



Bloom's Literature

Background to *Fahrenheit 451*

Fahrenheit 451 was written when what would come to be known as the "McCarthy era" was in its earliest stages of development. While he had not yet founded the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy had already inflamed public opinion with an unsubstantiated (and never proven) allegation that Communist spies had somehow insinuated themselves into the State Department. Labeled a "witch hunter" by his critics, McCarthy promoted his political position by fostering an atmosphere of suspicion and insecurity, while remaining studiously vague about what a "Communist" might actually be.

Early in 1953, America's foremost playwright at the time, Arthur Miller, published *The Crucible*. On the surface, the play was Miller's account of the Salem witch trials, but many understood it as a thinly veiled critique of McCarthy's tactics. While Miller did not address "McCarthyism" in his play, which was more preoccupied with the narrowness and paranoia of Puritan New England, the term "witch trial" would later come to be applied to McCarthy's public hearings.

While not a leftist in his own political leanings, Bradbury unflaggingly supported the cause of civil liberties and opposed both overt and subtler censorship. Like many of his contemporaries in the early fifties, he was concerned with the development of authoritarian politics. Memories of Nazi atrocities were still fresh at the time, and many were worried that, in the course of fighting the "Cold War" with the Soviet Union, the United States would so consistently promote an exaggerated idea of security over the personal liberties of its citizens as to become a Soviet-style police state itself. More thoughtful observers, like Bradbury, noticed too the less obvious ways in which conformity, reasonableness, and skepticism could be used to smooth over the obvious brutality of a fascistic regime.

George Orwell's famous novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a date he came to simply by inverting the last two digits of the year in which he began to write the novel, was widely read and highly influential in its stark depiction of a supposedly benevolent, actually authoritarian state. Its depiction of a prison-like society in which any individual could be placed under surveillance at any time for no reason became the most powerful image of oppression in twentieth-century literature.

Bradbury's own vision of a totalitarian future was arguably even more deeply influenced by Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel, *Brave New World*, to which Orwell's dystopia formed a pendant. Huxley envisioned a future in which people were controlled by pleasure, treats, and little indulgences doled out by an invisible, unaccountable government. Huxley's citizens were eugenically engineered and stratified according to a strict system into basically normal Alphas, less intelligent Betas and so on.

Fahrenheit 451 was composed in 1952 and published the following year. The nuclear arms race was well on its way when in 1952, England announced to the world that it possessed an atomic bomb, and the US conducted secret tests of a new, vastly more powerful weapon, the hydrogen bomb, in the Bikini atoll. The successful detonation of the "H-bomb" was reported in the first few days of 1953. Many people observed the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and their increasing power, with deep misgivings—uncertain where this escalation of destructive power might lead.

Given the political climate of the time, *Fahrenheit 451* was a popular book and one of the most well-received in Bradbury's career. He was immediately regarded as belonging to a small but important unofficial group of writers who were bringing to science fiction a new level of literary and intellectual sophistication, bringing it to bear on a world in which the rate of change, driven by unprecedented developments in technology, was rapidly accelerating. Bradbury, like many, found these developments heartening, even thrilling, but did not shy away from their darker implications. Since its publication, *Fahrenheit 451* has joined *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on a short list of classic anti-totalitarian literature. Renowned French director François Truffaut adapted it for the screen in 1967, and it has remained in print for over fifty years.

Citation Information

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