

Fahrenheit 451: Literary Analysis Essay

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Is ignorance truly bliss? Readers can't help but ponder this question when the content of Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 is displayed before them. A world sprawls within the pages of this book in which the term "ignorance is bliss" is no longer a phrase, but a way of life. American citizens are encouraged to live their lives from a detached point of view, unaffected by true emotions. In this world, killing isn't frowned upon, suicide is commonplace, and family has no meaning. The most important memories are allowed to slide away like butter on the surface of a hot pan, dripping out of sight and out of mind. America is a nation of blissfully unaware citizens caught in the flow of music, video, and sound in which true meanings and values are reassigned. No one asks questions. No one argues. Activities like reading books are discouraged by the government itself in order to keep people sedate. Many people are happy in this lifestyle. Or are they?

By taking on the majority of citizens, and by viewing this world through a lens of utilitarianism, it is possible to argue that yes, many people are happy living this way. People have changed so much that when they do read, the books provoke severe reactions and emotions which are difficult to explain to comprehend. Because of this, it becomes far easier to simply take away the power of these words and keep the world in a state of bland contentment. Only the shallowest of emotions are encouraged, and any sudden provocation may lead to complete chaos. This is demonstrated clearly on page 101, after Montag attempts to read the poem Dover Beach to the three women in his parlor:

"Mrs. Phelps was crying... [The others] sat, not touching her, bewildered with her display. She sobbed uncontrollably... Mrs. Bowles stood up and glared at Montag. 'you see? I knew it, that's what I wanted to prove! I knew it would happen! I've always said, poetry and tears, poetry and suicide and crying and awful feelings, poetry and sickness; all that mush! Now I've had it proved to me. You're nasty, Mr. Montag, you're nasty!'"

It is clear, from Mrs. Phelps reactions to the emotions this poem evoked within her, that she has been very thoroughly integrated into her society. It is people like her that cause the government to take such drastic measures against books. Furthermore, by keeping everyone superficial, complacent, and happy, making questionable governmental choices becomes easier and easier. Montag wants to spark change in his society, but once that spark is lit, society will have to take a very long road to a recovery that just may not be possible for many.

However, there are many that perceive this long journey not only possible, but preferable to living in a world where no one has to be bothered. Society will never be able to make any sort of progress unless people become more bothered about things. To be bothered about anything is

to see a need for change in it, which is what drives us forward. Mildred is a prime example of a young woman in the society this book portrays. She spends her time alone in the house, listening to the plugs in her ears and sitting in front of the walls in her parlor. The walls become her “family” while Montag s away, and she spends most of her time in that room. This existence is meaningless, and it is clear right from the start that somewhere deep down, she and many others know it. This becomes apparent on page 16, as Montag questions the operator of Mildred's emergency stomach pumping:

“The operator's cigarette moved on his lip. 'We get these cases nine or ten a night. Got so many, starting a few years ago, we had the special machines built... You don't need an M.D., cases like this; all you need is two handymen, clean up the problem in half an hour... we gotta go. Just had another call on the old ear-thimble. Ten blocks from here. Someone else just jumped off the cap of a pillbox.’”

Mildred's suicide attempt is nothing more than an addition to the machine operator's routine of stomach pumping. There are many people who are very unhappy with their lives and they don't know why. This is also displayed on page 110, when Mrs. Bowles and Mrs. Phelps casually speak about deaths and suicide as though these common occurrences are nothing to be particularly bothered by. The reason that books must be brought about once again is to fill that missing piece in these lives. Books give them a chance to question and explore the world, which is exactly what they need in order to start the recovery of their society.

Is ignorance bliss? Absolutely not. Although a surface-level happiness still has the potential to be achieved through this society's methods, there are far too many people left unfulfilled to consider its continuation. The men and women of Fahrenheit 451 need something more. They need reasons to keep on living. Through the simple act of asking questions about their world and about why things are the way that they are, people are given a reason to keep on living. Books encourage these questions and critical thinking in a way that short video reels cannot. They give us a reason to keep developing our minds and expanding our horizons to great distances we never thought we'd achieve. This is why we need books so much. We couldn't survive for long without them.