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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Fahrenheit 451 is, in some ways, the author's tribute to the role that books and libraries have played in his life. After all, Bradbury wrote hundreds of works (novels, stories, screenplays, essays, and poems) with only a high school education, an inspiring desire to learn, and a worn out library card.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students will take notes as they listen and will present the three most important points they learned from the Audio Guide.

Distribute Reader's Guide essays, "Ray Bradbury," "Literature and Censorship," and "Bradbury and His Other Works." Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they have learned from the essay. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentation memorable.

The novel begins: "It was a pleasure to burn." Why does Bradbury start the novel in this way? Why might it be more pleasurable to burn books rather than read them?

Writing Exercise

Bradbury opens the novel with a quote from Juan Ramón Jiménez: "If they give you ruled paper, write the other way." Why did Bradbury select this statement, and what does it mean? Students should write two paragraphs on how this statement relates to what they have learned about Bradbury's life.

Have students write one page about a book that opened new doors for them. If a book had a profound impact, explain why. If the book was pleasurable, explain in detail what kind of pleasure was experienced. Have students present their books, ideas, and conclusions to the class.

Homework

Read Handout One: The Fifties. Begin Part One of the novel. Consider the differences between Montag's life and Clarisse's life.

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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

Fahrenheit 451 was published in 1953, the year the Korean War ended. The memory of Hitler's atrocities and World War II was less than a decade old. The Cold War, meanwhile, had hardened into a standoff. In 1952 the United States tested a hydrogen bomb, and the Soviet Union followed suit a year later. A year after the publication of *Fahrenheit 451*, the Voice of America began broadcasting jazz worldwide. In New York, saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie inspired audiences with their dynamic virtuosity. In 1956, the U.S. State Department sent Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, and Louis Armstrong on tour in the hope that their performances would spread American democracy and alleviate the tensions of the Cold War.

?? Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. After listening to the Audio Guide, your students should be able to identify several aspects of the novel that link to trends in politics, music, literature, and technology. Discuss NEA Jazz Master Paquito D'Rivera's comments that relate his youth in Cuba to the themes of the novel.

Play clips of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Dave Brubeck. Ask students to take notes as they listen. See if they can identify patterns in the music. Team with your school's music specialist to further explore the music of the 1950s.

Writing Exercise

Montag's television includes headphones called seashells. The "wall to wall circuit" allows Mildred to enter the "play" and, therefore, the television programming. How does the technology within the novel compare to our current technology? Does technology improve the quality of life for Montag and his wife, Mildred? Why or why not?

Homework

Finish Part One. Ask students to consider why the narrator introduces us to Montag at this time of his life, when he encounters Clarisse and confronts Mildred's overdose.

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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

Bradbury employs a third-person limited narrator in *Fahrenheit 451*. We know only Montag’s movements and thoughts. The narration follows Montag like a camera, and the reader is never allowed into the lives of other characters, except for what they say to him. This inevitably increases our sympathy for Montag.

Discussion Activities

Reread Captain Beatty’s monologue. Discuss his view that school cultivates anti-intellectual sentiment. Do students think it accurately depicts their school? Do books violate the idea that “everyone is made equal?”

How might this story be narrated in the first-person from the point of view of a government official that believes burning books protects society? Have the class brainstorm the outline of a new version of *Fahrenheit 451* told from this perspective.

Writing Exercise

Clarisse says: “People don’t talk about anything. . . . Nobody says anything different from anyone else. . . . My uncle says it was different once.” Begin writing the novel in the third person using Clarisse as the central character.

Have students write a letter to Captain Beatty responding to his ideas about education and his charge that “a book is a loaded gun.” Do they agree or disagree with his ideas? In the letter, students should explain their own ideas about education and the value of books.

Homework

Begin Part Two. Five significant characters have been introduced: Montag, Clarisse, Mildred, Beatty, and Faber. Have students make lists of what motivates each of these characters.

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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Captain Beatty, the fire chief, is a key foil and a historian of sorts. While Montag once followed Beatty's values, he now resists Beatty's commitment to burning books. Meanwhile, Faber represents a musty, academic link to the past. Clarisse McClellan, a teenager, longs for the romantic days of front porches and rocking chairs, complaining, "we never ask questions." Mildred, the model citizen, attempts suicide while living in a world enchanted by television.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups to examine the role of foils in the novel. Assign each group a character: Mildred, Clarisse, Faber, or Beatty. Ask students to review the first ninety-one pages of the novel and look for occasions when this character brings out dramatic responses from Montag. How does the character lead Montag toward self-realization? How does Montag's relationship to the character change? Have students present their conclusions to the class, using specific textual support.

Writing Exercise

Students have examined many dimensions of the protagonist by exploring secondary characters. Have students write two pages on the character they believe to be the antagonist. Why is this character opposed to Montag? How does this character force him to reevaluate himself? Remind students to use passages from the text to support their conclusions.

Homework

Finish Part Two. Students will write one page explaining why Bradbury chose either "The Hearth and the Salamander" or "The Sieve and the Sand" as a section title. In their essays, students should explain what this title means.

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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Discussion Activities

Begin the discussion by exploring student responses to the homework. Why did Bradbury use “The Hearth and the Salamander” and “The Sieve and the Sand” as section titles? How does this deepen your interpretation of these sections?

What does figurative language ask of the reader? Does exploring a novel’s figurative language train us in precisely the thinking that Beatty hates? Why or why not?

Writing Exercise

Have students write a paragraph about their favorite place using the techniques reviewed in class: imagery, simile, and metaphor. Vary this exercise by assigning three paragraphs, with each paragraph using a different technique.

Homework

Begin Part Three. Read Handout Two: Science Fiction. Note the descriptions of the Mechanical Hound. How is the Mechanical Hound a symbol of something else? Are there other images in the reading that could be symbols?

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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Bradbury repeats and expands certain images. Front porches and rocking chairs symbolize the past, a time when people intermingled without the distraction of electronic screens. The Mechanical Hound, an especially important symbol, represents Montag's modern world and the deadly possibilities around every corner.

Discussion Activities

Bradbury writes, "The books leapt and danced like roasted birds, their wings ablaze with red and yellow feathers." Divide the class into groups that will examine twenty-page segments of the book, starting at the beginning. Each group will present the symbols that appear in its section. Students should be especially attentive to the way Bradbury uses fire and books both literally and symbolically.

Writing Exercise

Reread the detailed description of the Hound and the battle. Why might Montag's expression of affection to the Hound mark a turning point in his development? What role does affection play in this world? What might be the significance of Montag's final battle with the Hound? Finally, how might the Mechanical Hound be a symbol for Montag's world?

Ask students to write about a conflict in our world. They should explain the details of this conflict. Have students then develop a symbol to capture its complexity.

Homework

Continue reading Part Three. Ask students to think about what kind of transformation Montag has experienced and consider whether anyone else in the novel has undergone a similar journey.

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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Montag questions whether his profession is justified and whether the values he has held so dear—burning books and all it implies—are wrong. Mrs. Hudson forces Montag to question whether his life might be fundamentally improved by reading. Is he missing something invaluable? He then repudiates his profession. He does so partly through the intercession of Clarisse and Faber, messengers from a world he barely understands. The narrator explains, “Even now he could feel the start of the long journey, the leave-taking, the going-away from the self he had been.” By the end of the novel, Montag has been profoundly changed. As a three-dimensional character, Montag has an inner and an outer life unlike the two-dimensional portraits of other characters.

Discussion Activities

In Part Three, Beatty explains “Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun and now that he’s burnt his damn wings, he wonders why. Didn’t I hint enough when I sent the Hound around your place?” Beatty refers to the myth of Icarus, told in Ovid’s first-century poem *The Metamorphoses*. A version can be found at <http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.html>. Ask students why Bradbury compares Montag to Icarus. How does this shed light on Montag’s development?

Writing Exercise

As Montag escapes the city and enters the silences of the natural world, he looks forward to the time “needed to think all the things that must be thought.” He discovers “He was not empty. There was more than enough here to fill him.” How has the silence and emptiness of nature proved fulfilling compared to his former life? How have books led to these realizations?

Homework

Finish Part Three. Ask students to begin to think about how Bradbury has constructed the plot to reach this dramatic conclusion. Students should come to class ready to discuss the two most important turning points in the novel.

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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

Ray Bradbury made choices about how to structure and pace events to explore how bookburning can erode the human imagination. In this lesson, map the events of the story to assess the artistry of storytelling. Some of the turning points in the novel include Mrs. Hudson's willingness to die for books, Montag's confrontation with his wife's friends, Montag's murder of Captain Beatty, and Montag's creative escape from the Mechanical Hound. Punctuated by an audible refrain of flying jets as well as constant surveillance, Bradbury amplifies Montag's unease and foreshadows war. Montag, like a rat in a maze, turns corner after corner until he finds an exit.

Discussion Activities

In small groups, students will map a timeline that depicts the development of the story. This map includes the most significant turning points but also examines the lesser events that build tension. As students develop their timelines, they should define the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. Groups should present their work to the class.

Have students imagine they are making a movie of *Fahrenheit 451*. Tell them they have to cut certain scenes because of limited running time. Divide the class into groups and have each suggest two scenes that could be dropped. How does cutting certain scenes change the story?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to imagine a sequel to *Fahrenheit 451*. Have them outline the sequel. What would the beginning, middle, and end of the sequel look like? Then write the opening paragraphs to the sequel, creating a beginning that immediately plunges the reader into the story.

Homework

Read the "Afterword" and the "Coda." Read Handout Three: The Book of Ecclesiastes. Although we have focused on Montag as the central character, could books be the heroes of the novel?

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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

As one reads *Fahrenheit 451*, certain themes stand out: the repression of free thought through censorship, a proper education that values books, the loss of culture and history, the threat that new technology may deaden human experience, the constant demand to satisfy immediate visual and sensory appetites, the value of authentic human interaction, and the value of the natural world. For Bradbury, our choice to use, misuse, or discard books relates to all these themes.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises. Have students link Faber's comments on books to other passages that reflect on the same theme.

Happiness

"We have everything we need to be happy, but we aren't happy. Something's missing." How might Bradbury be defining happiness in *Fahrenheit 451*? Does he present a new idea of happiness or preserve an older idea?

Knowledge

"[Books] stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us." How do books draw together ideas and information so as to capture details that might otherwise be missed?

Freedom of Thought

"The television . . . tells you what to think and blasts it in." Members of this world have "plenty off-hours" but do they have "time to think"? What kind of thinking do Faber and Bradbury prefer? Will it initially make life more difficult?

Education

"Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord." What kind of education is necessary to create citizens who recognize "quality of information," take "leisure to digest it," and "carry out actions based on what we learn from the interaction of the first two?" How might this relate to our current educational system?



Homework

Students should begin working on their essays. See the Essay Topics. For additional questions, see the Reader's Guide Discussion Questions. Students will turn in outlines and rough drafts at the next class.

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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Put these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books that include some of the same characteristics. Which characteristics can be found in *Fahrenheit 451*?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Bradbury provide through Montag? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of his generation?

Writing Exercise

Ask students the following questions: If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a novel rather than a speech or an essay? What story would you tell to get your point across?

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts and arguments. Have them partner with another student to edit outlines and rough drafts. For this editing, provide students with a list of things they should look for in a well-written essay.

Homework

Students should finish their essays.

The Fifties

As much as *Fahrenheit 451* is about a time in the not-too-distant future, Ray Bradbury's novel is anchored in the 1950s. Mildred Montag sits like a zombie in front of a telescreen. The sound of jet fighters crosses the sky in preparation for war. A neighborhood sits full of cookie-cutter houses and the complacent souls who live in them. All of these would have been familiar scenes to a writer at work in 1953.

The era following World War II in the United States was known for its productivity, its affluence, and its social conformity. The economy was strong. The technology of television, air travel, and the transistor brought the future to the front stoop. The neighborhood Montag lives in probably looks a lot like Levittown, the famous low-cost housing developments of the age that ushered in the rise of suburbia.

Although the 1950s are remembered as a decade of peace and prosperity, they were anything but. The Korean War, which ended in the year that *Fahrenheit 451* was published, saw tens of thousands of American deaths. The larger Cold War that lingered was a source of constant anxiety. In the new atomic age, everyone was learning that the world could be destroyed with the push of a button, a fate Bradbury more than hints at in his novel.

Not only were governments endowed with nuclear weapons, they exercised the power to persecute suspected enemies closer to home. The congressional House Committee on Un-American Activities began investigating suspected espionage in 1946, and within a few years Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin was charging, without evidence, that dozens of government officials were Communist Party members. Meanwhile, memories of Nazi book burnings and Soviet censorship were still fresh in people's minds.

As a result, censorship was alive and well in the media. Communists were assailed in the press. Comic books were condemned as subversive by parents and educators. Images of the "organization man" and the "lonely crowd" reflected changes in the American spirit.

For all their prosperity and rising expectations, the 1950s were a decade of atomic tests and regional wars; racial segregation; government censorship and persecution; subtly enforced social orthodoxy; and building angst. The social and psychological problems of the era are watchfully scrutinized in *Fahrenheit 451*, a book that examines an intolerant society that seems oddly un-American in its penchant for censorship and governmental control.



Science Fiction

Extremely prevalent in film and literature today, science fiction has only established itself as a genre in the last 150 years. Despite its recent rise to fame, it has very old roots in mythical and philosophical literature. Epic poems like Homer's *Odyssey*, or books like Plato's *The Republic* and *Utopia* by Thomas More, have elements of the fantastic anticipating the popularity of science fiction writing in the twentieth century.

Nineteenth-century writers such as Edgar Allan Poe ("The Raven") and Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*) pioneered the genre of fantasy literature in the emerging industrial world. But it was not until late in the nineteenth century that H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Edgar Rice Burroughs began penning scientific romances that envisioned interplanetary travel and alien invasions. These writers had an extraordinary influence on the coming golden age of science fiction.

Inspired by Hugo Gernsback's pulp magazine *Amazing Stories*, founded in 1926, science fiction spread throughout the United States and England. It moved from cheap magazines devoted to futuristic stories to a legitimate branch of literature with the plot, characters, and themes of major novels. In so doing, a whole generation of visionaries—among them Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, and Ray Bradbury—was introduced to a world increasingly fascinated by the technology of the new atomic age.

Future visions of technology and science are essential to these stories. Common subjects have come to include robotics, aliens, time travel, biological experiments, and apocalyptic disaster. Although a branch of fantasy, science fiction often makes philosophical statements about our current existence.

Over time, science fiction has presented not only some of the greatest stories in modern literature but has foreseen many developments that define the contemporary world. Writers such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Kurt Vonnegut, and Michael Crichton have, like Bradbury, practiced social criticism and sometimes prophecy that has made them favorites around the world.

Science fiction has come to embrace a wide diversity of writers and approaches. C.S. Lewis used the genre as a medium for religious allegory. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood imagines a dangerous future world from a feminist point of view. And writers like Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler have created African American characters within a genre that has come a long way since *Frankenstein*.



The Book of Ecclesiastes

When Guy Montag meets Granger, he is introduced to a community in which each member is dedicated to learning a book by heart. Their purpose is to commit whole texts to memory and pass them down to future generations, surviving the “Dark Age” of atomic war and government censorship.

Montag chooses the book of Ecclesiastes, a text from the biblical Old Testament probably written about the third century BC. Narrated by the “Teacher” who is traditionally considered to be King Solomon, Ecclesiastes is a wonderfully diverse collection of advice on matters including good and evil, temptation and vice, love and hate, vanity, and wisdom. Along with the Old Testament books of Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is an essential part of the wisdom literature of early Jewish philosophy.

A philosophical essay rather than a narrative or history, Ecclesiastes offers ambiguous guidance about the nature of the world. Its tone changes throughout; it is merciful, skeptical, loving, cynical, sorrowful, and ecstatic. As one of its most famous passages says, there is “a time to rend and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love and a time to hate” (3:7-8). Ecclesiastes does not provide any easy answers.

Ultimately, this very short book is an endorsement of concrete human experience rather than dogmatic abstraction. The Teacher asserts that one should experience life as fully as possible, even if death and God’s judgment are final. The use of simple and concrete imagery is a call to experience all one can while learning that the difference between good and evil is not to be fully divined by mere mortals.

The prominent themes of wisdom and mercy in Ecclesiastes make the book a fitting choice for Montag to learn. This is not a text that lends itself to systematic answers. It is, in a sense, a book to stand for all books, which in their entirety give a loud chorus of voices, the voices that the firemen in *Fahrenheit 451* wanted to extinguish in the first place.

