

# 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.

Ray Bradbury, a noted science fiction author, became concerned about the dangers he felt television and automobiles presented to a stable society. *Fahrenheit 451* is the book that came out of Bradbury's vision of the future.

### **The Allegory of the Cave:**

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato authored a dialogue (philosophical discussion between characters) that we now know as *The Republic*. In this work, Plato describes the difference between ideals and reality. There are, he says, ideal forms of things which exist only as abstract concepts, but which are the most true and perfect things. Human beings, however, live in a shadow world; they see imperfect reflections of these true forms. In his famous allegory, Plato imagines people sitting in a cave, watching shadows play on a wall. Because the cave is all they know, the people think the shadows are real. When one person is somehow taken from the cave and placed in the Real World, he or she is unable to convince the others of the truth.

Like biblical prophets, persons who have been “out of the Cave” and know True Reality, are considered foolish or insane by those who still accept the shadow figures on the wall of the Cave as reality. Out-of-Cave prophets are dismissed, ridiculed, discredited, and—often—destroyed.

### **Genre:**

*Fahrenheit 451* is a work of science fiction. Unlike fantasy, science fiction describes things that are plausible, based on the best scientific knowledge at the time. Science fiction often considers the effect that technology might have on society. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury speculates that things intended to make life easier and more pleasant—cars, mass media—may actually rob people of the ability to think and relate to one another.

### **Themes:**

Look out for the following themes in *Fahrenheit 451*:

- Progress can actually be dangerous or harmful.
- The thinking man or woman will always be at odds with society.
- Reason can be used as a weapon to defend wrong as well as right. People should make their own choices and be careful about accepting what they hear.

### **Motifs:**

- Good and Bad Fire

Fire and burning are important symbols in *Fahrenheit 451*. Fire can be life-saving; after all, people need warmth to survive. According to one ancient Greek myth, Prometheus (his name literally means “forethought”), a son of Zeus, made human beings out of clay. He then stole fire from the gods for his new creation, allowing people enlightenment and knowledge.

As a symbol, fire has long been associated with technology—the Roman god Vulcan is the god of metalworking, and his forge is under the volcano Mt. Etna. The god Apollo is god of the sun and the god of knowledge—both physical and mental light.

Of course, fire can also destroy. The Prometheus myth contains the warning that if people try to know too much—to steal too much of the gods’ fire—they will pay the price. Prometheus himself was severely punished for his theft on behalf of humankind.

Among other associations of fire, life, and death are the phoenix and the salamander. The phoenix is a bird that destroys itself in a fire and then rises again from its own ashes. The lizard-like salamander was once thought to be generated by fire. (This belief is thought to have originated in the fact that many salamanders live in rotted logs. When the log is thrown onto a fire, the salamander flees, thus giving the appearance that it originated in the fire.)

- The  
Hearth

The first section of *Fahrenheit 451* is entitled “The Hearth and the Salamander.” The hearth is an ancient symbol of home and family. A warm fireplace symbolizes comfort, familiarity and affection. It is one of the places that contain the nurturing, non-destructive fire.

- Light and  
Vision

Fire brings not only physical warmth, but light, which is a symbol of wisdom. Look for the following symbols related to light:

- Eyes – Eyes have been called “windows to the soul”; they show a person’s mental or spiritual illumination. For example, Clarisse, a visionary character, watches Montag carefully; the feature of hers that strikes him the most is her eyes. Mildred’s eyes, on the other hand, are compared to stones or glass; there is no light behind them.
- Looking vs. Seeing – In Montag’s society, people experience constant visual stimulation, but do not actually see. As in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, they mistake the things they are watching for reality.
- Mirrors – A mirror is a symbol of self-examination and mental reflection. At the end of the book, Granger says that the job of the men will be to “build a mirror factory”—i.e., to force society to closely examine itself.
- The Sun and Moon – The sun gives off light by burning, the moon by reflecting. Clarisse is connected to the moon because she is reflective by nature.

