

Fahrenheit 451 Discussion Questions and Study Guide

Answer briefly the following questions:

Part One – The Hearth and the Salamander

1. The novel, *Fahrenheit 451* begins : “It was a pleasure to burn.” Why does Ray Bradbury start the novel in this way? Why might it be more pleasurable to burn books rather than read them?
2. In the opening scene, why are the books compared to birds.
3. Read Handout Number One, “The Fifties.” Read to page 31. Discuss the difference between Montag and Clarisse’s lives.
4. Montag’s television includes headphones called “seashells.” The “wall to wall circuit” allows Mildred to enter the “play” and, therefore, the television programming. How does the technology within the novel compare to our current technology? In the first pages of the novel, does technology improve the quality of life for Montag and his wife, Mildred? Why or why not?
5. Complete Part One (pp. 32 – 68) consider why the narrator introduces us to Montag at this time of his life, when he encounters Clarisse and confronts Mildred’s overdose.
6. Why does the author introduce the character of Clarisse before Mildred?
7. Why are all the houses fireproof in this society?
8. Why does Mildred require emergency service? What service is provided?
9. What is the mechanical hound and what is its purpose?
10. Why does the society consider Clarisse “anti-social”?
11. When the woman’s house is raided, why does she light the match?
12. Describe the relationship between Montag and Mildred?
13. What is the purpose of Beatty’s visit?
14. Reread Captain Beatty’s monologue (pp.57-59). Discuss his view that school cultivates anti-intellectual sentiment (p.58). In your opinion does it accurately depict your high school? Do books violate the idea that “everyone [is] made equal” (p.58)?
15. Why does Montag feel “fat”?

Arts and Culture

Fahrenheit 451 was published in 1953, the year the Korean War ended. The memory of Hitler’s atrocities and World War II was less than a decade old. The Cold War, meanwhile, had hardened into a standoff. In 1952 the U.S. tested a hydrogen bomb, and the U.S.S.R. followed suit a year later. Only three years later, Frenchman Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy of existentialism, *Being and Nothingness*, is published in an English translation. In jazz, the swing era gave way to bebop, bringing new musical expression to the post-war era. In New York, saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie inspired audiences with their dynamic virtuosity. A year after the publication of *Fahrenheit 451*, the Voice of America began broadcasting jazz worldwide. In 1956, the U.S. State Department sent Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, and Louis Armstrong on tour in the hope that their performances would spread American democracy and alleviate the tensions of the Cold War.

Go to NEA’s jazz in the Schools Web site at www.neajazzintheschools.org. Go to Lesson Three and play clips of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Dave Brubeck. Take notes as you listen. Identify the different patterns in the music.

Narrative and Point of View

First-person narration wraps the reader into the perspective of the main character, as this person tells us, first-hand, about her or his experiences. This voice uses the first-person “I” to recount her or his adventures and is almost always personally invested in how the drama unfolds. Bradbury employs a third-person narrator in *Fahrenheit 451*. Third-person narration uses “he” or “she” to tell the story and establishes a greater distance between narrator and audience, as an outside observer relates events. Third-person narration may or may not be omniscient. An omniscient third-person narrator knows the thoughts and movements of every character. *Fahrenheit 451* is not strictly omniscient; we know only Montag’s movements and thoughts. The narration follows Montag like a camera, and the reader is never allowed into the lives of other characters, except for what they say to him. This inevitably increases our sympathy for Montag.

How might *Fahrenheit 451* be narrated in the first-person from the point of view of a government official that believes burning books protects society? Brainstorm the outline of a new version of this story told from this perspective.

Writing Portfolio

Write a letter to Captain Beatty responding to his ideas about education and his charge that “a book is a loaded gun” (p.58). do you agree or disagree with his ideas? In your letter, explain your ideas about education and the value of books. Type your letter and submit to turnitin.com. Print out your receipt. Turn it both the receipt for submission and the original printed letter. Remember to use: Times New Roman, Size 12, Double Spaced

Part Two – The Sieve and the Sand

1. In the scene where Mildred and Montag read books together, what are their separate reactions?
2. What is the effect throughout sections I and II, of the bombers flying over?
3. Who is Professor Faber?
4. Montag’s reaction to the commercial on the subway is a turning point in his life. How does he react and why?
5. What argument does Faber make for books?
6. What is the “small green metal object”?
7. What does the White Clown show lead you to believe about television programming in this society?
8. Why does Mrs. Phelps cry when Montag reads “Dover Beach”?
9. What is Montag’s destination at the end of section II? Why?

Characters

The main character in a piece of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist often overcomes a weakness to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with courage and strength may be called a “hero.” The protagonist’s journey is made more dramatic by challenges from characters with different beliefs or perspectives. A “foil” provokes or challenges the protagonist. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success. Captain Beatty, the fire chief, is a key foil and a historian of sorts. While Montag once followed Beatty’s values, he now resists Beatty’s commitment to burning books. Meanwhile, Faber represents a musty, academic link to the past. Clarisse McClellan, a teenager, longs for the romantic days of front porches and rocking chairs, complaining, “we never ask questions.” Mildred, the model citizen, attempts suicide while living in a world enchanted by television.

The characters of Mildred, Clarisse, Faber, or Beatty bring out dramatic responses from Montag. Choose one character and discuss how that character leads Montag toward self-realization. How does Montag’s relationship to the chosen character change? Present your conclusion, using specific textual support.

Writing Portfolio

Who do you believe to be the antagonist? Why is this character opposed to Montag? How does this character force Montag to reevaluate himself? Use passages from the text to support your conclusions. Type your 5 paragraphs (two page response) and submit to turnitin.com. Print out your receipt. Turn it both the receipt for submission and the original printed two paged answer. Remember to use: Times New Roman, Size 12, Double Spaced

Write one page explaining why Ray Bradbury chose his section titles. Choose one title either, “The Hearth and the Salamander” or “The Sieve and the Sand,”. Explain what the title means and how this deepens your interpretation of the section. Type your one page response and submit to turnitin.com. Print out your receipt. Turn it both the receipt for submission and the original printed one paged answer. Remember to use: Times New Roman, Size 12, Double Spaced

Part Three – Burning Bright

1. This section is very revealing of Beatty’s character. What is revealed?
2. What major event coincides with Montag’s escape? How are the two related?
3. How does Montag foil the hound?
4. Read Handout Number Two, “Science Fiction”. Note the descriptions of the Mechanical Hound. How is the Mechanical Hound a symbol of something else? What other images in the reading could be symbols?
5. Reread the detailed description of the Hound (p.24) and the battle (p.120). Why might Montag’s expression of affection to the Hound, mark a turning point in his development? What role does affection play in this world? What might be the significance of Montag’s final battle with the Hound? Finally, how might the Mechanical Hound be a symbol for Montag’s world?

6. What is the purpose of the long description of the river, the woods, and the sky?
7. What purpose do the inhabitants of this wilderness have for life?
8. Why does the book end as it does?

Figurative Language

Writers commonly use stylistic devices. Such tools allow readers to visualize events, whether through an unexpected image, an idea, or an observation. Some common examples of figurative language include image, simile, and metaphor. Use these terms to identify the novel's figurative language and expand the meaning of the novel.:

Image: a vivid representation or description.

Simile: a comparison between two things using "like" or "as."

Metaphor: a comparison in which one thing is figuratively transformed into another so as to reveal its essence.

Ray Bradbury creates pictures for your inner eye to behold the setting and to convey ideas through moods. Beginning with the death of Beatty in Part II, "Burning Bright," find at least five effective figures of speech which contribute to your image of the setting and mood.

Phrase	Figure of Speech	Effect
e.g. hiss like a mouthful of spittle banging on the stove	Simile	The person is liquid, insignificant like spit but insulting in death

Symbols

Complex images do more than simply map the inner landscape; they become symbols. As a form of figurative language, symbols can maintain our fascination by hinting beyond the literal, drawing us into the story, or asking us to explore the author's intentions. Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts. The futuristic worlds of science fiction genre utilize symbols to explore our current circumstances. Bradbury repeats and expands certain images that become keys to unlocking the story. Front porches and rocking chairs symbolize the past, a time when people intermingled without the distraction of electronic screens. The Mechanical Hound, an especially important symbol, represents Montag's modern world and the deadly possibilities around every corner.

Group work: Bradbury writes, "The books leapt and danced like roasted birds, their wings ablaze with red and yellow feathers" (p.117). Each group will examine 20 page segments of the book, starting at the beginning. Each group will present the symbols that appear in its section. Be especially attentive to the way Bradbury uses fire and books both literally and symbolically.

Group 1 – pp. 3 – 24 Group 2 – pp. 25 – 46 Group 3 – pp. 47 – 68 Group 4 – pp. 69 – 90

Group 5 – 91 – 102 Group 6 – pp. 103 – 124 Group 7 – pp. 125 – 146 Group 8 – pp. 147 – 165

Character Development

The protagonist gradually undergoes a change of heart. The protagonist's shortcomings fundamentally affect the manner in which he or she is able to respond to the challenge brought by outside forces. While some changes begin from outside forces, changes also brew within thoughts and emotions as our hero searches to overcome fears, realize dreams, or discover identity. Montag questions whether his profession is justified and whether the values he has held so dear—burning books and all it implies—are wrong. Mrs. Hudson forces Montag to question whether his life might be fundamentally improved by reading. Is he missing something invaluable? He then repudiates his profession. He does so partly through the intercession of Clarisse and Faber, messengers from a world he barely understands. The narrator explains, "Even now he could feel the start of the long journey, the leave-taking, the going-away from the self he had been" (p. 103). By the end of the novel, Montag has been profoundly changed. As a three-dimensional character, Montag has an inner and an outer life unlike the two-dimensional portraits of other characters.

Writing Portfolio

In Part Three, Beatty explains "Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun and now that he's burnt his damn wings, he wonders why. Didn't I hint enough when I sent the Hound around your place?" (p.113) Beatty refers to the myth of Icarus, told in Ovid's first-century poem *The Metamorphoses*. Go on the internet and read about Icarus. Why does Bradbury compare Montag to Icarus? How does this shed light on Montag's development? Write a one page response. Type your one page response and submit to turnitin.com. Print out your receipt. Turn it both the receipt for submission and the original printed one paged answer. Remember to use: Times New Roman, Size 12, Double Spaced

The Plot Unfolds

A novel's plot unfolds a series of events leading to a dramatic climax. The timing of such events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. As the author, Bradbury has made choices about how to structure and pace events to explore how book-burning can erode the human imagination. In this lesson, map the events of the story to assess the artistry of story-telling.

Some of the turning points in the novel include Mrs. Hudson's willingness to die for books; Montag's confrontation with his wife's friends; Montag's murder of Captain Beatty; and Montag's creative escape from the Mechanical Hound. Punctuated by an audible refrain of flying jets as well as constant surveillance, Bradbury amplifies Montag's unease and foreshadows war. Montag, like a rat in a maze, turns corner after corner until he finds an exit.

Group work: Map a time line that depicts the development of the story and the building of drama (the plot unfolding). This map should include the most significant turning points, but also examines the lesser events that build tension. While developing your maps, define the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. Groups will present their time lines to the class.

Themes of the Novel

The development of characters, the implications of Bradbury's figurative language, and the unfolding plot contribute to the themes. The themes of a novel explore the meaning of human life. Themes are issues—love, war, freedom, and responsibility—that grab a reader's attention and do not let up. As one reads *Fahrenheit 451*, certain themes stand out: the repression of free thought through censorship, a proper education that values books, the loss of culture and history, the threat of how new technology may deaden human experience, the constant demand to satisfy immediate visual and sensory appetites, the value of authentic human interaction, and the value of the natural world. For Bradbury, our choice to use, misuse, or discard books relates to all these themes.

Explore the statements *Fahrenheit 451* makes about the following:

Happiness

"We have everything we need to be happy, but we aren't happy. Something's missing" (p.82). How might Bradbury be defining happiness in *Fahrenheit 451*? Does he present a new idea of happiness, or preserve an older idea?

Knowledge

"[Books] stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us." (p. 83) How do books draw together ideas and information so as to capture details that might otherwise be missed?

Freedom of Thought

"The televisor...tells you what to think and blasts it in" (p.84). Members of this world have "plenty off-hours" but do they have "time to think"? What kind of thinking do Faber and Bradbury prefer? Will it initially make life more difficult?

Education

"Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord" (p. 87). What kind of education is necessary to create citizens who recognize "quality of information," take "leisure to digest it," and "carry out actions based on what we learn from the first two?" (p. 84) How might this relate to our current educational system?

Satire

Satire is the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation, or scorn. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter as an end in itself, while satire "derides"; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon and against a butt existing outside the work itself. The object may be an individual or a type of person, class, an institution, a nation, or even as in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a whole race of human beings.

Satire depends on its audience understanding irony or the difference between what is shown and what actually is. Since the publication of *Fahrenheit 451*, the increased influence of television and visual media of all kinds has closed the gap of irony. Is Mildred's behavior unusual? If you feel a strong personal need for television in your life can you see how much you live the life of your soap opera favorite? What is the function of satire in the novel? How effective does it expose human vice and folly?

Questions and Resources taken from Teacher Resources:

The Center for Learning and (NEA) National Endowments of the Arts, Big Read