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## **THE PRESENCE / ABSENCE CONCEPTS: ONE CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

**Summary.** The article employs the presence / absence concepts to explore the influence of the dystopian society on a fictional personality. The analysis of Mildred's presence is conducted in relation to other characters. This approach allows us to identify implicit meanings in Ray Bradbury's sci-fi novel *Fahrenheit 451*. Particular attention is paid to the social roles which have not been assumed by the character. The findings indicate that the total absence of culturally significant things, such as books, contributes to degrading human intellect and produces individuals with insignificant social presence. Performing traditional feminine roles, such as a daughter, a mother or a housekeeper, adds "human" dimensions to a personality. It is concluded that the absent realities are related to the character's life crisis. Mildred's family presence is rather illusive and bears no proofs of her meaningful interaction with her husband.

**Key words:** dystopia, sci-fi novel, social presence/absence, family presence/absence, influential/insignificant presence

**Problem statement.** Presence and absence are exploratory paired terms employed by literary critics to uncover hidden meanings of the text and to propose its reasonable interpretations. "Such terms only seem to be opposites, since they imply each other" and show in specific contexts their pointedness at the same ideas [1, p. 243]. Describing fundamental states of being, both terms are self-referential: "the fact or condition of being present" and "the state of being absent or away" [2]. The terms' application to analyzing the works of fiction has proved to be productive.

In his book *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury depicts the dystopian society degrading the human intellect and experiencing a cultural crisis due to the demise of the book, whose material presence is banned because of political correctness demands. Pointing to what is present and what is absent in the material and spiritual worlds enables literary critics to articulate multifaceted hidden meanings and to represent them in all their complexity and interconnectedness. Consistent analysis of elements signifying “absence” is rather neglected in contemporary literary studies. However, close attention to excluded properties can result in a deeper understanding of the literary work and more accurate explication of its ideas.

**Literature review.** The available body of research literature indicates that the concepts “presence” and “absence” are widely employed in analyzing characters’ conflict with the society. The nature of a conflict influences the choice of the conceptual framework. Earla Wilputte’s paper (2000) on Henry Fielding’s works is guided by the author’s narrative strategy of making references to female characters who do not appear in his plots. This strategy was defined as “feminine absence”. The scholar investigates the plight of the real, eighteenth century women to whom their patriarchal society “denied an education, a political voice, any tangible social significance, and even identity once she was married.” [3, p. 324]. According to Gonzalez (1994), what is not spoken constitutes an alternative discourse. Under socioeconomic and gender oppression, Latin American women writers have experimented with “layering silence in order to protest, condemn... or disturb” [4, p. 80]. “The presence of absence” concept determines, in Rosario Aguilar’s *El guerrillero*, the boundaries of the issues which demand governmental attention, such as denied access to knowledge, information, food, education, and medical care. Haring (2012) states that cross-cultural social interactions provide cultural insights which are bound to lead to multiple interpretations. On the example of anecdotal discourse, the author illustrates how absence can be concealed under the presence and uses the term “the elusive presence” [1, pp. 239-256].

**The purpose of this article** is to apply the concepts *presence / absence* to Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* to describe the influence of totalitarianism, technology, and mass culture in their extreme representations on a personality. Our choice of character is determined by Bradbury's treatment of female characters deformed by the pursuit of happiness officially endorsed in the society. Mildred is a central character whose interaction and comparison with others provide rich grounds for multifaceted analysis. Her family and social presence are key concepts discussed in the paper.

**Discussion.** The first mention of Mildred occurred in the conversation between Montag and Clarisse McClellan. Montag, a fireman, tells his new neighbor that his wife always complains of the smell of kerosene. In Bradbury's dystopia, a fireman's job is to set fire to books and protect the society from rebels. Mildred's first physical presence is signified by "the little mosquito-delicate dancing hum" coming from electronic bees plugged into her ears. Another attribute of her life found in their cold, dark and lacking air bedroom is the empty bottle of sleeping pills which earlier today had been filled with thirty capsules. Her overdosing on sleeping pills poses a questions whether it was a suicidal attempt or just an accident. Mildred denies any intention to end her life. The intrigue of possible suicide calls for closer attention to the character's life and invites different interpretations of her choices.

Mildred's social presence reveals an absolute conformity to the official ideology. As a typical member of the society, Mildred takes part in activities that neither enrich her personality nor develop her mind, but are legitimate and entertaining. Those are watching television, listening to the radio, and fast driving.

One of Mildred's most favorite pastimes is interacting with television. Numerous shows with no plots but many exotic people fill Mildred's spiritual vacuum and replace the real world. Addicted to the primitive programs, the woman wants to buy a fourth screen, which would realize the popular dream of a four-wall TV. The fact that such a TV would depersonalize her parlor and would create the illusion that "this room wasn't ours at all", amuses Mildred. She is willing to give up a few things to make it happen. It might seem

weird that actors are called “relatives” by Mildred. Identifying herself with imaginary personalities, the woman spends more time in the turned-on parlor than with her husband. According to Montag, “she just never wanted any children at all” [5, p. 39] and “she was so strange he couldn’t believe he knew her at all” [5, p. 57]. The family she comes from is totally absent in the novel as well as the caring, affectionate attitude towards her husband or mutual memories and experiences to cherish. She is unable to recollect where and when she met Montag.

Although family bounds mean nothing to Mildred, but she does value her privileged status as a fireman’s wife. That is why she is distressed by Montag’s refusal to work after having burned an old woman. She feels no pity for her sick husband and constantly urges him to get up and go to work. Absolutely indifferent to his requests for complete silence and a tablet of aspirin, Mildred cardinally changes with Captain Beatty’s arrival. She needs to comply with the society’s standards. Projecting an image of a happy wife who provides good care of her husband, she tries to impress the fireman’s boss by moving around the room, picking things up and putting them down, smoothing the bedclothes, and fixing the pillow. In this way, her social presence is fabricated in order to imitate something of what she is not capable [6, p. 46].

Actually, Mildred is incapable of many things. She has no profession and highly depends on her husband. The house she lives in, the three-wall TV inside and all the family savings have been earned by Montag. Maybe she is a good expert at lips reading, but nobody ever saw her hands doing something. “They just hang there at her sides or they lay there on her lap or there’s a cigarette in them, but that is all” [5, p. 202]. Although Mildred is thirty years old, she has developed an infantile lifestyle that can be summed up by Mildred’s own words, “Let me alone, (...) I didn’t do anything [5, p. 69]”.

In some sense, she might be considered as a helpless and socially oppressed woman that does nothing meaningful for anybody or with anybody, including her husband. Deprived of love, care, and compassion, her family is falling apart. When Montag confesses about his desire to withdraw from his duties as a fireman as well as “to smash

things and kill things”, Mildred is not alarmed and does not listen to him carefully. Instead, she advises her husband to take the beetle, “I always like to drive fast when I feel that way. You get it up around ninety-five and you feel wonderful. Sometimes I drive all night and come back and you don’t know it. It’s fun out in the country. You hit rabbits, sometimes you hit dogs” [5, p. 86] Even after Montag admitted that he is unhappy and is going to do something big, the woman dismissed him with the words “I’m tired of listening to this junk” and turns from him to the TV announcer again. Her elusive presence as a wife manifests itself in the most treacherous way when Mildred denounces her own husband. Everything for what she feels sorry is limited to mundane things – “poor relatives” from her parlor and the house, which she is leaving in a hurry after putting in the alarm [5, p. 147].

The analysis of Mildred’s character is incomplete without considering the concepts presence/absence in relation to “others”. Accounting for the novel’s gender configuration, women appear in two capacities, as readers (the woman who dies with her books) and consumers (Mildred and her friends), “whereas men are exclusively linked to book culture, which they either destroy, create, or preserve” [7, p. 160].

As a law-abiding citizen, Mildred knows that disobedience and social unrest lead to a severe punishment. She completely obeys the state’s authority and has no intentions to break the law. While she is being told about the accident with the old woman, Mildred declares her hatred toward the outsider, “She’s nothing to me: she shouldn’t have had books. It was her responsibility, she should’ve thought of that. I hate her. She’s got you going and next thing you know we’ll be out, no house, no job, nothing” [5, p. 68]. Being horrified by Montag’s confession about keeping some books in their house, Mildred tries to discard them immediately because they are a real threat to her affluent and careless existence.

In response to Montag’s plea for help, Mildred reluctantly takes a superficial look at the books stolen by him. She can’t relate to them, except the one titled “The favourite subject, Myself.” To Mildred, books have no appeal. She is used to enjoying the spectacles

of parlour entertainment. In her words, “Books aren’t people. You read and I look around, but there isn’t anybody!”; “my ‘family’ is people. They tell me things; I laugh, they laugh! And the colour!”

And besides, if Capitan Beatty knew about those books – “She thought about it. Her face grew amazed and then horrified. “He might come and burn the house and the ‘family’. That’s awful! Think of our investment. Why should I read? What for?” [5, p. 94].

The parlour scene reveals similarities and differences between Mildred and other ladies who came over for entertainment. They react in the same way when Montag pulled the main switch. “The three women turned slowly and looked with unconcealed irritation and then dislike at Montag” [5, p. 123].

The unexpected involvement in conversation with Montag demonstrates the guests’ absence of “feminine humanity” [3, p. 327]. The fact that Mrs. Phelps’s husband serves in the Army does not worry her because “It’s always someone else’ husband dies.” She explains that it is her third marriage, and her husband always urged her to be independent. “He said, if I get killed off, you just go ahead and don’t cry, but get married and don’t think of me.” [5, p. 124]. The woman states that no one in his right mind would have children. Another guest disagrees with this opinion, but her reasoning is shaped by social doctrines, and characterizes her as an insensitive and selfish individual. She believes that

The world must reproduce... the race must go on. Besides, they [children] sometimes look just like you, and that’s nice. Two Caesarians tamed the trick... Oh, my doctor said, Caesarians aren’t necessary; you’ve got the hips for it, everything’s normal, but I *insisted* [5, p. 126].

Her approach to upbringing is defined by her untroubled existence and the availability of social institutions taking care of children. Her children were in school nine days out of ten. She “put up with them” with the help of parlor entertainment. In the technocratic, politically correct society the importance of women to the family, its nurturing nature and femininity became obsolete.

The only character which possesses characteristics typical of a woman is Clarisse McClellan. She is seventeen and “crazy.” Youthful curiosity urges her to ask inconvenient questions, such as “Are you happy?”, “why you haven’t any daughters like me, if you love children so much?” Every day the girl walked Montag to the corner in search of answers to her questions. The presence of a real family enables meaningful interaction with her mother, father, and uncle although talking is “like being a pedestrian, only rarer.” The family is the only source of learning the truth about the past and the present. Her favorite activities are considered abnormal. Clarisse loves to watch people and listen to them as well as to explore real world. She knows that there is dew on the grass in the morning, and old leaves smell like cinnamon. Like women in the past, Clarisse does all the shopping and house-cleaning by hand. However, activities in which the girl participates at school, such as a TV class, painting pictures, basketball, football or running, have no appeal to her. They are not social to her. It upsets her that schoolmates never ask questions because the answers are provided. Her social absence manifests itself in having no friends, in ignoring the ‘parlour walls’, races or Fun Parks. Clarisse’s presence is an influential one. Montag calls her a friend and misses her presence after she is gone.

The concept of social presence can be applied to Mildred’s friends taking into account their participation in election. However, their discussion of the presidential candidates demonstrates the elusive presence of reasonable grounds for their choices. Particularly, President Nobel won the women’s votes because he “he’s one of the nicest-looking men.” His opponent was short, didn’t shave too close or comb his hair, and mumbled. He was also fat and didn’t dress to hide it. Even their names were a matter – Winston Noble and Hubert Hoag [5, pp. 126-127].

The encounter with the poetry book whose material presence is banned in the society evokes an emotional response in Clara and makes Mildred and Mrs. Bowles object to the book’s cultural presence which associates with tears, suicide, sickness, and “all that mush” according to Mrs. Bowles. Mildred’s behavior shows no promise of changing. She belongs to the generation with no memories about the past. Having lived long enough in the

unchanging word, Mildred sees no reason in engaging in dangerous activities. She wants to laugh, to be happy and to party in the company of her parlour “family” and the ladies she socializes with.

**Conclusions.** Among the characters of *Fahrenheit 451*, Mildred is one of the few who lives in harmony with the state. The loyalty to the ruling ideology gives her the opportunity to have an unsophisticated but quite entertaining life. Her existence is devoid of culturally significant things, such as books or heated intellectual discussions, it does not require to use her brain power, and it is not confined to traditional feminine roles, such as a daughter, a mother or a housekeeper. In spite of this, the women considers herself to be happy. Based on the analysis of absent realities in her life, it can be concluded that they contributed to her life crisis and made her overdose on the sleeping pills. Her family presence reveals indifference towards Montag and an illusive need to interact with him. Naturally, she does not hesitate to sacrifice her husband for the sakes of her primitive parlor world. Mildred’s insignificant presence is best summed up by Montag, “My wife is dying” [3, p. 105].

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**Дужик Н. С. Концепти «присутність» / «відсутність»: аналіз одного персонажа**

**Анотація.** У статті застосовуються концепти «присутність» / «відсутність» для дослідження впливу дистопічного суспільства на персонажа художнього твору. Концептуальна присутність Мілдред аналізується у порівнянні з іншими персонажами. Цей підхід дозволяє ідентифікувати приховані значення у фантастичній повісті Рея Бредбері «451 градус за Фаренгейтом». Особлива увага приділяється соціальним ролям, не властивим персонажу. Результати дослідження виявили, що цілковита відсутність культурних цінностей, зокрема книг, спричинює звиродніння людського інтелекту та породжує особистостей з нікчемною соціальною присутністю. Виконання традиційних жіночих ролей (дочка, мати, домогосподарка) надає персонажу людяності. На підставі аналізу зроблено висновок, що відсутні реалії пов'язані з життєвою кризою персонажа. Сімейна присутність Мілдред кваліфікується як позірна, позбавлена значущої взаємодії з її чоловіком.

**Ключові слова:** дистопія, фантастична повість, соціальна присутність / відсутність, сімейна присутність / відсутність, впливова / позірна присутність

**Дужик Н. С. Концепты «присутствие» / «отсутствие»: анализ одного персонажа**

**Аннотация.** В статье применяются концепты «присутствие» / «отсутствие» для исследования влияния дистопического общества на персонажа художественного произведения. Концептуальное присутствие Милдред анализируется в сравнении с другими персонажами. Этот подход позволяет идентифицировать скрытые значения в

фантастической повести Рэя Брэдбери «451 градус по Фаренгейту». Особое внимание уделено социальным ролям, не свойственным персонажу. Результаты исследования показали, что абсолютное отсутствие культурных ценностей, в частности книг, способствует вырождению человеческого интеллекта и появлению личностей с ничтожным социальным присутствием. Исполнение традиционных женских ролей (дочь, мать, домохозяйка) придает персонажу человечности. На основе анализа сделан вывод о том, что отсутствующие реалии связаны с жизненным кризисом персонажа. Семейное присутствие Милдред квалифицируется как иллюзорное, лишенное значимого взаимодействия с её супругом.

**Ключевые слова:** дистопия, фантастическая повесть, социальное присутствие/отсутствие, семейное присутствие / отсутствие, влиятельное / иллюзорное присутствие