

## Notes on Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

At the end of the novel, Granger compares mankind to the phoenix, p. 163 a mythological bird that is consumed by fire, only to rise from the ashes as a new, young bird in a cycle that repeats eternally; it does reflect, of course, the cycle of nature. Granger suggests that humans' advantage over the phoenix is that man has the ability to **recognize** when he has made a mistake that is destructive of humans, and so there is the potential to learn, not to repeat the mistake. The historian and philosopher George Santayana said, "Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it." And Montag's society, that has tried to wipe out history, has clearly doomed itself. And only these few who remember those lessons are left to rebuild.

As they walk upriver to find other survivors, 165 Montag knows they will eventually talk, and he tries to remember passages from the Bible appropriate to the occasion. He brings to mind Ecclesiastes 3:1, "To everything there is a season" and also Revelations 22:2, "and on either side of the river there was a tree of life...and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations..." which he decides to save for when they reach the city. The verse from Revelations refers to the city of God, and the last line of the text, "when we reach the city", implies a strong symbolic connection between the atomic holocaust of Montag's world and the Apocalypse of the Bible, which is, in fact, described in Revelations. And the final images in these lines are images of nature – the river, a tree, leaves – all of the suggestive images of life, of the Garden of Eden, of a new beginning risen from the sins and mistakes of a ruined and deeply flawed world.

And the title of the last section, *Burning Bright*, is taken from William Blake's poem, *The Tyger*.

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright

In the forests of the night

What immortal hand or eye

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

For Blake, the tiger is, in part, a symbol for a world where evil seems to be at work, but it also speaks to the dual nature of existence. The tiger, in the world of nature, is not evil. He is only surviving in the way that nature has made him. He is a predator; that's what he is created to do. As humans, WE may see him as evil because he is a threat to us, to our civilized world, but he feels the same way about us, so essentially, this means that evil is not so easy to recognize. And this duality of good and evil is inherent in the conclusion. Even while the city burns brightly from the destruction of the war, the spirit of the people who are left also burns brightly, signifying some hope for a better future – a reminder of the phoenix, who rises to new life from the ashes of the old. It seems to suggest that humanity can **choose** good or evil, that fire, and everything else in the human experience, is neither good nor evil – it is neutral – it is only a tool for us to use as we wish, and the way we use it determines if WE are choosing to use it to **create** good or evil.

### **Paper topics**

Obviously, we have a lot of images of fire here, both real and metaphoric. Fire can be destructive, in the way that the firemen use it, or it can be a cleansing force, a symbol of a new beginning, as indicated by the phoenix. I would suggest it might work in both ways for Montag.

There are also many images of animals and nature, some of it subverted, like the mechanical hound and the electric snake, some of it benevolent, like the butterfly and the images of the woods at the end of the text. It suggests that we can use nature to make our lives better, or we can misuse it, misunderstand it, twist to our will, and possibly destroy the world we live in.

Religion is clearly missing from this culture, but there are references to it that are significant. There is a reference to the miracle at Cana when Jesus turns water into wine, a quote near the end

of the text from Revelations, and the Bible quote at the very end of the text is from Ecclesiastes, referring to the healing of nations in the context of nature as a force for new growth and positive change.

Montag kills Beatty, who seems to taunt Montag, dare him to do it, and we have to wonder why. For a fireman, for someone who says books are pointless, he is very adept at quoting them from memory. p. 105 “beast” from Shakespeare’s As You Like It. Below; “who are a little wise”. John Donne the poet. #3 Truth is truth..... Shakespeare, Measure for Measure. #4 They are never alone – Philip Sydney. #5 Sydney quoted. Then Pope quoted. p. 119 Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice, etc. He appears to know them by heart when he offers them to Montag. Does he do this to prove how useless they are, or is he actually like Montag in some fundamental way? Is it possible that he feels deeply the loss of these books too, but has given up hope that things will ever be different? Is this evidence that he lacks Montag’s courage, and deliberately pushes Montag to kill him because life has become meaningless to him as well without the ideas that books contain? And Montag appears to have two older mentors, Beatty, who is his boss, and Faber, who profoundly changes Montag’s direction life. And both of them do it through books – Beatty by claiming that books are useless, and Faber, who shows Montag just how valuable they are.

There are also a number of references to blood – the human life force. Montag sometimes describes “feeling things in his blood,” meaning in the deepest part of himself – Mildred, on the other hand, has her blood changed when it is poisoned with drugs – she seems to **misuse** the life force, tries to die, but the technology of her time won’t allow it – another way they subvert the laws of nature. What does this mean in a larger context in the novel?