

天主教輔仁大學英國語文學系學士班畢業成果  
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, FU JEN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATION PROJECT 2021

指導教授：墨 樵老師

Dr. Joseph Murphy

真善美聖

**Female Agency in Postwar Dystopian Literature:  
George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and  
Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451***

SANCTITAS BONITAS

PULCHRITUDO

VERITAS

學生：陳 婕 撰

Joyce, Chieh Chen

Joyce Chen 406110700

Academic Writing—Dr. Murphy

Research Paper 4 (Outline)

6 July 2020

Female Agency in Postwar Dystopian Literature: George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and  
Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

I. Introduction

- i. Historical context of both novels
- ii. Methodology on feminist reading of both novels
- iii. Thesis Statement

II. Totalitarianism vs. Individual Subjectivity

- i. Anti-leisure in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Fahrenheit 451*

III. Passive Women: Katharine and Mildred

- i. Portrayal of Katharine and how she interacts with Winston
- ii. Portrayal of Mildred and how she interacts with Montag
- iii. Fate of female characters and what this suggests about totalitarianism versus individual subjectivity

IV. Active Women: Julia and Clarisse

- i. Portrayal of Julia and how she interacts with Winston
- ii. Portrayal of Clarisse and how she interacts with Montag
- iii. Fate of female characters and what this suggests about totalitarianism versus individual subjectivity

V. Conclusion

VI. Works Cited

Joyce Chen 406110700

Academic Writing—Dr. Murphy

Research Paper 4

6 July 2020

Female Agency in Postwar Dystopian Literature: George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and  
Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

### Introduction

Although the dystopian genre has existed in literature for a long time, it was not until the post-World War II era that dystopian literature flourished. According to Douwe Fokkema, the sudden growth in dystopian literature is “in reaction to unchecked technological and disastrous political developments” (345) during that era. As many writers then either participated in or were impacted by the events of World War II, it is to no surprise that postwar dystopian literature is often enveloped in the overwhelming anxieties of the terrors that still remained after the war, especially George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Orwell himself participated in the “Spanish Civil War and later [worked] in London as political commentator for the BBC . . . in support of the British war effort during World War II” (351), a role paralleling that of the protagonist, Winston, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, who works to falsify historical records in the Records Department. Similarly, although Bradbury did not have firsthand experience in the war, *Fahrenheit 451* was inspired by “the public book burnings of Fascist Germany during the 1930s” (Eller 77), which parallel the work of the protagonist, Montag, who is a fireman responsible for burning books as a means of preventing “freedom of thought and expression” (Fokkema 364). Therefore, critics tend to devote their attention to the portrayal of male protagonists in the novels and view their totalitarian nightmares in relation to recent historical events.

Although following the male protagonists' actions and character development throughout these novels is a logical approach, critics severely overlook the female characters' subjectivity and agency in both texts. Feminist readings of dystopian literature did not fully emerge until the 1970s in response to second wave feminism that made its strong statement in the 1960s. As a result, feminist readings of speculative fictions are focused on more recent dystopian works written by female writers, such as Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*;<sup>1</sup> feminist readings of earlier dystopian works written by male writers are still in short supply. In order to grasp how the protagonists ultimately come to the point of rebellion, it is vital to consider the interactions between the protagonists and the female characters. This study, therefore, hopes to fill this gap in the criticism on postwar dystopian novels by focusing on the role of female characters in both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Fahrenheit 451*, where the dichotomy between the passive women, Katharine and Mildred, and active women, Julia and Clarisse, is a necessity in the making of the protagonist.

Female agency measures the extent to which female characters are able to resist totalitarian control, and how they influence the protagonist to do the same. In terms of methods of totalitarian control, Margaret J. Daniels and Heather E. Bowen propose that totalitarian practices within dystopian literature are means of "anti-leisure," the devaluation of women's "personal leisure spaces" (423), thereby suppressing their individual subjectivity. Thus, for the purposes of analyzing female agency in this paper, totalitarian practices will be referred to as "anti-leisure," and agency will be partially examined through the characters' ability to regain their own personal leisure spaces. However, not all female characters are necessarily subjected to anti-leisure, and there is commonality in that Orwell and Bradbury tend to portray and categorize female characters as stereotypical opposites of each other: whereas the passive women are stripped of their personal leisure spaces, the active women

regain them. Consequently, the active women inspire the protagonists to defy their totalitarian regimes, whilst the passive women remind the protagonists of the daunting reality that they must rebel against.

### **Totalitarianism vs. Individual Subjectivity**

Prior to analyzing the female characters' roles, it is important to understand the basis of anti-leisure in both novels. As both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Fahrenheit 451* were written after World War II, there are apparent parallels between the elements of totalitarianism in the novels and events that occurred during the war. According to Michael Halberstam, the totalitarian thesis, "first formulated in the early to mid-thirties in England and the United States, holds that there were essential similarities between the fundamentally antiliberal political regimes of Hitler's National Socialist Germany and Stalin's Communist Russia" (459). Thus, in the same way that Hitler and Stalin were able to regulate and sustain their regimes, "dystopias use leisure as a means of retaining power of the elite." The anti-leisure thesis, therefore, defines totalitarian practices as ways of "regulating identity" and "suppressing individual thought" (Daniels and Bowen 423) by promulgating propaganda in place of providing individuals with the personal, leisure space and time to develop their own subjectivity.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, an example of anti-leisure practice can be seen through "the program of the Two Minutes Hate" (Orwell 12), a mandatory daily event that promotes hate towards whomever the regime is fighting against, which Winston perceives as follows:

A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge hammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one's will into a grimacing, screaming

lunatic. And yet the rage that one felt was an abstract, undirected emotion which could be switched from one object to another like the flame of a blowlamp. (14)

Here, in likening people's shared emotions of "fear and vindictiveness" to "an electric current," Orwell emphasizes the level of conformity that the regime in the novel is able to achieve among their citizens, as if these emotions of rage are second nature to them and able to be activated by the flip of a switch; their emotions easily and rapidly influence one another like the conduct of electricity. Furthermore, the fact that the citizens' rage is "abstract" and "undirected" furthers the notion that the regime is the one that holds power over what the citizens should or should not think about, whereas the individuals themselves are stripped of their own subjectivity, their freedom of thought suppressed through loss of their own personal leisure spaces.

Similarly, anti-leisure can also be seen in *Fahrenheit 451*, as Clarisse tells the protagonist, Montag, of a typical day of school:

"I don't think it's social to get a bunch of people together and then not let them talk, . . . we never ask questions, or at least most don't; they just run the answers at you, bing, bing, bing, and us sitting there for four more hours of film-teacher. That's not social to me at all . . . . They run us so ragged by the end of the day we can't do anything but go to bed . . . ." (Bradbury 27)

Here, Clarisse's repetition of the onomatopoeic "bing" puts emphasis on the monotonous and mechanical way of teaching, where the virtual aspect of the "film-teacher" (understood as a pre-recorded teaching video) also draws a certain barrier in the communication of ideas.

Therefore, being "social" is redefined in *Fahrenheit 451*'s society; freedom of expression is replaced by the regulation of identity and suppression of individual thought.

Nonetheless, although anti-leisure in both novels can apply to both male and female citizens, power and control also contributes to "the patriarchal objectification and

disempowerment of the female gender . . . . [W]omen can suffer two times: first, because of political/authoritarian power, secondly through a male/sexist oppression” (Di Minico 2).

Female agency, then, is the extent to which female characters defy totalitarian and patriarchal power.

### **Passive Women: Katharine and Mildred**

The writers’ stereotypical categorization of female characters in both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Fahrenheit 451* can be examined through H el ene Cixous’ idea of binary opposition in language, where “organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organization subject to man,” and “the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/passivity” (64). Indeed, in the context of dystopian literature, hierarchy presents itself through anti-leisure to suppress individual identities. Yet, although authorities hold power over both men and women, it is always the passive women who are portrayed as being entirely subdued within the novels, and it is their passivity that reminds the protagonist of the daunting reality that he must rebel against.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, passivity is seen through the character Katharine, Winston’s wife, from whom Winston has separated, and who only exists as a distant memory in the novel. Though Katharine is only mentioned twice within the novel, Orwell intentionally highlights her passivity through depicting her obedience to anti-leisure on both occasions. The first instance occurs relatively earlier in the novel, where Winston is reminded of Katharine after contemplating the Party’s regulations on sex and marriage, in which the sole purpose of marriage is to “beget children for the service of the Party,” and “sexual intercourse was to be looked on as a slightly disgusting minor operation” (65). Indeed, Katharine embodies the ideologies of the Party, as “she had two names for [sex]. One was “making a baby,” and the other was “our duty to the Party,” which Winston describes as a

“performance” (67). Here, Katharine’s devotion to the Party even in the most private aspect of their marriage demonstrates the lack of personal leisure space. Orwell’s description of sexual intercourse as a “minor operation” and “performance” also emphasizes how Katharine and Winston are so emotionally distant and disconnected from each other that their marriage is essentially artificial.

Moreover, Katharine’s passivity is further intensified when Julia, Winston’s lover who inspires him to rebel, asks about her later in the novel. In response, Winston once again speaks of the “rigidity” (66), the “stiffening of Katharine’s body” (132) that is “frozen forever by the hypnotic power of the Party” (67), reiterating that sexual intercourse with Katharine is like a “frigid little ceremony” (132). Not only does the term “ceremony” denote the impersonal and dispassionate relationship between Katharine and Winston, Orwell’s repetitive description of Katharine’s body as immobile also emphasizes her lifelessness. Hence, her thoughts are static, and her mind “empty” (66) in that she is only capable of thinking of whatever the Party provides for her; Katharine is so docile and passive that Winston’s only memory of Katharine is “merely a distasteful one” (132), distant and entirely removed from his current life.

Similarly, in *Fahrenheit 451*, passivity is seen through the character Mildred, Montag’s wife. Unlike Katharine, Mildred remains constantly present within the novel, though she too is depicted as obedient and even dependent on anti-leisure. For instance, Mildred is constantly seen wearing her “Seashell ear-thimbles” (Bradbury 16), an earphone-like device that constantly plays “an electronic ocean of sound, of music and talk” (10). Though this detail in the novel can be attributed to the common theme of fear of technological developments in postwar dystopian literature, it can also represent anti-leisure, in that the “ocean of sound” connotes the vast and overwhelming propaganda that could be constantly transmitted through her ear-thimbles. Moreover, Bradbury also repeatedly



describes Mildred's ear-thimbles as "thimble-wasps" (11), "electronic bees" (16), and "tiny musical insect[s]" (43), in which the animal imagery of buzzing insects unveils the invasiveness of the sounds produced by the electronic device; the consistency of sound playing in Mildred's ears disrupts her from having any personal leisure space and time to interact with Montag or even think about anything other than what is playing in her head.

However, in contrast to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Mildred's passivity is not completely consistent. In her first appearance, Montag witnesses Mildred's attempted suicide, after he sees an empty "small crystal bottle of sleeping tablets which earlier today had been filled with thirty capsules" (11) when he comes home. In this instant, Bradbury describes Mildred's body as "uncovered and cold, like a body displayed on the lid of a tomb . . . . Two moonstones looked up at him" (10-11). Similar to Katharine, Mildred's body is regarded as lifeless, and her moonstone eyes empty, though in this case her lifelessness takes on a more literal meaning. Nonetheless, the importance of Mildred's attempted suicide is that it reveals the direness of living in a society that limits personal freedom. Whereas Katharine is portrayed as entirely passive, Mildred does have moments of uncertainty that have to be forcefully removed; even when Montag calls for help, the "operators" order him to "keep her quiet" after they use a machine to "clean" Mildred's blood of her "liquid melancholy" (12-13), reducing her suicide—an attempt to regain control of her own life and body—to a case of mechanical malfunctioning that a machine can easily fix.

Nevertheless, though Mildred's passivity fluctuates throughout the novel, Mildred's betrayal towards the end of the novel reestablishes that it is the authority that ultimately has power over its people. Although Mildred initially helps Montag in hiding his books, she eventually chooses to betray him by "turn[ing] in the alarm" (111) and reporting him to Captain Beatty, head of the Firemen. Mildred's final appearance in the novel is of her "running, one suitcase held with a dreamlike clenching rigidity in her fist, . . . her body stiff,

her face floured with powder, her mouth gone” (108). Here, Bradbury’s portrayal of Mildred’s “clenching rigidity” also parallels Orwell’s portrayal of Katharine’s frigid and stiff body, their shared lifelessness robotic and incapable of developing individual subjectivity under the anti-leisure control of their regimes.

Ultimately, it is the passive women who are stripped of their personal leisure spaces and remain obedient to anti-leisure throughout the novels. Their emptiness and therefore emotional distance from the protagonist are what form mistrust and serve as reminders of the daunting reality that he must rebel against. In fact, the overly stereotypical portrayal of Katharine and Mildred as passive and docile appears almost unrealistic even during the time when these novels were written. Though it is unknown why the writers may have chosen to portray them in this way, it should still be noted that representing female characters as nothing more than dual stereotypes remains immensely patriarchal.

### **Active Women: Julia and Clarisse**

Indeed, to reiterate Cixous’ argument, activity is always associated with the man, and passivity with the woman. However, in order for the male protagonist to take on an active role in both novels, there must exist a relatively more active female character that inspires the protagonist. As Laura Mulvey argues in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” “what counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does” (19). Though Mulvey’s argument is largely concerned with film analysis, the role of the “heroine” can be applied in the analysis of active women in both novels such that they are able to regain their personal leisure spaces and act as catalysts to trigger the protagonists’ rebellion.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, activity is seen through the character Julia, Winston's lover who, unlike Katharine, remains consistently present within the novel. On the surface, Julia appears to be a Party member devoted to her duties, as she is a member of the "Junior Anti-Sex League," an organization that "advocated complete celibacy for both sexes" (Orwell 65). However, Julia defies the Party's means of anti-leisure through secretly having sexual intercourse with multiple men, using her work in the Junior Anti-Sex League as "camouflage" (129), allowing her to deceive the Party and therefore regain her personal leisure space. For this reason, the sexual relationship between Julia and Winston is not merely about mutual desire in a society where physical attraction is prohibited: "Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act" (126). In comparing sexual intercourse to battle, Orwell reveals the raw, chaotic nature of their relationship, which is in itself symbolic of their rebellion. Though Winston already secretly hates the Party, it is through meeting and connecting with Julia that he comes to act on his rebellious instincts.

In *Fahrenheit 451*, activity is seen through the character Clarisse, Montag's neighbor who approaches and strikes a conversation with Montag from the beginning of the novel, and it is their communication with one another that slowly pushes Montag to the point of rebellion. Unlike Winston, Montag is portrayed as a regular individual satisfied with the workings of his society; his satisfaction in his life as a fireman is expressed in the first sentence of the novel: "It was a pleasure to burn" (Bradbury 1). However, Montag's change in how he perceives their society becomes evident by his second interaction with Clarisse: "He felt his body divide itself into a hotness and a coldness, a softness and a hardness, a trembling and a not trembling, the two halves grinding one upon the other" (21). Whereas Julia regains her personal leisure space through freely engaging in sexual acts, Clarisse does so through thinking "crazy thoughts" (7) and having intellectual exchanges with both Montag

and her family. Hence, the imagined contrasting conditions of Montag's body unveils a moment of psychological struggle, the friction of the polar opposites hotness/coldness and softness/hardness a chemical reaction that deconstructs Montag's crumbling understanding of his society, catalyzing his impending rebellion.

Whilst Katharine and Mildred are both portrayed as emotionally distant, Julia and Clarisse succeed in developing a connection with the protagonists that ultimately inspires them to rebel: Julia through physical and Clarisse through intellectual connection. In both cases, the strength of the protagonists' emotional connection with the active women is portrayed through both writers' use of light. In Winston's first interaction with Julia, she is seen "coming toward him from the other end of the long, brightly lit corridor" (Orwell 105). Similarly, in Montag's first interaction with Clarisse, Bradbury dwells on her appearance: her face has "a soft and constant light in it," like "the strangely comfortable and rare and gently flattering light of the candle" (Bradbury 5). Here, light is symbolic of hope, and the writers' association of these active female characters to light therefore emphasizes their ability in inspiring the protagonist, instilling in him the possibility of change.

However, Julia and Clarisse's fates within the novels signify that they still remain relatively passive. As Cixous argues, "either woman is passive or she does not exist. What is left of her is unthinkable, unthought" (65). Indeed, their activeness is only relevant in inspiring the protagonist, and they are forced to withdraw into the background once they have fulfilled their intended roles. Though Julia initially represents hope, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* concludes with Julia and Winston both betraying each other when they are caught and interrogated by O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party. After the interrogation, Winston recounts a moment where he sees Julia once again in the Park and how he has "put his arm around her waist," only to notice that "her waist had stiffened," the "rigidity and awkwardness" of her body "made it seem more like stone than flesh" (Orwell 291). Here,

Julia's stiff body mirrors how Katharine's body has felt to Winston earlier in the novel, an intentional comparison signifying that Julia has become, like Katharine, stripped of her personal leisure space and completely passive to the power of the Party.

Similarly, Clarisse's activeness abruptly comes to an end when she is "run over by a car" (Bradbury 44) and dies suddenly quite early on in the novel. However, her death is never explicitly portrayed, and is instead only briefly mentioned in a conversation between Mildred and Montag:

"Her," said Mildred in the dark room.

"What about her?" asked Montag.

"I meant to tell you. Forgot. Forgot."

"Tell me now. What is it?"

"I think she's gone." (44)

Here, in indirectly depicting her death through Mildred, Bradbury eliminates any remaining activity that could be left of Clarisse, wherein Mildred's forgetfulness and apathetic manner in speaking of her death also pushes Clarisse into a realm of passivity and unimportance, "unthought" (Cixous 65) of once she has fulfilled her intended role within the novel.

Ultimately, though Clarisse is represented as relatively more active than Mildred, and Julia than Katherine, the active female characters are still unable to escape binary oppositions. As active as these female characters are, they are inevitably dictated by the novels' plotlines and are still relatively passive to the male protagonists, around whom, and through whose perspectives, the plots unfold. However, even though the active women have to withdraw to the background of death or non-existence after fulfilling their intended roles as catalysts to trigger the protagonists' rebellion, their momentary agency in the novels still embodies what anti-totalitarianism means for the two novels.

## Conclusion

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Fahrenheit 451*, the dichotomy between the passive and active women is a necessity in the making of the protagonist: the active woman inspires the protagonist to defy his totalitarian regime, whilst the passive woman reminds the protagonist of the daunting reality that he must rebel against. Although the active women, Julia and Clarisse, have agency in defying anti-leisure and regaining their personal leisure space, their agency remains only temporary: as soon as they inspire the protagonist to rebel against his regime, they are cast aside and ultimately become, like Katharine and Mildred, passive to the power of authority. As both novels are written through the perspective of a male protagonist, Julia and Clarisse's activeness is ultimately surpassed, for the protagonist is the one who is ultimately responsible for taking on the active role; female characters are reduced to mere plot devices for the means of the protagonist's character development. Nonetheless, Julia and Clarisse's momentary agency still embody the essence of anti-totalitarianism, one that represents a step towards the development of subsequent feminist dystopias.

Word count: 3570

## Note

1. Di Minico discusses how the control of personal leisure space contributes to the "disempowerment of the female gender" (2) in the context of three dystopian works written by female authors: *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) both feature female protagonists, whereas Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937) feature a male protagonist.

Works Cited

- Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. 1953. Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2012.
- Cixous, Hélène, and Catherine Clément. "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays." *The Newly Born Woman*. Translated by Betsy Wing. U of Minnesota P. 1975, pp. 63-132.
- Daniels, Margaret J., and Heather E. Bowen. "Feminist Implications of Anti-leisure in Dystopian Fiction." *Journal of Leisure Research*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2003, pp. 423-40. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/00222216.2003.11950004. Accessed 5 Dec. 2019.
- Di Minico, Elisabetta. "Spatial and Psychophysical Domination of Women in Dystopia: *Swastika Night*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Humanities*, vol. 8, no. 38, 2019, pp. 1-15. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.3390/h8010038. Accessed 5 Dec. 2019.
- Eller, Jonathan R. "Speaking Futures: The Road to *Fahrenheit 451*." *Critical Insights*. Grey House Publishing, 2014. *EBSCOhost*, web.a.ebscohost.com.utorpa.lib.fju.edu.tw:2048/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=2bb479cc-ae13-4fc3-ae7a-f83f91f5ac8d%40sdc-v-sessmgr03&bdata=Jmxhbmc9emgtdHc mc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZl#AN=101665726&db=lkh. Accessed 5 Dec. 2019.
- Fokkema, Douwe. "Utopias, Dystopias, and Their Hybrid Variants in Europe and America since World War I." *Perfect Worlds: Utopian Fiction in China and the West*, Amsterdam UP, 2011. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mwnv.20. Accessed 5 Dec. 2019.
- Halberstam, Michael. "Totalitarianism as a Problem for the Modern Conception of Politics." *Political Theory*, vol. 26, no. 4, 1998, pp. 459-88. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/192200. Accessed 31 Dec. 2019.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*.

Palgrave, 1989, pp. 14-26.

Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. 1949. Signet Classics, 1950.