

LIFE OF THE MIND IN “FAHRENHEIT 451” BY REY BRADBURY

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Abstract: *This study examines Ray Bradbury’s description of a whole new world in Fahrenheit 451. He demonstrates what the future will be like if new generations do not continue to further their education. This book “teaches us about our recent past, our present, and our own imagined future” with physical abuse (Smolla 896). The author analyzes how Bradbury explains the meaning of life and how sometimes we take it for granted.*

Key words: *Fahrenheit 451, futurism, censorship, sensation.*

The present has changed from the past. The future is not what it used to be. The 1953 publication of *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury is a cultural time marker that helps us to identify the past, evaluate the present, and imagine the future, just as other imaginative time markers do--George Orwell's novel *1984*,¹⁷ or Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*¹⁸, or the lyrics from Prince's 1982 classic *1999*.

When filmmaker Michael Moore chose the title for his muckraking movie, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a scathing attack on President George W. Bush and the war on terrorism, he deliberately conjured a play on the title of Ray Bradbury's classic novel and evoked the novel's status as a cultural time marker.¹⁹ The temperature 451 degrees Fahrenheit is, for Bradbury, the temperature at which books burn; for Moore, according to his movie tagline, it is "the temperature where freedom burns."²⁰

Fahrenheit 451 speaks to us about Ray Bradbury's literary imagination, and, more powerfully, for what it teaches us about our recent past, our present, and our own imagined future. As we are too preoccupied with the rapid speed and hypnotic appeal of digital and virtual realities, we neglect genuine human relationships; we rush past the precious physical and sensory moments that bring substance to our being; we struggle to find the quietude for genuine reflection, peace, and a life of the mind.

The novel is presented through the point of view of its central character, Guy Montag, whose occupation is "fireman." Though we are never told the precise year in which the action takes place, Bradbury hints that it is the late twentieth or early twenty-first century. The danger of war and nuclear blaze permeates the novel. "We've started and won two atomic

¹⁷ George Orwell, *1984* (1949).

¹⁸ *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer 1968)

¹⁹ *FAHRENHEIT 9/11* (Dog Eat Dog Films 2004).

²⁰ Ray Bradbury did not find the allusion flattering. Bradbury strongly criticized Moore for appropriating his novel's title. See Lawrence Van Gelder, Arts Briefing: Michael Moore vs. Ray Bradbury, *N.Y TIMES*, June 22, 2004, at E2.



wars since 1990" (p.73), the narrator explains. Now the bombers are in the air at all times (p.73).

Although *Fahrenheit 451* can be discussed as futurism and as an exploration of the anatomy of censorship, in the end, in my opinion, the real genius of the book is more universal. The literary masterpiece *Fahrenheit 451* is too big to be reduced to ordinary muckraking, dystopian science fiction, or a movement against censorship and book burning. Though muckraking, futurism, and anti-censorship manifestos are all admirable literary achievements, *Fahrenheit 451* surpasses them all. *Fahrenheit 451* is really about the life of the mind and the crucial connection between a life of the mind and a life of meaning. This is why the characters, the story, and the ideas are all so important.

Bradbury points out many forces that interfere with a life of the mind and diminish the possibility of a life of meaning. Separation from the written word, from the basic sensations of taste, smell, sight, and touch, and from the benefits of leisure, rest, and thought are a few examples. Despite all the violence in *Fahrenheit 451*, including the book burnings and city bombings, the main theme of the book is the need for peace on earth, whether it is peace within nations or peace of the mind and soul. And while we may have avoided the book burning that Bradbury predicted for us, we have yet found our peace, neither literally nor figuratively.

It is important to distinguish between Bradbury's criticism of modernity's attack on sense and his criticism of sensation itself. However, *Fahrenheit 451* warns us that a life without the senses is a life without memory, without meaning, without sensibility. Clarisse helps to save Montag by helping him to smell and see and taste and touch. Bradbury links the quality of human life to physicality. Bradbury links the burning of books to the ignoring of taste, smell, sight, sound, and touch, and he links the loss of both reading and sensation to a decline in our humanity. The link between the senses and books is a link between sense and thought, between sense and the taking of time to think. *Fahrenheit 451* makes the significant observation that we lose humanity when we mistake time for leisure and stimulation for a real life of the mind and soul. Pausing to smell, see, feel, listen, and touch is the prerequisite to pausing to reflect, critique, brood, and invent. Pausing to read to a child is the prerequisite to pausing to pass on the traditions of civilized humanity.

We can conclude that despite the fact that we live in a time with less censorship than the one depicted in *Fahrenheit 451*, many of the problems that plagued Bradbury's characters are still with us today. More than a censorship-free atmosphere is necessary for intellectual, fulfilling lives. And this is where the struggles and hardships experienced by the characters in *Fahrenheit 451* are strikingly never-ending.

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