse, Montag, Mildred and Captain Beatty.

Happiness and Hedonism in *Fahrenheit 451*

The concept of happiness is highlighted throughout the novella by many characters. The frequent usage of words like "happy, unhappy, and happiness" throughout the narrative manifests the state's and the characters' obsession and infatuation with the condition of being happy in this hedonistic, pleasure-centered society. An emphasis on happiness has been placed, which "fosters superficial hedonism," but how to accomplish it becomes problematic because there does not exist one single definition (Veenhoven, 2010: 625). It differs on the political, social, collective and individual levels in line with the manipulative policies of the dominant power and its monolithic ideology, which does not tolerate freedom of expression, diversity, or a multiplicity of opinions. Instead, it indoctrinates fear, standardization, monotony, pleasure-seeking, dogmatism, total conformity, blind adherence, indifference, allegiance, and a culture of submissiveness. It expects its citizens to be happy without asking questions and places fun at the center of their lives; therefore, hedonism, which may

make people “evade challenges” leading to the erosion of “social bonds,” becomes the main objective for the citizens in this mechanized, callous world (Veenhoven, 2003: 439). This expectation, however, carries other ramifications due to conflicting interests, and different perceptions of happiness subsequently ensue.

What this hedonistic society has to offer does not necessarily make everyone happy in Bradbury’s vision. To give an example, Clarisse McClellan is one central character who is not content with the concept of happiness and hedonistic society as defined by the despotic regime which yearns for an unquestioning society of “[h]appyism” (Veenhoven, 2010: 606). Her perception of happiness implies the opposite of whatever the regime encourages. As an influential character in Montag’s metaphorical journey of transformation, she is a potential threat to the system, a social outcast, and a misfit socially alienated and isolated from her peers. As a “peculiar” individual in this social order, her understanding of happiness does not coincide with that of her society, which values meaningless long sport activities such as fast driving, basketball, baseball, running, watching TV, wrecking cars, trying on clothes, and swimming in pools, which are superficial and artificial activities (Bradbury, 2008: 17; 41-43). Instead, she becomes happy through activities such as going out, hiking in the forest, watching the birds, collecting butterflies, sitting and thinking, watching people, listening to people, and looking at the sky, which represent engagement with the natural world and self-reflection (Bradbury, 2008: 33; 43). Her personality does not welcome distorted facts as they are, which also reveals how happiness “a personal issue, is . . . also a political issue” (Mantilla, 2007: 32). Due to her inquisitive mind, she is interested in the principle of causality, which “glues sensory fragments into a coherent picture of the experiential world” (Simonton, 1990: 174). Accordingly, her emotions and outlook on life gradually coalesced into animosity towards the

culture of callousness and ignorance imposed on the citizens in her world of make-believe.

The protagonist Guy Montag, a fireman, is a character from within the suppressive political system. As a character who changes his approach to the internal mechanics of the system radically in the course of the narrative, Montag becomes “an active participant who has claimed his own agency” and gradually comes to the realization that he is not happy (Reid, 2008: 74). His initial state does not attach significance to the concept of imposed happiness, which is “a label for a goal that readily comes into conflict with many other goals,” as he maintains his life as a standard character caught up in the rat race without being aware of the manipulative strategies of the political order (Ryan, 2010: 422). However, one of the functional turning points towards the climax in the narrative, Clarisse’s question, “Are you happy?” becomes the spark that ignites his feelings of discontent (Bradbury, 2008: 17). This question becomes pivotal in waking his skeptical mind, as he finds himself questioning his own life: “Of course I’m happy. What does she think? I’m *not*?” (Bradbury, 2008: 17). Later on, the narrative highlights his growing discontent as his awareness of the situation becomes clear:

“Darkness. He was not happy. He was not happy. He said the words to himself. He recognized this as the true state of affairs. He wore his happiness like a mask and the girl had run off across the lawn with the mask and there was no way of going to knock on her door and ask for it back” (Bradbury, 2008: 20).

Happiness for Montag undergoes a drastic transformation: he initially takes pleasure in burning books as a fireman and is happy with the existing facilities and opportunities bestowed upon him by the system. However, his disrupted state of mind looks for happiness outside the realm of the restrictive system, as he has become aware of the huge impact of the political power over the society in general because happiness is also affected by “social conditions, which, in turn are influenced by government policy” (Cole, 2006: 21). What the books have in them to offer turns into a means of

accomplishing a new version of happiness for Montag because the ingrained system now appears artificial and full of misguided facts and falsification. In this sense, Montag becomes a functional “satirical means for Bradbury to question the impetus of consumerism” and the artificially constructed world of supposed happiness (Seed, 1994: 232). Through professor Faber, Montag finally becomes aware of the three prerequisites to achieve happiness, which are missing in the portrayed world: “Number one, as I said, quality of information. Number two: leisure to digest it. And number three: the right to carry out actions based on what we learn from the interaction of the first two” (Bradbury, 2008: 110).

Mildred and Captain Beatty, on the other hand, stand out as the two other main characters who seem content with the temporary pleasures provided by the system and the illustrated notion of happiness, which “belongs to [s]ubjective enjoyment of life” (Stanca and Veenhoven, 2015: 93). They show total conformity to the internal dynamics of the system as characters who are submissive, docile, unquestioning, apathetic, callous, and indifferent. As “hedonistic utilitarian” characters, they accept, adopt and internalize the predetermined notion of happiness whose lines have been strictly drawn through ignorance, indifference, shallowness, fun, entertainment and hedonistic consumption (Dimmock and Fisher, 2017: 13). In that sense, they believe that they are happy because they do not violate the normative rules of the repressive body.

To start with, Montag’s wife Mildred, who “embodies just about every form of self-narcotization available in this society and just about every way of avoiding the will to live and its affirmations,” considers herself happy through pure ignorance, indifference, and shallowness (Eller and Touponce, 2008: 94). The lack of communication between her and Montag is disclosed through disconnected, fragmentary and inconsistent conversations. As a good example of a submissive and indifferent citizen, Mildred indulges in TV programs, spends plenty of time before parlor, and keeps herself busy

with trinkets like her “seashell ear-thimbles” (Bradbury, 2008: 28). Mildred chooses to completely stick to the rules of the system, as she is motivated by the “maximal satisfaction of the desires” (Geuss, 2005: 105).

Constant search for pleasure, fun, entertainment and hedonistic consumption leads Mildred to describe the parlor as her “family” (Bradbury, 2008: 65). Mildred in this sense becomes “a victim of mass culture and advertising that defines desire as a lack and the consumer as someone whose desires can never be fulfilled” (Eller and Touponce, 2008: 94). She therefore avoids engaging herself in sophisticated conversations and cultivates a feeling of hatred towards the books as expected from her by the regime. Thus, her sole means of achieving happiness becomes ignorance and indifference: “Come on, let’s be cheery, you turn the ‘family’ on, now. Go ahead. Let’s laugh and be happy, now, stop crying, we’ll have a party” (Bradbury, 2008: 131).

Similarly, Captain Beatty, the captain of the firefighters, communicates the insistence of the state on happiness and pleasure without questioning, which illustrates how happiness “depends on mental constructs rather than on the realities of life” (Veenhoven, 1991: 6). Beatty, who is “willing to concede a certain level of knowledge to placate Montag,” shows total conformity to the system as a utilitarian character (Filler, 2014: 534). Happiness for him means burning books, eliminating the potential risks and hazards for the system, abiding by the stifling rules of the dominant power, and maintaining the status quo. In his lines in the narrative, providing happiness plays an important role since Beatty describes his profession as responsible for making people happy:

“...we're the Happiness Boys, the Dixie Duo, you and I and the others. We stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought . . . Don't let the torrent of melancholy and dreary philosophy drown our world . . . I don't think you realize how important you are, we are, to our happy world as it stands now” (Bradbury, 2008: 81).

In this respect, his description as to the nature of his job places a substantial emphasis on being happy no matter what, a perspective highly utilitarian in its nature. In his outlook on life, books pose an obstacle to happiness and bring pain; therefore, they must be destroyed and burned immediately when found, which may be a reference to Jeremy Bentham's remarks on pain and pleasure: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure" (Bentham, 2004: 65). Subsequently, Beatty explains and regards "de facto censorship as a removal of disturbing elements" (Seed, 2015: 99). His staunch belief in the despotic state becomes the main medium for his alleged happiness.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the concepts of happiness and hedonism in Ray Bradbury's literary dystopia, *Fahrenheit 451* by focusing on what happiness may represent and stand for instead of merely centering upon what happiness is not in the text. In Bradbury's canonical text, one fixed and rigid definition of happiness cannot be found, as has been exhibited and proven throughout the article. The main characters, Clarisse, Montag, Mildred, and Captain Beatty all perceive and interpret happiness in a different light. They have different interests, pastimes and their own definitions of happiness. They demonstrate disparate aspects of happiness and unhappiness based on their experiential journeys. Through this novella, Bradbury thus opens the concepts of happiness to question by hereby drawing attention to the multifaceted nature of happiness.

Bradbury explicitly and implicitly critiques consumerist culture, shallow communication, ignorance, indifference, the extreme use and abuse of technology, and the lack of trust and sincere bonds between individuals. These problematized issues constitute an impediment to seeking happiness; therefore, citizens are unable to achieve lasting happiness when they are molded under the strong influence of these characteristics and aspects, which

Bradbury does not promote. In the search for permanent happiness, Bradbury sympathizes and empathizes with Clarisse and the transformed Montag in that these characters finally speak to real emotions and manage to connect with other people. Clarisse stands out as an outspoken, eloquent, articulate, self-aware, self-confident, and happy character. Her critical approach to the social world and political system around her brings her to maturity, wisdom, and sophistication. Her command of books enables her to find correlations, interconnections, and interactions with the working mechanism of the repressive power projected in her make-believe world. From this point of view, her self-confidence, elocution, and her reconciliation with her individual attributes play an instrumental role in her source of lasting happiness.

In a similar vein, Montag gradually finds out that pure pleasure-seeking within the context of that social order does not bring lasting happiness. He is exposed to the artificiality of his wife and the hypocritical nature of the enforced system and its docile members in the courses of the narrative, which ultimately leads him to a novel dimension of disbelief and skepticism. His gradual radical transformation, his participation in the Book People, his becoming the Book of Ecclesiastes, and his alienation from Mildred and the society exemplify his desire for attaining lasting happiness. Ultimately, he realizes that what Mildred, her friends, Captain Beatty, and the portrayed power represent does not bring long-lasting happiness; on the contrary, their stance thwarts all potential attempts to achieve perpetual happiness because they are alienated and detached through artificiality and insincerity. They are trapped within the boundaries of utilitarian hedonism. Mildred's and Captain Beatty's utilitarianism is juxtaposed with Clarisse's and Montag's search for lasting happiness, which Bradbury promotes and advocates.

In conclusion, through engagement with such a dystopian social engineering, Bradbury demonstrates the two sides of the same coin by illustrating different aspects of happiness and unhappiness. In the light of

this illustration, it can be deduced and argued that Bradbury offers various methods and a possible recipe for happiness: to establish a sincere bond between friends, family members and citizens; to create an atmosphere of mutual trust; to value sincere family relationships; to establish an open and sincere communication with each other; to self-question and to self-criticize; to confront a problem and to face the reality in general; not to value materialism; to adopt a critical and cautious approach to technology and its overuse; and to be at peace with oneself. He thus advocates strengthening family bonds through genuine and outspoken communication and a critical questioning attitude to what is presented as the reality by the dominant power. In short, Bradbury's projection highlights that the pursuit of happiness may be challenging and laborious, as it requires perseverance, exertion, patience, and dedication, but it can be achieved through critical thinking, introspection, self-contemplation, and self-actualization.

WORKS CITED

- BENTHAM, Jeremy (2004), "An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation", *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, Ed. Alan Ryan, Penguin Books, London.
- BRADBURY, Ray (2008), *Fahrenheit 451*, HarperCollins, London.
- BROWN, Joseph F. (2008), "'As the Constitution Says': Distinguishing Documents in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*", *The Explicator*, 67.1, 55-58.
- COLE, Amanda (2006), "The Politics of Happiness", *AQ: Australian Quarterly*, 78.5, 21-24.
- DIMMOCK, Mark and FISHER, Andrew (2017), *Utilitarianism: Ethics for A-Level*, Open Book Publishers, Cambridge.
- ELLER, Jonathan R. and TOUPONCE, William F. (2008), "The Simulacrum of Carnival: *Fahrenheit 451*", *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451*, Ed. Harold Bloom, Bloom's Literary Criticism-Infobase Publishing, New York, 91-114.

- FILLER, James (2014), "Ascending from the Ashes: Images of Plato in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*", *Philosophy and Literature*, 38.2, 528-548.
- GEUSS, Raymond (2005), *Happiness and Politics: Outside Ethics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton; Oxford.
- LEE, Sunjoo (2014), "To Be Shocked to Life Again: Ray Bradbury's *FAHRENHEIT 451*", *The Explicator*, 72.2, 142-145.
- MANTILLA, Karla (2007), "The Politics of Happiness", *Off Our Backs*, 37.4, 31-36.
- MCGIVERON, Rafeeq O. (1998), "'To Build a Mirror Factory': The Mirror and Self-Examination in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 39.3, 282-287.
- MCGIVERON, Rafeeq O. (2010), "Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*", *The Explicator*, 54.3, 177-180.
- REID, Robin Anne (2008), "*Fahrenheit 451* (1953)", *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451*, Ed. Harold Bloom, Bloom's Literary Criticism-Infobase Publishing, New York, 71-80.
- RYAN, Alan (2010), "Happiness and Political Theory", *Social Research*, 77.2, 421-440.
- SEED, David (1994), "The Flight from the Good Life: 'Fahrenheit 451' in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias", *Journal of American Studies*, 28.2, 225-240.
- SEED, David (2015), *Ray Bradbury*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign, Illinois.
- SIMONTON, Dean Keith (1990), *Psychology, Science and History: An Introduction to Historiometry*, Yale UP, New Haven.
- SISARIO, Peter (1970), "A Study of the Allusions in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*", *The English Journal*, 59.2, 201-205+212.

- STANCA, Luca and VEENHOVEN, Ruut (2015), "Consumption and Happiness: Introduction to this Special Issue", *International Review of Economics (IREC)*, 62.2, 91-99.
- VEENHOVEN, Ruut (1991), "Is Happiness Relative?", *Social Indicators Research*, 24.1, 1-34.
- VEENHOVEN, Ruut (2003), "Hedonism and Happiness", *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 4, 437- 457.
- VEENHOVEN, Ruut (2010), "Greater Happiness for a Greater Number: Is That Possible and Desirable?", *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 11, 605-629.
- ZIPES, Jack (2008), "Mass Degradation of Humanity and Massive Contradictions in Bradbury's *Vision of America in Fahrenheit 451*", *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451*, Ed. Harold Bloom, Bloom's Literary Criticism-Infobase Publishing, New.