Literature & Writing

In this world, books are banned. Not only are they banned—if you’re caught with any books in your possession, the fire department will come and set house on fire, because that’s not an overreaction or anything. Even though we don’t see too many of them, books are a huge deal in this story—it’s full of debates on the advantages and disadvantages of literature. The novel's characters present a variety of points of view. One believes that books are problematic in how they present so many varying and often contradictory viewpoints. This leaves the reader confused. Another believes that books themselves are not important, rather what matters is the information that the best of them contain: reflections of life and the world at large. A third character insists that those who study literature are not superior beings; it’s the books themselves that are superior. Either way, the novel reminds us that without literature, we’d be stuck between a rock and a hard, bookless place.

QUESTION: If books and TV both have the capacity to convey information at a mass scale, then why are books so superior to television in this novel?

Technology & Moderation

TV is the enemy in *Fahrenheit 451*. It’s responsible for replacing literature, intellectualism, and curiosity. On top of that, it’s become a substitute for family, friendship, and any sort of real conversation. Relationships? Pshhht, who needs *those*?  We learn that the TV reigns supreme in the future because of the "happiness" it offers. People are happier when they don’t have to think, or so the story goes. TV aside, technology is the government’s means of oppression, but also provides the renegade’s opportunity to subvert. We wonder what Bradbury would have to say about *smartphones*.

QUESTION: In the digitized, mechanical world of *Fahrenheit 451*, what makes something *real*? What’s more "real" – books or TV? Are either really reality?

Rules & Order

*Fahrenheit 451* takes place in a world of strict rules and order. Books are illegal, free thought is essentially prohibited, and activities are tightly organized.

The weird part is that much of the restrictions on the general populous are self-enforced. The government has taken away the citizens’ ability to dissent and veiled all dissatisfaction with a cheap version of "happiness," a.k.a. TV. This means that little external regulation is required, as the citizens conform contentedly to the status quo. Sound familiar? We thought so.

QUESTION: Given the way that the book people fight the law, are they "rebels"? Is it enough to fight on a small scale, without concern for the state of others?

Violence

Excessive violence in the futuristic world of Fahrenheit 451 betrays a problematic underbelly to the status quo. Teenagers go around killing each other, TV is filled to the brim with violence, and even driving a car brings on the crazed thirst for speed and destruction. In this book, violence is an outlet, and the cravings for such behavior mark the dissatisfaction of the general populous. Because, you know, violent outbursts are a totallyreasonable reaction to feeling unfilled.

QUESTION: If life really is cyclic, as Montag believes at the end (a time for living, a time for dying, etc.), then isn’t destruction necessary? Does this justify the violence we see earlier in the novel?

Identity

The crisis of identity is at the core of Fahrenheit 451—just like middle school. As Montag learns from a series of mentors and teachers, he sees his own identity melding with that of his instructors. This is also a means of scapegoating—if your identity is not entirely your own, then you are not entirely responsible for your actions. It's a tad ironic that this occurs as Montag is learning to think for himself, but that's kind of the point. Bradbury explores the question of how to define the self throughout the story, and seems to find an answer: actions.

QUESTION: Montag often splits his identity – he hears Clarisse talking through him, or he’s got Faber in his ear, or he imagines his hands acting of their own accord – but which is the "real" Montag?

Wisdom & Knowledge

In Fahrenheit 451, wisdom and knowledge are gained through both experience and scholarship. Most important is critical thinking—challenging ideas rather than accepting them as absolutely correct. Mentors and teachers are integral to this process, not only for passing on knowledge but for opening the door to independent thought, so it's really convenientthat Montag runs into a group of wild professors in the forest. Along with Faber, these guys do a great job of passing on their wisdom and knowledge of books to Montag. Once the city is conveniently destroyed, these guys are tasked with reestablishing society. We couldn't think of a better—and more knowledgeable—crew to take it on.

## QUESTION: Of Montag’s three mentors – Clarisse, Faber, and Granger – who is the most knowledgeable? What are the differences between their philosophies? Who’s got it "right"?

Dissatisfaction

In the world of Fahrenheit 451, everybody seems to be happy. Sort of. They watch TV all day, they’re never forced to face anything unpleasant, and they’re never truly bothered by anything. Sound like paradise? We hate to break it to you, but it's not. Most everyone in the story is horribly dissatisfied—it’s just that no one is willing to admit it. Why else would Mildred try to overdose on all those pills? The deep sense of boredom that runs through the population is subdued by mindless activity and an insistence on happiness, both on the part of the government and the citizens themselves.

QUESTION: Are characters like Mildred are her girlfriends content? Are they happy? What’s the difference?

Man & The Natural World

In Fahrenheit 451, readers get a front row seat to an epic battle between technology and nature. In one corner of the ring we have technology, which is cold and destructive. In the other corner we've got nature in all its engaging and inspiring glory. Nature comes out pretty strong in the end. Remember—it is only in nature that Montag is able to think clearly and draw conclusions from his experiences. The novel argues that nature—and all of life, for that matter—is a cycle of construction and destruction. This is the natural way of things, but technology has focused only on destruction and violence, leaving man in a devastated, unnatural state. Technology might be a pretty strong contender in this fight, but its tendency toward self-destruction becomes its downfall. In the end, nature reigns supreme.

QUESTION: What does the Mechanical Hound have to do with this question of nature vs. technology?