



# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Ray Bradbury's

## **Fahrenheit 451**

from

**Multiple Critical Perspectives™**

by

Elizabeth Osborne



**PRESTWICK HOUSE, INC.**

*"Everything for the English Classroom!"*

## General Introduction to the Work

---

### About the Author

**R**AY BRADBURY WAS BORN IN Waukegan, Illinois, in 1920. As a child, he was fond of libraries and spent much time reading in them. Bradbury's family moved to Los Angeles when Bradbury was thirteen. After he graduated from high school, he decided not to go to college. He worked odd jobs and spent nights in the local library, where he educated himself. In the 1940s, Bradbury submitted short stories to science fiction magazines. He also joined a group of prominent science-fiction writers in Los Angeles. In 1947, he published his first collection of short stories.

*The Martian Chronicles*, Bradbury's first long work, was published in 1950. It is actually a collection of short stories held together by a framing device. Its subject is the settlement of Mars by earthlings. It considers some of the problems of American society, such as emotional alienation, racism, and destruction of the environment.

In 1951, Bradbury published a collection of short stories called *The Illustrated Man*. This collection also has a framing device: the tattoos on a man the narrator meets each lead into different stories.

Bradbury has said that most of his stories are not science fiction. He defines science fiction as something that could plausibly happen according to the laws that govern life on Earth, and notes that many of the things in his books could not happen. Nonetheless, his books are often classified as science fiction because they deal with a topic specific to this genre: the dangers that technology poses for human society and the human soul. Many of the stories are set in the future, at a time when the mistakes of the present have come to fruition and people are living in a *dystopia* (the opposite of a *utopia*, or perfect place; a society in which nothing functions). Alienation, especially of individuals from their society and family members from one another, is common. For instance, in the short story "The Veldt," which appears in *The Illustrated Man*, parents trying to make their children happy end up losing control of the children, who take over the house. Another important recurring element is people's loss of power over the technology that is supposed to make them happy.

Many of Bradbury's stories have been turned into films. Legendary French director Francois Truffaut, for instance, made a movie out of *Fahrenheit 451*. Bradbury also hosted a television program called *The Ray Bradbury Theater*, which showed adaptations of stories he had written.

## Feminism Applied to *Fahrenheit 451*



### Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



## Activity One

### Examining Women's Roles in *Fahrenheit 451*

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Roles of Women in the 1950s and Roles of Women in *Fahrenheit 451*.
  - Each group will answer the questions on the worksheet that relate to its category, using the information sheet for comparison.
2. Divide the class into four groups, or a number of groups divisible by four.
3. Reconvene the class and have each group present its findings.
  - As a class, answer the following questions:
    - How is Mildred like or unlike the ideal women portrayed on television in the 1950s?
    - Are the roles of women today the same as they were in the 1950s?
    - What arguments have you heard about what women should be doing (working, raising children, etc.) today?

## Mythological/Archetypal Analysis of *Fahrenheit 451*



### Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure... that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



## Activity One

### Identifying Archetypal Characters in *Fahrenheit 451*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Fahrenheit 451* Archetypal Activity One: Identifying Archetypal Characters.
2. Divide the class into three groups, or a number of groups divisible by three.
3. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the archetypes on the worksheet and answer the questions relating to that archetype.
4. Reconvene the class and have each group present its findings.
5. As a class, answer the following questions:
  - Think of some other characters from literature, film, and television who resemble the main characters in *Fahrenheit 451*.
  - Which character in *Fahrenheit 451* best conforms to the archetype of the spirit/intellect, and why?
  - Which character in *Fahrenheit 451* best conforms to the description of the sage, and why?

## Psychoanalytical Approach to Fahrenheit 451



### Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

#### Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

## Activity One

### Examining the Role of the Id in *Fahrenheit 451*

1. As a class, review the three parts of the mind in Freudian psychology discussed in the *Notes on Psychoanalytic Theory*, paying special attention to the description of the id. Then review the following passages in *Fahrenheit 451*:

In *The Hearth and the Salamander*:

- The third conversation between Montag and Clarisse, especially the passage beginning, “Sometimes I’m ancient...,” and ending, “And I do all the shopping and housecleaning by hand.”
  - Beatty’s first lecture to Montag, especially the passage beginning, “School is shortened...,” and ending, “Beatty got up.”
  - Faber’s first conversation with Montag, especially the passage beginning, “So now do you see...,” and ending, “Quality, texture of information.”
2. Pose the following questions:
    - Which part of the mind seems to be driving the society in which Montag lives? What in the passages you’ve read suggests this?
    - Which part of the mind is weak or missing altogether? What happened to it? What in the passages you’ve read suggests this?
    - What solutions do the characters provide for the imbalance in society?