Q. Symbols are very important in “Fahrenheit 451”. Analyse the effectiveness of Bradbury’s use of symbolism within the novel, with reference to three specific symbols and/or motifs.

The Science Fiction novel “Fahrenheit 451” by Ray Bradbury uses motifs and symbols to reflect the journey of humanity’s revival in an oppressed dystopian society overruled by technology. The novel critiques censorship and the reduction of intellectual rigour that is associated with nationalism and war through these elements. Bradbury uses motifs of nature and technology to portray a dystopian world whereby nature has been replaced by grotesque mechanical creations- highlighting humanity’s attempt to satisfy natural desires with artificial constructions. This bleak assessment of the human condition is offset through the author’s use of mirrors, as a motif, to convey the importance of inner reflection as the narrator and protagonists, Guy Montag, goes through a fundamental transformation from conformist to free-thinker. Furthermore, the symbol of the phoenix and the river suggest that through self reflection, humanity can be redeemed and reborn, creating an optimistic ending to this novel. Whilst self destruction set the plot into motion, Bradbury uses symbols and motifs to build a looking glass into the positive renewal of this society.

Bradbury utilizes opposing motifs of technology and nature, indicative to the Science fiction genre, to suggest that an attempt to emulate nature through artificial means is futile and only serves to isolate individuals from themselves. Humanity’s innate desire to be closer to nature in “Fahrenheit 451” is satisfied through artificial means. This can be seen in mechanical devices which are modelled after the natural world such as the mechanical hound. Montag describes this creation as:

“(it) slept but did not sleep, lived but did not live ... the nylon-brushed nostrils of the creature that quivered gently, gently, its eight legs spidered under it on rubber-padded paws” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 24).

Contrasting the animal characteristics of a real hound to an eight legged, Frankenstein-esque monster symbolises how barriers between nature and technology have been distorted to create a replica of nature that evokes fear. Ironically such mechanisms are designed to provide security. Through this Bradbury conveys the idea that technology is emotionally destructive by turning a naturally emotive creature into a soulless killing machine. The mechanical hound also serves as a metaphor for society, as technology creates violent and empty creatures, devoid of anything natural. This effectively communicates the author’s message that an attempt to emulate the natural world through artificial means is futile and emotionally destructive. The juxtaposition of nature and technology is clearly evident in the ironically named “seashell” radios. The very sound of this device is described as:

“little mosquito(s)-delicate(ly) dancing hum in the air, the electrical murmur of a hidden wasp snug in its special pink warm nest” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 12).

The use of natural imagery to show the irritating noise of the seashell radios contrasts so greatly to the soothing sound of natural seashells, producing cognitive dissonance. This is clearly a failed attempt to emulate natural beauty. Technological devices such as this represent escapism as individuals escape into the artificial, isolating themselves from each other by preventing communication and thought. Bradbury uses this to convey the idea that technology cannot ultimately supplant the important contemplative functions that nature holds for humanity. The dehumanising effects of this process are presented through the character of Mildred (Montag’s wife) who is too preoccupied with technology to realise how entirely separated from the world she has become. She is described as;

“A snow –covered island upon which rain might fall, but it felt no rain; over which clouds might pass their moving shadows, but she felt no shadow” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 13)

Mildred is described as cold and untouchable by even the forces of nature as she leads such an empty existence. This creates an unnatural separation between the husband and wife which is described as:

“a winter island separated by an empty sea” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 41).

This metaphor of nature is applied to a person associated with technology to express the solitude and emotional numbness (the “winter island”) of Mildred. The “empty sea” symbolises how this relationship is distanced by trivial machines that fill the emptiness. It is only when connected to nature that there is thought and calm. This can be seen when:
“(Montag) floated on his back ...The river was very real; it held him comfortably and gave him the time at last, the leisure, to consider this month, this year, and a lifetime of years. He listened to his heart slow. His thoughts stopped rushing with his blood” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 140).

Therefore, Bradbury effectively expresses the importance of nature in life through contrasting motifs of nature and technology to highlight how a lack of nature, or even a manipulation of nature, can cause isolation.

The motif of a metaphorical mirror is used by Bradbury as a narrative device to reveal the protagonist's transformation through self-examination. The novel’s first use of the mirror emphasises the need for self-examination as Montag returns from a book-burning, thinking:

“that when (he) return(ed) to the firehouse, he might wink at himself, a minstrel man, burnt-corked in the mirror” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 4).

Instead of recognizing the destructiveness of his profession, his gaze merely sees self-satisfaction (McGiveron, 1998). This arrogant acceptance shows how this society is conditioned to be superficial instead of self-reflective. The motif of the mirror is developed and personified through Clarisse, the initial foil of both Montag and this society. This can be seen in the imagery of mirrors when:

“He (Montag) saw himself in her eyes, suspended in two shining drops of bright water, himself dark and tiny, in fine detail, the lines about his mouth, everything there, as if her eyes were two miraculous bits of violet amber that might capture and hold him intact... How like a mirror, her face. Impossible; for how many people did you know who refracted your own light to you?... How rarely did other people's faces take of you and throw back to you your own expression, your own innermost trembling thought?” (Bradbury, 1953, pp. 7-11)

Observing himself in the “mirror” of Clarisse allows Montag to comprehend that he merely wears "his happiness like a mask." (Bradbury, 1953, p. 12) and Clarisse has "run off across the lawn with the mask... “ (Bradbury, 1953, p. 12) (McGiveron, 1998). This is an analogy of how Clarisse has opened Montag’s eyes to the truth of his profession and surroundings. Clarisse does this through constant observations about Montag, by asking:

"How did it (his job) start? How did you get into it? How did you pick your work and how did you happen to think to take the job you have?... It just doesn't seem right for you, somehow" (Bradbury, 1953, pp. 23-24).

With each remark Clarisse reflects unseen truths of Montag that reveal how empty his existence is (McGiveron, 1998). Just as Clarisse transforms Montag through self-reflection, Bradbury suggests that the survivors of the American atomic war should:

“build a mirror factory... and put out nothing but mirrors. . . and take a long look in them” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 164).

To change the attitude of society, and avoid repetition of former catastrophes, it is clear that inner-reflection of their failings is needed. This contrast to the parlour walls which only reflect what humanity wants to see, boxing them away from the real world. Montag even comes full circle when he feels the same self-satisfaction in burning these parlour walls that he once felt when burning books. This conveys how Montag has transformed through inner reflection from burning books to preserving and burning the artificial. The metaphoric motif of a mirror is used by Bradbury to effectively communicate that only through self-reflection can humanity learn from their mistakes and move on.

The symbol of the phoenix and river are used by Bradbury to convey the cycle of renewal and rebirth. The natural cycles of life are suppressed in the society of “Fahrenheit 451”. Faber describes this as:

“...living in a time when flowers are trying to live on flowers, instead of growing on good rain and black loam.... Yet somehow we think we can grow, feeding on flowers and fireworks, without completing the cycle back to reality” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 83)

Faber’s analogy shows how humanity is only willing to live in comfort without allowing for the natural imperfections of life. This is why books are feared in the novel as they “show the pore(s) in the face of life” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 83). This society
symbolically burns for this artificial lifestyle through the detonation of the atomic bomb. Granger compares mankind in this situation to:

"...a Phoenix..., every few hundred years he built a pyre and burnt himself up. He must have been first cousin to Man. But every time he burnt himself up he sprang out of the ashes, he got himself born all over again. And it looks like we're doing the same thing, over and over..." (Bradbury, 1953, p. 163)

The symbol of the phoenix refers to the collective rebirth of humankind. Typically the phoenix is associated with a “sense of hope and redemption” (Granger, 2006), however; Bradbury portrays this process of rebirth as humanity’s inability to learn from their mistakes. This is conveyed through drawing a parallel to the life cycle of this mythical creature to the cyclical nature of humanity’s history. This bleak outlook is offset through the author’s suggestion that humanity has a clear advantage over the Phoenix, seen when Granger says:

"we've got one damn thing the Phoenix never had. We know the damn silly thing we just did....and as long as we know that and always have it around where we can see it, someday we'll stop making goddamn funeral pyres and jumping in the middle of them." (Bradbury, 1953, p. 163)

While the society in “Fahrenheit 541” currently resembles the phoenix, Bradbury suggests that the knowledge held in book, and now in minds, will overcome humanity’s shortcomings through self reflection. This builds hope for this society and the means for humanity to get in touch with themselves and nature. However, the individual rebirth and spiritual renewal of Montag is conveyed by his passage through the river. Bradbury uses the symbol of the river to baptise Montag into a new life with the river cleansing his body and soul. This can be seen when:

"Montag floated in a sudden peacefulness, away from the city and the lights and the chase...he was moving from an unreality that was frightening into a reality that was unreal because it was new ...” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 140).

The capture and death of another man in Montag’s place sustains this idea of rebirth through the death of his old identity. This idea that a fireman, the very group who enforce oppression and censorship, has recognised and changed the error of his ways creates hope for the rest of society to do the same. The symbol of the river also suggests that there is a much more peaceful process for renewal and rebirth instead of a major nuclear catastrophe forcing society to change its ways. Bradbury effectively suggests that through self reflection this society can correct its cyclical history, symbolised in the phoenix, while also using the symbolic meaning of the river to convey the possibility of individual spiritual renewal.

“Fahrenheit 451” by Ray Bradbury is a Science Fiction novel that uses motifs and symbols to reflect the journey of humanity’s revival in an oppressed dystopian society overruled by technology. Motifs of nature and technology convey a bleak assessment of humanity’s temperament to satisfy natural desires with artificial constructions. However, Bradbury’s use of motifs and symbols such as the mirror, the phoenix and the river convey that through inner reflection, humanity can triumph over intellectual apathy and slavish servitude to technology. Therefore, Bradbury’s use of motifs and symbols is an effective narrative device in presenting the major themes of the novel and providing an optimistic closure.
Bibliography


