# Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury

# Themes and Construction: Fahrenheit 451

*EXPLORING Novels*, 2003

## Themes

**Alienation and Loneliness**

An atmosphere of alienation is established by Bradbury in the opening scenes of *Fahrenheit 451*, which details a "fireman's" growing dissatisfaction with his conformist society. Montag's pleasure in his work of burning books is quickly challenged in his conversation with his neighbor, Clarisse McClellan. As they walk home together, she asks Montag if he is happy. His first reaction is to tell himself that, of course, he is happy. After leaving her and wandering around inside his house looking for his wife, Montag answers Clarisse's question in the negative. When he discovers that his wife Mildred has taken an overdose of sleeping pills, his alienation is intensified. Bradbury uses the roar of jets overhead as a counterpoint to Montag's scream, thus pitting his character's human sounds and feelings against the roaring sounds of technology. With the introduction of other mechanical devices, such as the equipment used on Mildred by the medics, the television parlors, and the Mechanical Hound, Montag's alienation from a society that has embraced mass culture and thoroughly discouraged individual thinking intensifies. In scene after scene, Montag becomes emotionally alienated from his work, his wife, and the people he works with. As this alienation increases, he reaches out to books and to the people who value them. His escape from the city to the refuge of the book people offers hope. He has escaped the alienation of the mechanical society he left behind. Perhaps he will help establish a better one by remembering the words in the book he will commit to memory. The suggestion Bradbury makes is that by staying connected to books, which are a reflection of other people's thinking, we stay connected as human beings one to the other. Books, then, are an antidote to alienation.

**Apathy and Passivity**

By portraying many characters as passive figures who never even wonder about their lot in life, *Fahrenheit 451*seems to imply that apathy is a very important element in the decline of Montag's society. Millie is content to receive whatever "entertainment" that comes from her television, unable to distinguish between programs that are numbing in their sameness. She has no real concept of what the coming war might mean to her—she only worries it might interrupt her precious television programs—and her friends are similarly unconcerned. Montag's colleagues laugh at him when he wonders aloud about the history of the firemen, and are satisfied with the reasons provided in their handbooks. The only action these characters take is to maintain the *status quo*—the way things are. In contrast, Clarisse, Montag, and Faber are individuals who wonder about their world and, in the case of Montag and Faber, are able to make attempts to change things. Even the book people who live outside of society are eventually able to take action, for after the destruction of the city it is implied they are the ones who will help rebuild the world.

**Change and Transformation**

The transformation of Montag's character from obedient fireman to outcast creates the central tension of the novel. Since the smallest act of deviation is the same as an act of civil disobedience, the reader worries from the beginning of the novel to its final pages about Montag's safety and survival. In the beginning of the story, the only action Montag can take is in his work as fireman. He follows the rules of

the fireman's code until he begins to doubt his work. Throughout the story there is little will to action taken by the characters. It is as if they have all become paralyzed from conformity. Mildred and her friends are mesmerized by the programs they watch in the television parlor. The relationship between Montag and Beatty is a passive one. Beatty talks to Montag to rationalize the work of the firemen when he begins to suspect Montag's discontent with his work. The main scenes of action involve the book burnings and Montag's pursuit by the Mechanical Hound. Other than these action scenes, Montag's transformation is one of thought. In one sense he is thinking mechanically in the beginning of the story. In the end, he has opened his mind to the ideas he finds in books. It is the beginning of his transformation. The reader cannot help wondering what action his new thinking might lead to. Bradbury leaves us with the hope that through these books, society will bury some of its destructive force. By ending the book in a fire storm of bombs, there is the sense that this old society of conformity will die and a new one will be born out of the ashes, like the mythical phoenix to which Granger refers. "A time to break down, and a time to build up. Yes. A time to keep silence, and a time to speak," Montag thinks as the book people move up the river at the end of the story.

## Construction

### Structure

Bradbury has structured *Fahrenheit 451* into three parts which parallel the stages of Montag's transformation. Part One is called "The Hearth and the Salamander." Montag enjoys his work as a fireman in this section, but he also begins to find his inner voice as doubts set in. While Clarisse and Mildred are introduced in this section, the other main character is Captain Beatty. Montag's conflict with the captain begins in Part One. Part Two is called "The Sieve and the Sand." In this section Montag has taken steps away from social conformity. He is reading books. He has established an alliance with Faber, who has equipped him with a two-way communication device. Montag's dialogues become angry and incoherent as he is torn between listening to people around him and to the voice of Faber in his ear. This section of the book ends with Montag in front of his own house, where he has come to burn books. His illegal activities have been exposed. In Part Three, "Burning Bright," Montag commits his final acts of transformation. He kills Beatty after burning down his own house and is chased by the Mechanical Hound as he makes his escape down the river. The other important character in Part Three is Granger, who introduces the work of the book people. The book ends with his meeting the book people, the bombing of the city, and a note of hope for the future.

**Point of View**

The book is written in the third person ("he") with its central focus on the thoughts and actions of Montag. Much of the excitement in the story, though, comes from the descriptive passages of the setting, action, and characters. Through his poetic descriptions, Bradbury makes the unreal world he describes seem real. He is able to make the fantastic seem real and reality seem fantastic, which establishes a tension that moves the story along. The narrative is interspersed with dialogue between characters. Some of the dialogue is didactic—that is, somewhat preachy—and tends to delay the action. These instructive passages, however, do reveal Bradbury's basic point of view, which passionately embraces the importance of books for human beings. Clearly, he has written *Fahrenheit 451* in order to express this opinion. His purpose is not merely entertainment, although readers do find the novel an enjoyable work of fiction.

**Symbolism**

Fire, the salamander, the Mechanical Hound, and the number of the title are important symbols that Bradbury exploits in the novel. At 451 degrees Fahrenheit, paper will burn. Fire is a primary image in the book. In the work of the fireman it is seen as a destructive force. It stamps out books and the freedom of

thought that books represent. In the beginning, Montag enjoys its qualities. He even likes the soot that it leaves behind. Later, when he is with the book people, fire is used constructively to warm people. When the Phoenix myth is used in the book, fire becomes a symbol of renewal. Out of the ashes, the mythical bird will be renewed. The suggestion is that a new society will be born from the ashes of the old one. The symbol of the Phoenix is used in contrast to the earlier use of the salamander. The dangerous fire lizard of myth, a symbol of the firemen's society from which Montag escapes, the salamander represents the destructive uses of fire. The most frightening symbol Bradbury uses is that of the Mechanical Hound, which represents the dehumanizing side of technology. This fierce creature seems to have powers greater than human ones; it has inescapable tracking capabilities, and can capture its victims with just one sting of anesthetic. Bradbury has made the creature seem so real that it exists in the novel as an important character. When the Mechanical Hound pursuing Montag is destroyed, another one is sent in its place, suggesting that technology used destructively cannot be easily demolished.

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# Historical Context: Fahrenheit 451

*EXPLORING Novels*, 2003

**Book Burnings**

Bradbury had a number of recent historical events on which to base *Fahrenheit 451* when he wrote the book in the early 1950s. The book burnings of the Nazi regime in Germany during the 1930s had been widely shown after World War II. These book burnings became a major symbol of the repression that followed in Nazi Germany. The importance of books and the freedom to read them was a central concern of liberal-minded people during the 1950s. As the Senate hearings of Joseph McCarthy began to focus on writers and film makers, the question of artistic freedom troubled many people and became the subject of debate. It was within this context of artistic repression that Bradbury expanded his story "The Fireman" into a full length novel. The fact that the book was reprinted forty-eight times over a twenty-five year period after its publication is indicative of the fact that Bradbury hit a vital nerve center of public consciousness. Unlike many of the characters in *Fahrenheit 451*, the American reading public ultimately rejected the idea of thought control that was present during the McCarthy hearings.

**Censorship**

While Americans are guaranteed free speech and free press in the Bill of Rights to the Constitution, a history of censorship has nevertheless existed in this country. Censorship was at times allowed and even enforced by the United States government. In the early years of film making, censorship was allowed on the grounds that movies were entertainment and not an expression of free speech. Senator Joseph McCarthy's hearings into the political background of artists led to the "blackballing" of several prominent Hollywood writers during the 1950s. While the Supreme Court decision allowing censorship of films was overturned in 1952, strict regulation of film content persisted into the 1960s. Today, the attempt to censor artistic products comes mainly from organized pressure groups. Ironically, Bradbury's publishers, unknown to him, bowdlerized *Fahrenheit 451* —that is, "cleaned up" or deleted some of the language that Bradbury used—in order to make the book saleable to the high school market. Since the advent of films, television, and the internet, efforts to limit access by children to certain types of material in these media has persisted to this day. The general method has been to have producers of these media rate the programs and place the burden of responsibility on parents to censor what children see in the movies, watch on television, or have access to on computers.

**Political Repression and Conformity**

Besides the repression that took place during the Nazi regime in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s, similar political repression and dictatorship had been taking place in the Soviet Union. After World War II, Western Europe and the United States entered into what has been called the Cold War—a struggle pitting the ideals of democracy and communism against each other—with the Soviet Union. Frequent reports of Soviet repression of writers and censorship of books were in the news. In his dystopian novel *1984,* George Orwell had satirized what he called "big brother," a government figure who was always watching the public. Orwell also used two-way television to illustrate how the new technology could be used against the public. Bradbury presents television in *Fahrenheit 451* as a drug that stupefies its viewers. Much of the pressure to conform in the United States during the Cold War was derived from the holdover of a wartime psychology that was strong during World War II. The mobilization during the war spilled over into the postwar era. As the United States and Europe went through a period of rebuilding domestic markets, the Cold War also stimulated a military economy. Opportunities for advancement abounded. Jobs were plentiful and people were encouraged to "work hard and get ahead." The image of the "organization man" was prevalent. If you "followed orders, you would succeed" was the conventional wisdom of the day. This attitude is reflected in Bradbury's portrayal of Montag in the opening scenes of *Fahrenheit 451*.

**Technology**

From the early days of television in the 1950s, when every American scrambled to have one in the home, to this day, watching television has competed with reading books. In the 1950s, schools began to use television in the classroom because it was becoming apparent that children's reading levels were dropping. Bradbury, who had been nurtured as a child on books, used this in his novel to show how literature was begin reduced to the simplest, most general terms. "Out of the nursery into the college and back to the nursery; there's your intellectual pattern for the past five centuries or more," Captain Beatty tells Montag and his wife when he tries to rationalize the work of the firemen.

Of all the technological advances developed since World War II, none have had a greater impact than the development of atomic energy and the atomic bomb. During the 1950s and up until the fall of the Soviet Union, the fear of nuclear war was a real threat in the minds of people. The fear of damage from nuclear waste remains an environmental threat. The fear that destructive atomic power might fall into the hands of terrorists is also an issue that compels political discourse and action. It is within an atmosphere of fear

that repression can flourish. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury re-creates the atmosphere of fear and repression that prevailed when he was writing the book.

Another technological advance that Bradbury deals with in his book is the development of robots. In the Mechanical Hound he presents a robot that is more powerful than a human being in its ability to "sniff out" its prey. This representation reflects a commonly held view that the nature of robots is to be feared because they do not possess human qualities and might even be able to take control over human beings. Many science-fiction "mad scientist" movies of the 1950s capitalized on this fear by portraying monstrous creatures created by misused technology as well as technology itself revolting against its creators. This fear of technology was pervasive during the 1950s.

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