

BACKGROUND NOTES ON RAY BRADBURY'S FAHRENHEIT 451

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

During the late 1940's Ray Bradbury produced a short story called "The Fireman" which appeared in Galaxy Science Fiction in February of 1951. This short story was the basis for his famous novel Fahrenheit 451 which appeared in October of 1953. It is probably his best and also his best known novel. It was originally published in the same book with two other short novels, and did not come out separately until April 1960.

The society of Fahrenheit 451 is involved with the burning of books. Book burning is a phrase which describes the suppression of writing. The real issue of this novel is **censorship**. A society which burns books is censoring everything. It is probable that Bradbury took the idea for this novel from the book burnings in Nazi Germany of the 1930's.

This novel also appeared during the "McCarthy period," the post World War II climate characterized by blacklisting and censorship in the United States.

Fahrenheit 451 is currently the most famous work of social criticism that Bradbury has written. It deals with the extremely serious problem of the banning of books and the suppression of the mind - that is, with censorship. The novel examines a few pivotal days of a man's life, a man who is a burner of books, and therefore an instrument of suppression.

You should note two things before you begin this novel: (1) the significance of the title, and (2) the epigram by Juan Ramon Jimenez at the beginning. Jimenez was a Spanish poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1956 and was largely responsible for introducing Modernism into Spanish poetry.

Fahrenheit 451 is a **dystopian** novel. This type of novel shows an imperfect world in the process of becoming worse.

CENTRAL CHARACTERS

Guy Montag	The protagonist , a complacent man thirty years old. He has been a fireman for ten years.
Mildred Montag	Guy's wife, also thirty years old.
Clarisse McClellan	Montag's new neighbor, sixteen years old.
Captain Beatty	Montag's superior, the Fire Captain.
Unidentified Woman	A woman from "the ancient part of the city" who becomes a martyr.
Faber	An elderly man, a retired English professor.
Granger	An ex-writer who lives out of the city.
Stoneman & Black	Montag's fellow firemen.
Mrs. Phelps & Mrs. Bowles	Mildred's friends.

NOTES AND QUESTIONS ON PART I - THE HEARTH AND THE SALAMANDER

1. In what century does the novel take place? **It doesn't say, but it's in the future.**
2. How are homes different in this futuristic society? _____
3. How are firemen different in this futuristic society? _____

4. According to the government (and the average citizen) what advantage do the citizens get from the burning of books and why? _____

5. Why is Montag not happy? _____

6. Mildred is a **stereotype**. Whom does she represent? _____

7. Clarisse is a **stereotype** also. Whom does she represent? _____

8. Explain how Clarisse acts as a catalyst to Montag. _____

9. List three kinds of things Clarisse enjoys doing? _____

10. List three kinds of things most teenagers of that society enjoy doing? _____

11. How does the **motif** of "rebirth" fit into this novel? _____

12. Mildred claims to be happy, but we can see that she is not. List three things that show she is not happy. _____

13. What is it that Montag cannot remember about Mildred? _____
14. Describe the Mechanical Hound. _____

15. How are Captain Beatty and Hitler's Nazis alike? _____

What is right with Captain Beatty's talk about the history of fire departments?

What is wrong with Captain Beatty’s talk about the history of fire departments?

16. Montag’s fire run to the unidentified woman’s house is a turning point in his life. What happens there? _____

At one point she says, “You can never have my books.” What does she mean?

The woman’s strange statement, “Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.” is an **allusion** to Nicholas Ridley, the Bishop of London in the sixteenth century. He was of heresy and sentenced to be burned at the stake with a fellow heretic, Hugh Latimer. Latimer’s words to Ridley are those Bradbury alludes to in this section.

Explain the significance of this quote. _____

17. Why do the McClellans move away? _____

18. Captain Beatty has been aware all along that certain changes are taking place within Montag. When Montag claims to be sick, what does Captain Beatty do?

19. What is the reason Captain Beatty gives for the government ultimately deciding to get rid of books? _____

20. After Captain Beatty leaves, Montag confesses what to Mildred? _____

21. The title of Part One is “The Hearth and the Salamander.” Bradbury chose this title because it shows the dual image of fire - it can warm and it can also purify. In ancient mythology, there was the belief that the salamander was a creature that could survive fire.

Which warms, the hearth or the salamander? _____

Which purifies? _____

Which is happening to Montag, warming or purifying? _____

22. What is the last quotation Montag reads at the end of Part 1? _____

This quote is from Jonathan Swift (Book 1, Chapter 4 of Gulliver's Travels). Compare this quote to the one by Juan Ramon Jimenez before the beginning of the novel. **Compare** them in your own words. ____

Some interesting notes on allusions, words, and phrases from Part 1

- a. **this great python** the fire hose, which resembles a great serpent, a key image in the novel which serves as a reminder of Adam and Eve's temptation to disobey God in the Garden of Eden
- b. **pigeon-winged books** the books come alive and flap their "wings" as they are thrown into the fire. This connection between books and birds continues throughout the novel, symbolizing enlightenment through reading.
- c. **black beetle-colored helmet** the beetle, with its prominent black horns, is connected in literature with Satan. Vehicles, too, in this society resemble beetles.
- d. **salamander** in an animistic concept of nature, the salamander is a visual representation of fire. In mythology, it endures the flames without burning.
- e. **Phoenix** a mythical multicolored bird of Arabia with a long history of artistic and literary symbolism, the Phoenix is one of a kind. At the end of its five-hundred-year existence, it perches on its nest of spices and sings until sunlight ignites the mass. After the body is consumed in flames, a worm emerges from the ashes and develops into the next Phoenix.
- f. **Clarisse** the girl's name comes from the Latin for "brightest."
- g. **Guy Montag** his name suggests two significant possibilities - Guy Fawkes, the instigator of a plot to blow up the English Houses of Parliament in 1605, and Montag, a trademark of Mead, an American paper company, which makes stationery, and also of a company that makes furnaces.
- h. **black cobra** the "suction snake" that pumps Mildred's stomach repeats the earlier image of the python; the impersonal "handymen" who operate it have "eyes of puff adders." The fact that it has an eye suggests a sinister and invasive fiber optic tube that examines the inside of the body's organs and even the soul.
- i. **Beatty** the fire captain, who "baits" Montag, is well named.
- j. **November 4th** the firemen play cards early on Mischief Day, the eve of Guy Fawkes day, when bonfires and burning of "guys" in effigy commemorate his

gunpowder plot, an abortive attempt to destroy James I and his Protestant supporters, who suppressed Catholics.

- k. **Stoneman and Black** the firemen's names suggest the hardness of their hearts and the color of their skin and hair from contact with smoke.
- l. **Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine** from Chapter 1 of Dreamthorp, a collection of essays by Alexander Smith, a Glasgow lacemaker.
- m. **Tower of Babel** in Genesis 11:1-9, the Biblical explanation of how Noah's children came to speak different languages. The word "babble" comes from Babel.
- n. **automatic reflex** Beatty is describing how people stopped using their brains and began depending on nerve functions that require no thought.
- o. **our fingers in the dike** an allusion to the legend about the Dutch boy who performed a noble, selfless public service in holding back the sea by keeping his finger in a hole in the dike.

PART 2 - THE SIEVE AND THE SAND

1. What do Montag and Millie spend the rest of that cold, rainy November afternoon doing?

The weather outside is dismal and depressing. The mood of Montag and Millie seems to match this weather. What is the literary term for this? _____

2. What is outside the door while they are reading? _____

How do you know this? _____

3. What foreshadowing clue of impending world doom is heard by Montag and Millie?
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4. At this point Montag is thirsting for knowledge, but he realizes that in order to make some sense from these books he needs a teacher. He remembers his encounter with Faber a year before. Montag calls him and asks what question?
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5. On the way to Faber's house, Montag is riding on the subway and trying to concentrate on the book he is reading. What is the literary term for the type of writing Bradbury uses in this section? _____

Explain what this type of writing does. _____

6. It is also on the subway ride that Montag remembers a day at the beach when he was a child. This is where the author takes the title for this section of the novel. In your own

words, explain what this section title means. _____

7. Montag arrives at Faber's house. Notice that Faber is an old man. This is no accident.

Bradbury has used an old man because age often represents knowledge and wisdom.

Age also often represents moral qualities such as good will and readiness to help.

Notice also that Faber (like Clarisse) is associated with the color white. He himself is

very white, the walls of his house are white. There is white in his hair and eyes. White

is often a symbol of goodness in literature. List the three things Faber says are

necessary for us to get something out of books.

1. _____ 2. _____

3. _____

8. When Faber tells Montag he will not help Montag with his plan to try to stop the madness in society, what does Montag begin to do? _____

What does Faber finally agree to do for Montag that starts as soon as Montag leaves?

9. Montag then returns home. While there, he becomes enraged at Millie and her friends. Notice the many words Bradbury uses in this section which have burning connotations. Montag imagines the women's smiles "burning" through the walls of the house. Millie and her friends are characterized with "lit cigarettes," "sun-fired" hair, and "blazing" fingernails. Montag then does something very bold. He pulls out a book and begins to read it aloud. The selection he reads has been carefully chosen by Bradbury. It is a poem written by Matthew Arnold entitled "Dover Beach." Read it. Then explain why Mrs. Bowles breaks into tears. _____

10. Later, Montag returns to the fire station. Then Captain Beatty tells Montag about his dream of the previous night. In that dream, Captain Beatty and Montag have a "duel." Explain what kind of duel it is.

What does Captain Beatty say is the result of the duel? _____

11. Before Montag can respond to Captain Beatty's tirade, the fire alarm sounds. Where does this run take them? _____

SOME INTERESTING NOTES ON PART 2

- a. **We cannot tell the precise moment when friendship is formed. As in filling a vessel drop by drop, there is at last a drop which makes it run over; so in a series of kindnesses there is at last one which makes the heart run over.** from James Boswell's Life of Dr. Johnson, published in 1791. The quotation helps Montag understand his relationship with the mysterious Clarisse, who brings joy into his life for no obvious reason.
- b. **That favorite subject. Myself.** taken from a letter of the British biographer James Boswell, dated July 16, 1763. It emphasizes the chasm that separates Montag from Mildred, because she shuns self analysis and submerges herself in television programs that sedate her mind.
- c. **half out of the cave.** This alludes to Plato's cave allegory, found in Book 7 of his Republic. The analogy describes how people rely on flickering shadows as their source of reality.
- d. **Consider the lilies of the field. They toil not, neither do they . . .** In his dash on the subway toward Faber's house, Montag tries to read a line from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of St. Matthew. The line, which is taken from Chapter 6, verses 28-29, ends, "and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." This quotation reminds Montag that spiritual hunger is greater than material need.
- e. **The Book of Job** Faber selects a book of the Old Testament which describes how Job is tested by God. What Job learns from all this testing by God is to trust.
- f. **Cheshire Cat** a reference to the grinning cat in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland.
- g. **Who are a little wise, the best fools be** a line from John Donne's poem "The Triple Fool," which Beatty uses to confuse Montag.
- h. **the sheep returns to the fold. We're all sheep who have strayed at times** Beatty alludes to the prophecy in Isaiah chapter 53, verse 6; "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." The implied message is that Montag has betrayed his fellow firemen.
- i. **Truth is truth, to the end of reckoning** a line from Shakespeare's Measure for Measure Act V, Scene i, line 45.
- j. **They are never alone that are accompanied with noble thoughts** a verse taken from Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia.
- k. **Sweet food of sweetly uttered knowledge** a line from Sir Philip Sidney's Defense of Poesy.
- l. **Words are like leaves and where they most abound, Much fruit of sense is rarely found** a couplet from Alexander Pope's Essay on Criticism.

- m. **A little learning is a dangerous thing. Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring; There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely sobers us again.** a famous pair of couplets from Alexander Pope's Essay on Criticism, which warns the learner that scholarship requires dedication for maximum effect.
- n. **Knowledge is more than equivalent to force** from chapter 13 of Dr. Samuel Johnson's Rasselas.
- o. **He is no wise man that will quit a certainty for an uncertainty** from Dr. Samuel Johnson's Idler.
- p. **Truth will come to light, murder will not be hid long!** from Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, Act II, Scene ii, Line 86.
- q. **Oh God, he speaks only of his horse** a paraphrase from Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, Act I, Scene ii, Lines 37-38.
- r. **The Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose** from Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, Act I, Scene iii, Line 99.
- s. **This age thinks better of a gilded fool, than of a threadbare saint in wisdom's school** a couplet from Thomas Dekker's Old Fortunatus.
- t. **The dignity of truth is lost with much protesting** a line from Ben Jonson's Catiline's Conspiracy, Act III, Scene ii.
- u. **Carcasses bleed at the sight of the murderer** from Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, Part I, Section I, Member 2, Subsection 5.
- v. **trench mouth** severe ulceration of the gums, tonsils, and mucous membranes of the mouth resulting from bacterial infection.
- w. **Knowledge is power** a line from Francis Bacon's Advancement of Learning.
- x. **A dwarf on a giant's shoulders sees the furthest of the two** from Democritus to the Reader, Robert Burton's paraphrase from Lucan's Civil War.
- y. **The folly of mistaking a metaphor for a proof, a torrent of verbiage for a spring of capital truths, and oneself as an oracle is inborn in us** a paraphrase of Paul Valery's Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci.
- z. **A kind of excellent dumb discourse** a line from Shakespeare's Tempest, Act III, Scene iii, Line 38.
- aa. **All's well that is well in the end** a paraphrase of Shakespeare's All's Well That ends Well, Act IV, Scene iv, Line 35.
- bb. **the tyranny of the majority** from John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton's History of Freedom and Other Essays.

PART 3 - BURNING BRIGHT

1. What does Montag find out Mildred has done? _____
 What does she do when he arrives? _____
2. What does Captain Beatty force Montag to do about the house? _____
3. Explain what Montag does about the following:
 - a. Captain Beatty _____
 - b. the mechanical hound _____
 - c. Stoneman and Black _____
4. When Montag is running down the alley behind his house to escape, he suddenly falls down because he realizes something. What is it that he realizes?

 How does he know this is true? _____

5. Montag then heads for Faber's house. On the way there what does he do at Black's house? _____

6. Montag is in a rest room at a gas station when he learns that war has been declared. However, Montag has too much going on in his own life at the moment to worry about that. What immediate obstacle must Montag overcome in order to continue to Faber's house? _____
 What happens when he proceeds? _____
7. When he arrives at Faber's house, Montag douses everything with whiskey to eliminate his odor in the house. Why must Montag run now? _____
8. Explain Montag's dash for freedom. _____

9. Montag then discovers Granger and his men. Who are they? _____

10. How does the hunt for Montag end? _____
 Why does it end that way? _____

11. How have Granger and his people done what Montag has wanted to do? _____

12. What finally happens to the city? _____
 To Mildred? _____
 To Faber? _____
13. There is a lot of symbolism at the end of the novel. Explain the symbolic meanings in the following things:
 - a. the Phoenix _____

 - b. the time of day _____
 - c. the Biblical quotation _____

SOME INTERESTING NOTES ON PART 3

- a. **Burning Bright** The heading comes from a poem by William Blake called "The Tyger." The first four lines of the poem are
 Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,
 In the forests of the night:
 What immortal hand or eye,

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

This poem is often interpreted as a meditation about the origin of evil in the world. The tiger in this poem is often considered a symbol for a world in which evil is at work; it speaks also of the dual nature of all existence. There is also a dual meaning at the end of the book. The city is burning brightly from destruction, but the spirit of Granger and his people is also burning brightly, as they hope to rebuild society

b. **Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun and now that he's burnt his damn wings, he wonders why**

Captain Beatty alludes to Icarus, the son of Daedalus, an inventor in Greek mythology. After Daedalus makes wings and teaches his son to fly, he warns the boy not to go too near the sun. Icarus, intrigued with the power of flight, fails to heed the warning, the wax melts which holds the wings together, and he drowns in the sea below.

c. **You think you can walk on water** Beatty alludes to Jesus walking on water, as recorded in Mark 6:45-51.

d. **There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats, for I am arm'd so strong in honesty that they pass by me as an idle wind, which I respect no** Beatty taunts Montag with a passage from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Act IV, Scene iii, Line 66.

e. **Keystone comedy** From 1914 to 1920, director Mack Sennett and Keystone Studios produced a series of madcap silent film comedies featuring the Keystone Cops.

f. **the guild of the asbestos-weaver** Montag associates his desire to stop the burning with the formation of a new trade union. Like the guilds of the Middle Ages, the asbestos-weavers symbolize progress against the tyranny of the past.

g. **coat of a thousand colors** Granger alludes to Joseph, the character in Genesis 37: 3-4 who receives a long-sleeved, ornamental coat of many colors from Jacob, his doting father. The coat, symbolizing favoritism shown by Jacob toward his son, alienates the other sons, who sell their brother to passing traders, stain the coat with goat's blood, and return it to their father to prove that a wild animal has eaten Joseph.

h. **crying in the wilderness** Granger compares his group's minority status to John the Baptist, the prophet whom Isaiah predicted would one day announce the coming of the Messiah.

i. **V-2 rocket** the deadly German rockets used during World War II.

j. **I hate a Roman named Status Quo!** Granger's grandfather made a pun out of the Latin phrase, which means the situation as it now exists.

k. **whisper of a scythe** In an extended metaphor which begins with a giant hand sowing the grains of bombs over the land, the image concludes with the death-dealing scythe, the symbol carried in the hand of Father time, an image of death, which cuts down life in a single, silent sweep.

l. **To everything there is a season** Montag recalls an often-quoted segment of Ecclesiastes 3: 1- 8, which reminds him that there is a time for dying as well as a time for living.

m. **And on either side of the river was there a tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations** a prophecy from verse two of Revelation 22, the last book in the Bible.

ADDITIONAL CHARACTER NOTES

1. **Montag** - the **protagonist**
2. **Captain Beatty** - the **antagonist**
3. **Clarisse** - the **foil** of Mildred
4. **Granger** - the **foil** of Captain Beatty
5. **mechanical hound** - taken from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's dog in "The Hound of the Baskervilles"