

Beatty's speech—Muzaurieta response

Ray Bradbury clearly offered a warning about the future in his novel, *Fahrenheit 451*. Sadly, America has in many ways become the dysfunctional world of the novel, and we may move even closer to it if we are not careful. A clear examination of Beatty's speech reveals this trend. Beatty, as a fireman in love with his job, speaks for the Establishment of the future and believes that society has actually improved. A reader should note that, despite his rejection of books, Beatty is quite educated about the past—or rather, about one biased version of that past.

Looking back into the 19th century, Beatty claims that people had more time to read when life was slower. However, he fails to note that until social conditions changed such that less affluent people were able to send their children to school, only the wealthy could afford either the education or the leisure time for reading. The slow rise of technology made it possible for a majority of people to enjoy books.

Unfortunately, that technology was not always beneficial to reading. By the mid-1900s, as Beatty observes, people enjoyed radio, television and motion pictures. All were mass-produced for the largest possible audience—and that required simplistic material. The markets were profit-driven, and books and magazines were, in order to compete with these other forms of entertainment, “leveled down to a sort of pastepudding norm” (54). Meanwhile, life itself got faster. As people developed more “time-saving” devices, they were able to rush from one activity to another, and life demanded that they do so. Why walk a mile when a car could cut your travel time to nothing? Why drive when you could fly? People didn't have to wait so much anymore, and the time they could have spent reading—or thinking—was gone. Beatty's explanation of the increasing speed of society is accurate.

At the same time, life offered new and exciting pleasures: sports leagues, theme parks, vacations on tropical islands. People had less time for learning, and less interest in doing so. Thinking takes practice, and the fun things in life didn't require much thought at all. Beatty notes this shift when he observes, “More sports for everyone, group spirit, fun, and you don't have to think, eh” (57)? Our entertainment industry churns out inane movies starring beautiful people and preposterous television shows that claim to be “reality.” Most people seem unaware that they are being exploited by huge corporations that make billions of dollars off these low-quality products. Beatty recounts how classics were “cut to fit fifteen-minute radio shows” then “two minute book columns” (54), or summed up as “one-page digest[s] in a book that claimed: *now at last you can read all the classics*” (55). Similarly, news reports have changed from lengthy newspaper articles to radio summaries to mere sound bytes and headlines. Not surprisingly, book sales have fallen. Today, some researchers claim that only 2% of American people purchase a book each year. Books simply don't satisfy the need for instant gratification, easy laughter. Books require analysis, attention, effort. As Beatty puts it, “the mind drinks less and less” (57). Sadly, his is an apt description of the American fascination with simple pleasure.

According to Beatty, the final element that changed society forever was the demand of minority groups that they never be offended—by anything. That “minority pressure” (58) is also present in the real world. Perhaps the shift toward political correctness can be traced back to the Civil Rights Movement and to the 1970s, a decade which saw huge progress in rights awareness for women and minorities. Offensive language became a no-no, and people in general began to overcome lack of awareness in favor of sensitivity. Women could not be called “sweetheart” or “honey” anymore; “handicapped” replaced “crippled.” Many minority groups, like African Americans and Native Americans, developed a sense of pride and demanded respect. While all

people did not embrace these changes, all people were affected by them. On the whole, these changes were good. American culture *needed* to develop a little sensitivity toward the experiences of women and minorities. Unfortunately, even sensitivity can be taken too far. If we avoid controversy just to avoid offending people, we are blinding ourselves to reality. Sometimes people need to think about offensive ideas, if only to understand and overcome them. Sadly, in our America as in Beatty's, censorship may halt this process.

Beatty claims that censorship did not start with the government but with the people, and there is a chilling resemblance between his past and our present. Censorship is alive and well in today's America, and it is often perpetrated by regular citizens. Hundreds of books are challenged each year, and may be censored or banned as a result. Some books, parents claim, are inappropriate for children or teens because they contain references to profanity, drug use, sexuality, or violence; examples include *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and *Go Ask Alice*. Other books are challenged because their subject matter is difficult to accept. For example, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been banned for both its realistically negative portrayal of Southerners and slavery—as if slavery deserved a positive portrayal—and for its use of the word “nigger”—a truly offensive word, to be sure, but a part of our American history nonetheless. Are we to censor out every issue, every event, every word that offends us—even if that means censoring the truth? In Beatty's world, that has become the reality. We must be careful if it is not to become our own.

Is this threat real? Are we headed for a *Fahrenheit 451* future? Beatty's world is certainly more extreme than our own. His government does actively suppress ideas, but Beatty makes it clear that his America was not created by a Government intent on controlling the population. Rather, people themselves changed, and the government eventually took advantage of the situation to gain more control. As Beatty explains, “It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God” (58). Because we are clearly experiencing the three factors that Beatty claims created his society, we must watch our government carefully for any evidence of censorship, for this could be the first step toward making dissenting ideas illegal. We must embrace controversy as an opportunity to discuss and overcome conflict, and guard against the suppression of upsetting ideas.

Disappointingly, controversy is a casualty of the simplification of mass media. Today's entertainment rarely explores interracial or gay relationships, for instance. Some schools still do not teach evolution because it offends a few religious people. “The bigger your market,” Beatty explains, “the less you handle controversy” (57). Modern companies seem well aware of the pitfalls of selling controversial material; they claim to be respecting the desires of the consumer, but in fact, their only motivation is profit, as Beatty claims. However, Beatty does not discuss the effect of giant conglomerates controlling the publication of almost all media products; one can assume that this was not a factor in the *Fahrenheit 451* world, but it has contributed mightily to the reality of 2005. These conglomerates do not publish anything offensive to their own owners, and their owners are often fairly conservative in nature. Some people today claim that the media tends not to publish criticism of the government because the media is owned by groups that are tied to that government. The implication of censorship, and the implied stifling of any dissenting voices, is hard to miss.