

Fahrenheit 451
through the lens of
"we wear the mask"
and "barn burning"



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Ray Bradbury's novel Fahrenheit 451 explores the idea of a person living a tedious, restrictive life while trying to fool himself into believing in a sense of happiness. Similarly, Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "We Wear the Mask," proposes the idea that people are wearing masks in order to deceive themselves and others and suppress their real emotions. Fahrenheit 415 further elaborates that one can only find true happiness if he makes the decision to abandon everything familiar and just run away, achieving tranquility and inner delight. "Barn Burning," a short story by William Faulkner, also presents the life changing decision to flee from the unpleasant, well-known life in order to find true contentment. This essay, through explicit use of "We Wear the Mask" and "Barn Burning," will explore the superficial urban life of Guy Montag, the main character in Fahrenheit 451, and later on his important decision to run away from civilization, thus finding his true self and inner peace. In Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury argues that the best way to break free from the vicious circle that is exemplified by a fake monotonous life without real feelings or excitement is by making a conscious decision to escape from this reality and find a new place to begin exploring one's inner self and observing new surroundings.

While going through this empty, false life, a person capable of thinking for himself has to pretend that he is foolishly content and oblivious to the faults of his way of living. The characters in these texts find different ways to escape or conceal the real feelings about their own lifestyle. In "We Wear the Mask," the mask represents one's face as something still and immutable, and this is the standard. "We smile" because this has become the only acceptable behavior. These two words insinuate that putting on this fake grin

is effortless and simple. The genuine emotions, on the other hand, are heavily suppressed, and people “ let them only see us, while / We wear the mask.” Allowing others to see one without his usual, content countenance is regarded as a sign of weakness. Therefore, this person may feel wretched or miserable but “ let[s] the world dream otherwise,” for hiding his true feelings deep down inside the mind serves as the only way to ephemerally escape them. In “ Barn Burning,” Sarty’s constant moving embodies the way he and his family try to break away from their critical problem. His father’s bellicose burning torments the whole family, so they flee from one town to another without knowing “ where they are going” (Barn Burning, 7) in a desperate attempt to temporarily forget all about the Abner’s issues. “ It was always somewhere, always a house of sorts waiting for them a day or two days or even three days away” (Barn Burning, 7). This quote illustrates Sarty’s attitude towards this nomad-like existence. He constantly keeps a little ray of hope inside, for he feels that there will always be a suitable place for the family, and they can carry on pretending to be happy in a new location. In Fahrenheit 451, people are accustomed to concealing all genuine emotional bursts and living this pseudo-delightful life, only showing what lays on the surface, similarly to “ We Wear the Mask”. Montag and his wife, Mildred, are “ not in love with anyone,” (Fahrenheit 451, 51) but pretend they are happy with their marriage. When he confronts her in regard to something real like “ t[aking] all the pills in [her] bottle last night,” (Fahrenheit 451, 27) Mildred has already absorbed this problem, saying that she “ wouldn’t do that” (Fahrenheit 451, 27) and dismisses it as a figment of Montag’s imagination. These two passages demonstrate that in Fahrenheit 451, people are unable

to deal with unadulterated feelings, so they just hide them at the bottom of their minds.

At the most conscious level of one's mentality, on the other hand, is situated the basic command to be obedient and follow the orders issued out by his superiors. Sarty " had not been permitted to choose for himself," (Barn Burning, 21) so his father's commands are carried out without question or hesitation. A simple " Go." sends the son " moving, running, outside the house, towards the stable" (Barn Burning, 21). This single word conveys the strength of Abner's influence over his son, for Sarty seems frantic, desperate to fulfill the commands given out. In the same manner, Montag is also being harshly controlled by his boss, Beatty. " Everything to its proper place. Quick with the kerosene! Who's got a match!" (Fahrenheit 451, 44). These fast-paced, energetic orders show how Montag has been taught to succumb to instructions without thinking individually in his mind. Like other firemen, he has become a mindless slave as he " grin[s] the fierce grin of all men singed and driven back by flame" (Fahrenheit 451, 11). This quote gives even more insight on the ways that Montag, akin to his colleagues, has been brainwashed. He has been fooled into believing that he loves and enjoys this dreadful profession, but in reality, he only burns these books because such orders are issued out to him.

Under this superficial appearance, a person can easily keep his true identity intact. In " We Wear the Mask," our true emotions are being concealed behind the fake, plastic smile. The mask " hides [one's] cheeks and shades [his] eyes," as these two parts of the face are a dead giveaway of one's emotions. Therefore, they are kept secret from others. In " Barn Burning", <https://assignbuster.com/fahrenheit-451-through-the-lens-of-we-wear-the-mask-and-barn-burning/>

Sarty describes his own father as being “ without face or depth – a shape black, flat, and bloodless as though cut from tin in the iron folds of the frockcoat which had not been made for him, the voice harsh like tin and without heat like tin,” (Barn Burning, 8). This vivid illustration of Abner evokes the sentiment that he is this unreal entity, inhuman and almost alien in appearance and behavior. He does not need to hide behind a mask, for he stays stolid, like a blank canvas. Montag, on the other hand, starts hiding behind a mask deliberately, for he begins thinking in a more vivid, poetic way, which shocks and petrifies him. “ What?’ asked Montag of that other self, the subconscious idiot that ran babbling at times, quite independent of will, habit and conscience” (Fahrenheit 451, 18). Guy tries to mentally distance himself from this other wiser personality because being different is something truly horrifying and dangerous in his world. The fact that these genuine thoughts come at random times make them even more unusual for Montag. As a result, he feels obliged to keep this part of his entity hidden well.

The second most important step of a person’s path to finding his true self consists of the many small clues that there is something wrong in his life, leading to the lightning-fast moment in which he realizes that his existence so far had been everything but perfect and that his previous outlook had been tinted by rose-colored glasses. While wearing the mask, a person takes into account all the difficulties he had experienced, forcing him to put it on in the first place. As “ We Wear The Mask” reveals, “[A]ll [his] tears and sighs” have been carefully kept under control, but one finally comes to term with these misfortunes. The excruciating pain caused by the “ torn and bleeding

hearts" finally catches up with the person, and he realizes that he has to change something in the name of his future existence. In "Barn Burning," Sarty fully realizes that his family's life is not in its proper state, but feels helpless when it comes to improving it. He is "not heavy enough to keep him footed solid in [the world], to resist it and try to change the course of its events" (Barn Burning, 9). Being so young, Sarty has absolutely no influence over the other members of the family, so any form of resistance on his part would be futile. In Fahrenheit 451, Montag has many moments in which he questions his actual feelings towards his marriage and overall lifestyle. "Well, wasn't there a wall between him and Mildred, when you came down to it?" (Fahrenheit 451, 51) He has already found out the answer, but inside, he refuses to believe that his marriage is failing. After a while, as he begins to think more and more, Montag realizes that his relationship with Mildred can be described as being "a silly empty man near a silly empty woman..." (Fahrenheit 451, 51). This further startles him because he had become used to thinking that he had a perfect, strong marriage full of mutual love. From this point on, Montag begins thinking in an entirely new way, feelings like "[h]e was in someone else's house..." (Fahrenheit 451, 49). He finally realizes that there is no room for him in his own ordinary, sub-urban house, where he dwells with his emotionless wife, sharing no real connection with him; analogically, his formerly docile mind can no longer contain the new untainted thoughts, rushing through his head. Montag's realization of his artificial life marks an important moment, for it starts the snowball effect, leading to his liberation.

In order to make this sort of life more meaningful, a person begins making miniature, but significant changes to his own lifestyle. In "Barn Burning," Sarty begins to openly question his father's orders and sees to it that other people discover about the father's pyromaniac tendencies. At one point in the story, Abner gives orders to Sarty, expecting the boy to react like always; however, "[t]he boy did not move. Then he could speak. "What ..." he cried. "What are you ..." (Barn Burning, 21). This quote demonstrates Sarty's first step towards finally reaching a better life. Even if he ends up complying with the father's orders, at first, he tries to reason out why he has to obey. Correspondingly, in Fahrenheit 451, Montag also tries to understand the purpose of his job, but at first, he actually begins changing his life involuntarily. "His hand had done it all, his hand, with a brain of its own, with a conscience and a curiosity in each trembling finger, had turned thief" (Fahrenheit 451, 45). Guy practically steals the book, but due to his conscious upbringing that books should be burned, he is scared by his own act. As a result, he attributes this to his body's impulses. Later on in the book, he contemplates that by using the power of books, he may be able to unite people again. "Maybe the books can get us half out of the cave. They just might stop us from making the same damn insane mistakes!" (Fahrenheit 451, 81). Montag is genuinely concerned with making changes to the whole world. He feels that the knowledge people can get from books is too valuable to be burnt away. As a result, Montag decides to finally break away from his fireman profession in order to learn all about books.

These changes begin to escalate, and in the end, a person is pushed to make a life-changing decision. In "Barn Burning," Sarty makes this choice in a "

flight or flight" moment. " I could keep on, he thought. I could run on and on and never look back, never need to see his face again,. Only I can't. I can't..." (Barn Burning, 21). He either has to follow his father's orders like always or he can disobey the commands and think for himself for the very first time. Sarty has finally matured enough to realize that his father's actions are wrong and unforgivable. He flees in panic and confusion, and "[a]t midnight he [sits] on the crest of a hill. He [does] not know it [is] midnight and he [does] not know how far he [has] come" (Barn Burning, 24). Sarty's decision has great influence on himself and probably his family. The boy is overwhelmed by his own freedom and his senses are numb. Neither time, nor weather make any impression on the stupefied Sarty. In Fahrenheit 451, Montag makes a series of important decisions, but the most significant one is his choice to leave the city behind and run away to meet the people living on the railroad tracks. Upon exiting the city, he finds himself around nature. " But he was at the river. He touched it, just to be sure it was real" (Fahrenheit 451, 147). This quote exemplifies Montag's disbelief that he can be at a place so far away from the fake, industrial city and so tranquil and relaxing. " He felt as if he had left a stage behind and many actors" (Fahrenheit 451, 146). This quote further illustrates his attitude towards his wife, Mildred, and all the other citizens. Guy believes that none of them ever took off their mask, and he feels delighted to be away from all this. Montag's choice to abandon the urban stage life of unsuspecting actors, ironically unaware of their own costumes, transforms him into a whole new person.

After such a purifying decision, a person has to come to terms with his new outlook and being. Sarty's feelings are summed up in exactly five words. "

He did not look back" (Barn Burning, 25). He feels no remorse because he can finally make decisions for himself, without a barn burner telling him what to do, what to get, or what to say. Similarly, in Fahrenheit 451, Guy finds peace and mental balance when he is alone, exploring his new scenery. He "float[s] in a sudden peacefulness, away from the city and the lights and the chase, away from everything" (Fahrenheit 451, 147). The word "away" is stressed in this quote because it shows how Montag has distanced himself from everything that had previously made him sick. He is finally a new person in a new place. Where he meets the group of new people, they further reassure him. "You're welcome here" (Fahrenheit 451, 154). Guy finally belongs to a community with the same sense of awareness as him, and he understands that he is part of an initiative bigger than just stealing books. At last, Montag has come to terms with all the changes around and inside him, and he feels that his true life is just beginning.

Through "We Wear the Mask" and "Barn Burning," this essay demonstrates the personal path of Fahrenheit 451's main character, Guy Montag, as he evolves from being an ordinary face behind an ordinary mask to becoming a new individual with real thinking skills, who finally makes the colossal decision to abandon civilization. Montag becomes liberated from the urban chains, hampering his mental power, and he can go on to accomplish his new goals, connected with his realization that books are good for people.