

English Department

Sophomore Summer Reading Study Guide: *Fahrenheit 451*, by Ray Bradbury

To help you enjoy your reading we are providing the following points for consideration. Give each a close look before you begin reading, and refer back to them while you are reading. We recommend that you take notes - YES! - and return in August prepared to discuss your responses, as well as any other thoughts the novel may have stirred in you. Enjoy!

...my mountain of mail delivered forth a pipsqueak mouse of a letter from a well-known publishing house that wanted to reprint my story "The Fog Horn" in a high school reader. In my story, I had described a lighthouse a having, late at night, an illumination coming from it that was a "God light." Looking up at it from the viewpoint of any sea-creature one would have felt that one was in "the Presence."

The editors had deleted "God-Light" and "in the Presence."
(from "Coda," Ray Bradbury)

Bradbury's literary classic, *Fahrenheit 451*, is often considered the first novel to cross over from the science fiction genre to mainstream American literature. It is a visionary parable of a media-saturated society where learning is suppressed and censorship prevails, where firemen burn books and thinking makes people unhappy.

Fahrenheit 451 is a gripping and disturbing story that is as relevant, if not moreso, in our multimedia age as when first published in 1953.

In 2002 the Library of Congress designated this book as one of the top 100 works of American Literature.

Overarching questions/considerations:

1. Define 'dystopian novel' and 'cautionary story' then determine the point Bradbury is making about our future in a technological world.
2. Think about Bradbury's use of books and fire both from symbolic and literal perspectives. Does exploring a novel's figurative language train us in precisely the thinking that Beatty hates (Pt 2)?
3. Using Montag's expression of affection toward the Mechanical Hound (Part 3), consider the role affection plays both in your personal life and in the world.
4. If Bradbury were writing the book today, what additional 'conditions' might he warn about that have developed since *F451*'s first publication?

Part One

1. What is the relationship between the salamander and fire?

2. What does the Phoenix symbolize?
3. Why would government/societal leaders want to suppress knowledge? How can knowledge be powerful? How can ideas be dangerous? Consider these questions both in terms of Bradbury's novel, and today's society / world.

Part Two

1. Consider what motivates each of the five significant characters introduced in Part Two: Montag, Clarisse, Mildred, Beattie, and Faber.

Part Three

1. What symbols does Bradbury use to connect the past and the future in Part Three?
2. Identify the two main turning points in the novel.

Sophomore Summer Reading Study Guide: *A Lesson before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines

Published in 1993, Gaines's novel is hailed for its outstanding characterizations and subsequently, the intense emotional response and compassion such characterization evokes. Although set in the rural south of the '40s, this is a timeless story that addresses basic universal truths and begs the question of what it is to be a human being striving for dignity in a universe that often devalues it.

Level One

1. The novel is set in Louisiana in the late 1940s. This is the segregated, Jim-Crow South of the pre-Civil Rights era. You will remember this setting and social milieu from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. How does the reality of segregation, injustice, and virulent racism affect these characters from page one?
2. Grant Wiggins is a teacher and a respected member of the community, even though he is young man. Why, at first, does he resist the request to visit Jefferson in prison? Is Grant a vain and selfish man? Is he lazy? Why does he dread performing this act of mercy?
3. What is it that begins to bring Jefferson out of his self-imposed isolation? When and why does he begin to open up?
4. How does Grant change over the course of the visits to Jefferson? What role does Vivian play in Grant's change? What role do Reverend Ambrose and others play in Grant's growth?
5. Why does Grant remain in that community? He possesses youth and education and speaks often of getting out. Why does he stay?

6. What role does the radio and the pen and paper play in Jefferson's change?

Level Two

1. Is Jefferson a Christ figure? How is Jefferson like Christ?
2. Jefferson is imprisoned in a cell. How are others imprisoned in this novel? Who else in this novel longs for escape? From what do they wish to escape? How do they attempt to find escape?
3. How is food used symbolically in the novel? Food is meant to nourish our physical body and keep us alive. What other kinds of nourishment are considered in the novel?
4. What makes a human a human? What gives a person dignity and a sense of self-worth? How would Grant answer these questions at the start of the novel? How would he answer them at the end?
5. What role do others play in our lives? Consider intimacy – physical, inter-personal, and spiritual. How are relationships important in this novel?
6. What do we owe to others – to the youth, to the oppressed, to our family, to members of the larger community? Consider this question in relation to questions nine and ten above. Consider this question in relation to the Gospel message and in relation to our call to become "Men for Others".