

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Fahrenheit 451

by Ray Bradbury

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Fahrenheit 451

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain the significance of the Allegory of the Cave to *Fahrenheit 451*
2. explain what *parable* and *allegory* are and how *Fahrenheit 451* is related to those forms
3. analyze significance of the symbolism of fire, light, and related images to the book
4. trace Montag's development as a dynamic character
5. discuss the distinction the book makes between pleasure and happiness
6. understand the references to the Bible in the book, including:
 - the Garden of Eden
 - the Book of Ecclesiastes
 - the story of Sodom and Gomorrah
7. analyze the state of families and interpersonal relationships in the book and explain what the author is saying about them
8. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam
9. respond to multiple-choice items similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam
10. offer a close reading of *Fahrenheit 451* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Fahrenheit 451

Lecture Notes

Fahrenheit 451 is a science fiction novella set in a future version of the United States. It was first published in 1953, a time of great prosperity for a large group of Americans. World War II had brought the country out of the Depression. Manufacturing and production increased. Two things that were produced in large numbers, and that changed the face of America, were the television and the automobile.

As more people entered the middle class, they were able to afford televisions. Before World War II, only about 7,000–8,000 television sets had been made in the U.S. Production was halted during the war and resumed in August of 1945. In 1946, only one half of one per cent of United States households had a television set. By 1954 (the year after the release of *Fahrenheit 451*), 55% of United States households had televisions. By 1962, television sets could be found in 90% of United States homes.

Men worked during the day, but women generally stayed home and raised the children. Women, therefore, were a captive audience for television programs broadcast during the day. Children were also a desirable audience. Television changed the way people interacted. Rather than talking to neighbors as a form of entertainment, people began to stay in their homes and watch their favorite television programs.

The 1950s were also a time in which the automobile became extremely important to America. In 1947, still in the aftermath of World War II and industry's retooling for peacetime, 3,300,000 automobiles were produced in the United States. By 1953 (the year of *Fahrenheit 451*'s release), production had more than doubled.

The year 1949 also witnessed the introduction of the high-compression V8 engine, allowing for faster and more powerful automobiles, and setting off America's decades-long love affair with speed and power.

Coincident with the rise of the automobile was the building of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System (originally called the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways). While the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 (popularly known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act) was not signed into law until three years after the release of *Fahrenheit 451*, variations of Eisenhower's plan had been circulating since 1921 and had been lobbied for by automobile manufacturers since the end of World War II.

New cities and suburbs were planned around the new roads and plentiful, cheap automobiles. Areas that had formerly been wilderness or parks were transformed into residential or business areas. Walking became more rare; the automobile was the preferred method of getting from one place to another.

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Questions for Discussion

1. Was killing Captain Beatty right or wrong? Are books worth more than human beings?
2. Not only do most people in *Fahrenheit 451* not read, but they also don't write. What kinds of freedom does writing provide?
3. What are the benefits and drawbacks of democracy, according to the book?
4. Is censorship a natural result of majority rule?
5. With the Internet, information is available to everyone. Is this a good or a bad thing? What might Bradbury think about it?
6. Even though Montag has never been exposed to books, he has an affinity for them; he is able to be moved by words. Do all humans have this innate ability and desire, or is it something that has to be taught and fostered in the culture?
7. Beatty says that every fireman goes through what Montag is going through at some time or another. Do you think this is true? If so, have the other firemen been convinced by Beatty that they are doing the right thing?
8. Faber implies that people and society are not just the perpetrators, but the victims, of a shallow, unstable society. How can this be true?
9. Analyze Faber as a guide. What are his strengths and weaknesses?

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Study Guide

Part One: The Hearth and the Salamander

1. In an ancient Greek myth, Prometheus, a son of Zeus, feels sorry for human beings, who are cold and helpless. He steals fire from the gods and gives it to mankind. Symbolically, the giving of fire is the beginning of wisdom and science. Fire is also destructive: the Christian Hell is supposed to be a place where people burn eternally, and some religions predict that the world will end in fire. What aspect of fire do we see in the opening of the book?

2. How does Bradbury characterize Montag in the opening paragraphs of the book? What details does he use to accomplish this characterization?

3. Why does Montag's helmet have the number 451 on it?

4. What details does Bradbury give to establish the setting of Montag's encounter with Clarisse? Why might these be significant?

5. What kinds of words and images does Bradbury use to characterize Clarisse? How might these be symbolic?

Part Two: The Sieve and the Sand

1. The first two books mentioned in this section are by James Boswell, an eighteenth-century lawyer and friend of the writer Samuel Johnson. Boswell is best known for his biography of Johnson and his diaries describing their travels together. Why does Montag think these books have something to do with Clarisse?

2. What connection does Montag make between books and empathy?

3. In relation to the Allegory of the Cave, who would Faber be? What does he say that indicates this is the case?

4. Describe Montag's state of mind as he rides the train to see Faber. Has he made a complete break with his old self?

5. Why does Montag, at this point, have the memory about the sieve and the sand?

6. What Bible verse is Montag trying to memorize during the train ride? Who or what is his antagonist in this scene?

Part Three: Burning Bright

1. To what story is Beatty alluding when he says Montag “wanted to fly near the sun”?

2. What, according to Beatty, is the real attraction of fire?

3. What is the last thing that Montag burns?

4. What does Montag mean when he says, “We never burned *right*”?

5. Why does Montag run to Faber’s house?

6. Who almost kills Montag? What is the significance of the motivation for this attempted murder?

7. Where does Faber advise Montag to travel? Why might this be thematically significant?
