

# English B High Level Extended Essay

**Research Question: How is external conflict used in characterization in order to establish the themes of Happiness vs. Distraction in *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury?**

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Candidate Name:

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Candidate Number:

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# Contents

Introduction.....	3
Montag and Clarisse.....	5
Montag and Mildred.....	6
Montag and Beatty.....	9
Conclusion.....	13
References.....	14

# Introduction

The aim of this extended essay is to examine and discuss how contrast has been used in the relationships between certain characters, mainly their external conflicts, in the book *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury in order to explain the impact of their inclusion on the establishment of the theme “true happiness versus distractions”. *Fahrenheit 451*, which was written in 1953, is set in a dystopian world where it is illegal to read or possess books. In this dystopian setting, as time went on, the societal norm strayed further and further away from reading books and started to embrace the momentary happiness of distractions created for people by the government. Due to the reason that it is easier to manage and control people when the entire population is focusing on the act of instant gratification instead of focusing on true happiness, which is implied as learning, exploring, and questioning the world that surrounds an individual, the government started to mandate certain laws that cause people to embrace the distractions. The laws include prohibitions such as driving below the extremely high-speed limits, so that the driver has no time to stop and question his/her happiness in life, and the aforementioned bookkeeping, also aiming to prevent the rise of intellectual individuals that question their surroundings.

In the novel, following the abandonment of books and all the houses becoming fireproof, the firemen, who were once known to extinguish fires in homes, get appointed the job of going to the houses that inhibit illegally owned books and burning them with a flamethrower. One of these firemen, Guy Montag, is the main protagonist of the novel. Montag, in the beginning of the novel, has a strange encounter with a girl, who encourages him to think and question his own happiness, which sets off the entire events that take place in the novel. After this strange encounter with

Clarisse, Montag completely breaks down, and realizes that he is indeed not happy. Throughout the novel Montag continues his search for fulfillment and that's where he encounters the opposition from Mildred, Beatty, and the Mechanical Hound, none of which succeed in deviating Montag from his true pursuit.

As a reader, reflecting upon the characters Montag interacts with and the situations he engages in, it is clear that Montag contrasts with the people and the world surrounding him. After noticing this detail, to learn more about the use of contrasting characteristics that present new perspectives on a very complex problem, I decided to analyze the relationships and differences of Clarisse and Montag, Montag and Mildred, and lastly Montag and Beatty. All three of these relationships offer brand new viewpoints towards the idea of true happiness and conformity: Clarisse and Montag offer new beginnings for Montag, Mildred and Montag create a central conflict that has to be dealt throughout daily life, and Beatty and Montag represent strong opposites with the same initial ambitions.

Part of these conflicts can be attributed to the place of technology in the characters' lives. The novel was written in 1953, when technology wasn't half as advanced as it was today. Yet, Ray Bradbury's "predictions" both towards the overabundant technological distractions described in the novel and for the characters interacting with them is, for the most part, were incredibly and disturbingly accurate. The idea of walls covered in giant grey televisions that bombard the resident(s) with content that is as loud, bright, and in-your-face as can be from many different channels and genres, never allowing a single second for a thought to occur is not too far off from the current technological conditions that exist in many households. These televisions coupled with the ear-radios that never stop making noise to prevent unhappy thoughts or feelings to squeak

through, perfectly represent the present-day circumstances with the giant OLED televisions plastered in every living room and the recent rise of wireless earbuds occupying every second of free time. Ultimately “*Fahrenheit 451*” is relevant, arguably even more so today than the era it came to be, due to the sheer amount of distraction created by devices that pollute our daily lives and free time today, contributing to the theme of happiness vs distraction.

## Montag and Clarisse

The differences of Montag and Clarisse are born from one factor: their individual levels of awareness. At the beginning of the novel Montag is oblivious to the many instances of the overabundant government sovereignty present in his daily life, while Clarisse grew up noticing the strange laws and cultural norms that spread in their environment. In their first interaction, by asking simple questions like “Do you read any of the books you burn?” (pg. 15) and “Is it true that long ago firemen put fires *out* instead of going to starting them” (pg. 15), Clarisse attempts to invoke the least bit of independent thinking in Montag, which doesn’t work at first due to Montag laughing at the questions instead of stopping and thinking for an answer. After realizing she has to approach Montag in a different way, she asks if he had noticed the dew on the grass or noticed that recently a man has been put on the moon, which irritates Montag as he wasn’t quite sure of these things like Clarisse. Following his irritation towards his absence of knowledge on his surroundings, he is hit with a lasting, burdensome question from Clarisse just before parting off: “Are you *happy*?” (pg.17). After Montag spends some time while trying to convince himself that he is happy, he returns to his home (which is compared to the likes of a tomb by the narrator), where he comes to the terrible realization that he is in fact not happy.

This initial interaction between Montag and Clarisse displays the differences of their characteristics in an effective way, highlighting the careless characteristics of Montag contrasting with the more aware and attentive characteristics of Clarisse, which perfectly reflect on their happiness. Furthermore, the interaction

plays a fundamental role in the first ever shift in outlook and character development of Montag, in which he starts as a mindless worker that believes he loves his job and his life but is left completely shallow and empty behind the façade forced upon him by the government and his close social circle. Similar to a phoenix, in the wake of his façade getting utterly shattered by Clarisse over the course of a three-to-five-minute conversation, Montag can be considered to be born anew in the way he operates and behaves.

Even though ultimately both Clarisse and Montag alienate themselves from useless distractions, their main difference stems from the way they were introduced to the idea and decided to follow the path to true happiness. While Clarisse grew up in a household that encouraged late night conversations and driving below the high-speed limits to consume all the information from their surroundings, Montag had the realization of the state of his forged happiness after already embracing an oblivious lifestyle for the entirety of his life which had already gradually consumed him, leaving him feeling desolate instead of content.

## Montag and Mildred

In the story of *Fahrenheit 451*, Mildred is Montag's physically, mentally, and emotionally absent wife. She constantly wears and listens to her "Seashells", a type of earbud that constantly pumps out loud content from the news, radio stations etc., and she is obsessed with their televisions that cover the 3 walls in their living room, eager to get a fourth one as soon as possible. Even though in the beginning of the novel Montag and Mildred start off in similar fashion, both mistaking and in turn embracing simple distractions as happiness, the divergence starts to appear after Clarisse completely shatters the comfort walls that surround Montag. After Montag returns home from the radical encounter/conversation with Clarisse, he stumbles upon a passed-out Mildred. Upon further inspection he finds out that she took around 30 sleeping tablets as an attempted suicide. Both fortunately and unfortunately, suicide attempts have skyrocketed, in this dystopian world, so saving Mildred's life does not pan out to be a difficult task as two technicians efficiently clean her blood and stomach with two separate machines tailor suited for that exact situation. The strange occasion, however, is the fact

that the handymen treat Mildred not as an individual but just as a machine that simply needs to be cleaned so “it” can return to being operational. Witnessing this event, Montag gets deeply disturbed and angry at the technicians for their lack of empathy and asks them why they didn’t send an MD, which they reply with “We get these cases nine or ten a night. Got so many, starting a few years ago, we had special machines built” and ”You don’t need an MD, case like this; all you need is two handymen...” in turn further cementing the horrors of the deeply integrated societal issues present into Montag and the reader. Mildred’s attempted suicide and the interaction between Montag and the handymen communicates to the reader and Montag that, in this dystopian novel, living life while fully embracing distractions rather than pursuing true happiness is a life filled to the brim with emptiness and one where people actively try to take their own lives from, which sets off the second source of disgust and willingness to change current living conditions that Montag is currently experiencing.

Following Mildred’s speedy recovery, she succumbs back into her shallow, comfortable life not even realizing the horrors that had occurred the night prior. Around that time, Montag’s interest towards books gradually increases, as he hangs with Clarisse more and more, while on the other hand, Mildred, not forced to step a single foot out her comfort zone, stays inert and doesn’t see any use to bring any sort of change to her life.

On a particular part in the novel, while Montag is at work and the firemen are dousing the house of a lady that had books in kerosene, Montag instinctively takes and hides one of the books with him. Moreover, the resident who is an elderly woman refuses to leave her house even after when the house gets completely doused in kerosene, and eventually by lighting her own house on fire and burning alongside the house sends a very strong message to the firemen which Montag gets deeply affected by. Following the events of Montag obtaining his first book, Montag starts to feel ever so distant to Mildred going as far as to feeling like she is a complete stranger consumed by the meaningless devices

she lets herself get devoured by. Montag, now starting to heavily stray away from the distractions, finds himself heavily straying away from his wife as well.

Skipping over some segments in the novel, Mildred discovers the books Montag has been hoarding, and after Mildred immediately trying to burn them, with a little while of convincing, Mildred agrees to at least take a look at the books for at least the next 48 hours. The true differences between Mildred and Montag starts to appear at this point in the novel, when both of them have tried to give an alternate way towards fulfillment a chance. Regardless of Mildred trying to read and understand books with Montag, she is so used to the easy comfort granted by their televisions and the familiar pleasure of her seashells that her attempts at understanding the books don't last. Montag, however, holds on to the mystery of the books and even though doesn't quite understand them yet, he doesn't let go of the pursuit to acquire knowledge hidden from them, as opposed to going back to his simple life as a mindless individual free of independent thought, similar to that of Mildred's approach.

Following this display of contrast between Montag and Mildred, continuing his pursuit of knowledge from books and in turn happiness Montag refuses to give up the books and opts to hide them instead of burning them as the law and job enforce him to. Mildred being addicted to the comfortable lifestyle created by overabundant distractions feels threatened when she realizes she is also taking part in Montag's criminal activities by being inactive which puts her devices and comfort on the line from the chance of being punished by the government. Realizing the risk of losing her comfortable life she acts selfishly, betraying his husband in the process, by reporting the stolen books to the government. The way Montag gets to learn that his distant wife has betrayed him is by being forced to "cleanse" his own house being commissioned by the fire department and especially Beatty.

The main contrast of characteristics between Montag and Mildred stem from Mildred being the embodiment of someone lost to comfort, resulting inaction when comfortable and extreme/drastring action when said comfort is taken away from her, while Montag embraces the faults of his prior lifestyle and tries to pursue methods of living a happy satisfactory life through books.



## Montag and Beatty

Beatty, in the novel, is Montag's boss, who is an extremely intelligent person and also a fireman. Even while being a fireman, the most interesting and complex character in the entire novel is Beatty since it is stated by himself that he once stood with the same ambitions and intentions where Montag has stood. However, even though both of the characters start out with the same exact ambitions, the conflicting characteristics of the characters determines completely opposite outcomes. After his undertaking, Montag feels as though true happiness lies beneath the knowledge to be gained from books, and he doesn't give up on his pursuit throughout the entire novel. On the other hand, after Beatty undertakes the same search of happiness through books, he learns the true intentions and purpose of the law that enforces books to be incinerated, which in his perspective is enough of a reason as he halts his pursuit of happiness through books and instead embraces the law. Due to Beatty not receiving the satisfactory answers he once searched through books, he becomes depressed and his perspective changes completely and becomes one of complete loathing of anything that constitutes as a book.

In the novel, around the time when Montag starts to hoard books that are about to be burned and hides and reads them in his house after pretending to be sick to avoid coming to work, Beatty pays Montag a visit guessing that he would call in sick that same day. Beatty being remarkably intelligent and experienced speculates that Montag is in a dilemma and in search of answers to cure his depressing life through books and comes to his home to discreetly confront Montag and address the issues Montag has been experiencing and invite him back to work.

After Beatty realizes that his suspicions were indubitably correct and Montag wasn't really sick, he then begins to tell the journey similar to that of Montag's, which he once embarked upon. The true purpose of Beatty revealing his illegal but necessary journey to Montag is to prevent Montag from embarking on the same pointless journey that will undoubtedly end in dissatisfaction and misery, which he has experienced first-hand and is expecting Montag to fall on the same path and dissatisfaction in the future.

The lengthy and convincing conversation about Beatty's pursuit of happiness through books reveals the true nature of Beatty's characteristic and his ideals. During which Beatty mentions that what actually started the downfall of book reading and creative and thought-provoking writing styles was due to books and similar media offending minorities of many kinds. As Beatty puts it "Colored people don't like *Little Black Sambo*. Burn it. White people don't feel good about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Burn it. Someone's written a book on tobacco and cancer of the lungs? The cigarette people are weeping? Burn the book. Serenity, Montag. Peace, Montag." Beatty defends the viewpoint of absolute serenity which can only be achieved through collective affirmation. Collective affirmation, however, requires agreement from all the minorities and groups of individuals, requiring material be inoffensive when encountered by every single group or minority, resulting in bland/tasteless books in order to avoid controversy.

The idea that books naturally became bland and therefore people stopped reading them in the world of *Fahrenheit 451* is further supported by Beatty's remarks: "Books...critics said, were dishwater. No wonder books stopped selling... There you have it, Montag. It didn't come from the Government down."

Another point made by Beatty in his everlasting monologue is the misery born from disparity. He supports the idea that misery is mainly born from disparity by giving the example of everyone despising the smart kid in their classes when they were young due to the smarter kids reflecting onto others their individual shortcomings sprung from a sense of inferiority and subservience. Beatty then references the constitution on how not everyone is born equal but made equal which brings out true happiness. Quote from Beatty "...then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cover, to judge themselves against!". Beatty links this idea with books by mentioning that book readers see themselves as being superior, which, similar to the "smart kid" example, creates misery.

The last and point Beatty makes in his lengthy speech is on the idea that everybody lives happily in oblivion. He alludes to the serenity of being given not both, not one, but none of the sides to a political issue which consequently makes the people forget of such a thing which creates, as Beatty puts it, peace. To continue the illusion of serenity, people are "crammed full of non-combustible data,"

meaning useless information, to make them feel “brilliant” with information, which in turn makes them feel as they are thinking and thus, they will be happy. Moreover, any contact with “slippery stuff” like philosophical or psychological books or information will result in a melancholy end, according to Beatty. This is supported from experience by Beatty comparing the happiness of a man that can do easy, menial tasks to an individual that tries to measure and equate the universe which leaves him feeling lonely and sad.

These viewpoints of Beatty clash directly with Montag’s discoveries about books at the time when speech is given by Beatty in the novel. This is due to Montag feeling more eager to live and thrive than ever after encountering the existence of books and finally starting to question himself and others around him. Furthermore, the reason Beatty’s speech resonates with the reader as much as it does can be linked with the point Montag is at his journey at that time. The characterization in the novel makes us feel like the naïve, newcomer Montag will walk the exact same road where the experienced and highly intelligent Beatty has once embarked upon and fall to the same consequences, but even though the speech delivered by Beatty does make the readers question if Montag will falter and fall victim to the curse of brought upon by knowledge, Montag doesn’t falter and disregards Beatty’s remarks continuing on his journey.

As Beatty gets up to leave Montag alone, he mentions that he has in fact read some books just to scratch his “itch” and tells him that they teach nothing. He mentions that the books are meaningless if they are fiction because they aren’t related to real life, and worse if they are non-fiction because that means they are about “...one professor calling another an idiot...” which consequently leaves the reader lost. Posterior to sitting through Beatty’s extensive speech about his view of true happiness, Montag still doesn’t give up hope on books. This is made apparent when Beatty asks Montag if he’ll come to work that night, where we can deduce that he expects him to immediately say yes because after Montag answers by saying “I don’t know” Beatty looks surprised.

The key difference underlined about their characters that occurs during this lengthy interaction between Beatty and Montag is their fundamental outlook on happiness as a concept. While Beatty thinks that questioning “why” something is made instead of “how” it’s made will lead to unhappiness, Montag has experienced the complete opposite. Only when Montag starts questioning his surroundings is when he finally starts to become truly happy for the first time in his life.

One other place Beatty’s well-constructed argument falls short is when he mentions the importance of making every individual equal in order for no one to feel inferior or superior to one another, which- according to him- prevents unpleasant thoughts, but in order to make everyone *feel* equal, freedom of speech has to be trumped which creates anger and outrage amongst those who have been forcibly silenced.

Following the events of the novel, when Montag finally returns to work, now in contact with a fellow book reader and former professor Faber, he hands over a book to Beatty, after completely rejecting his ideas and experiences, in order to avoid further suspicion. However, the alarm then goes off in the fire department and the location of the books turns out to be Montag’s house. Arriving at Montag’s house, Beatty forces Montag to set fire to his own books and after that, ironically enough, ridicules him with memorized quotes from books of which he acts as if he loathes. As Beatty talks more and more, telling Montag what a fool he is and how he is going to be arrested, Montag finally snaps and with the same flamethrower he used to incinerate his books he kills Beatty on the spot, and suddenly becomes a man on the run from the government.

What is confusing and complex about the final interactions Montag had with Beatty is that the way Beatty acts in the last confrontations alluding to Beatty actually wanting Montag to put an end to him (although likes of which are never confirmed). Beatty, the an intelligent and the most complex character in the entire novel, a walking juxtaposition of a man who embraces conformity to the difficulties of access to knowledge but also a man who has once sought out and acquired the very same knowledge he comes to despise, presents the most interesting perspective in the novel, but in the end,

the prominent conflict that is inside of him becomes too much to bear as in his last moment he lashes out against an emotionally unstable man capable of incinerating him within seconds which comes to fruition.

## Conclusion

Overall, in the critically acclaimed novel *Fahrenheit 451*, the differences of the characters and their interactions with one another build the foundation for the main story and ideas in the novel by discreetly and non-discreetly exchanging perspectives on the living conditions in their dystopian world.

The four main character types are featured in the novel, though they differ greatly in their specifics, can be boiled down to: individuals who embrace a life filled with distractions, void of true happiness; individuals who have been actively seeking out true happiness since their creation; individuals who have been tempted to find true happiness later in their life and embraced it, and lastly who have walked the path to true happiness but rejected it. The characters in question are Mildred, Clarisse, Montag, and Beatty respectively. With as few as four characters, Ray Bradbury was able to effectively present an extensive portion of the perspective spectrum while not being overwhelming or underwhelming. Each character has their viewpoints clearly expressed in one part of the novel or another, and thus the expert writing and the interesting and complex characters' aid greatly in the presentation of the topics featured in the novel.

## References

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