

Montag's grief in fahrenheit 451

Life



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The 5 Stages of Grief in Fahrenheit 451

In 1969, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross used observations from her work with terminally ill patients to create a system that would later be known as the Kübler-Ross model (or, more commonly, the five stages of grief). This psychological system postulates a series of emotions that one experiences upon encountering a horrible truth—in her case, terminal illness. The five stages as described in the theory are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—but not necessarily in that order, as each individual undergoes and copes with grief differently (Patricelli 1). Because these traits are infallibly human by nature, it is reasonable to expect their appearance in sources of literature that glimpse into the human mind.

In addition to being a heavily satirical commentary about the dangers of conformity and censorship, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* is, at its most basic level, an emotional and deeply psychological journey. As such, an analysis of protagonist Guy Montag's psyche during the dynamic mental transitions he endures would prove to be an enlightening endeavor that reveals a large amount about his character and the story the novel tells. In *Fahrenheit 451*, its protagonist undergoes a series of emotions that bear a striking resemblance to the Kübler-Ross model and, throughout its duration, experiences all five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

The subject of grief in Kübler-Ross's initial tests was terminal illness and coming to terms with it. In regards to Guy Montag, the horrible truth is a bit different; rather than the discovery that he will soon die, it is the realization

that everything in his life thus far has been a lie and his society is, in fact, a dystopia. As is the usual first stage, Montag undergoes denial first. It occurs when his young neighbor, Clarisse McClellan, provokes self-reflection in him for the first time in years with the simple question, "Are you happy?" (Bradbury 10). Montag instantly is shocked and "crie[s]" out his response. Later, while in his home, he ponders the question. "Of course I'm happy. What does she think? I'm not? he asked the quiet rooms" (10). Bradbury describes the rooms as "quiet" to emphasize how he received no response, and how he will not find an easy answer no matter how hard he looks. The denial stage is all about the inability or unwillingness of the subject to accept whatever troubling information has been disclosed to them (Patricelli 1), and the abrupt nature of Montag's initial dismissal of Clarisse's question—in addition to the stubbornness he demonstrates later that day—is certainly indicative of one experiencing denial.

The second stage Montag goes through is bargaining. Slightly out of order but legitimate all the same, Montag's experience with this stage is intense yet futile. After Captain Beatty discovers Montag has been hoarding books for himself, he allows him a twenty-four-hour period during which the fireman can read through the books, in an effort to prove to him that they are in fact useless. Montag goes home and reveals his hidden stash to his wife, who is immediately distraught and hesitant to read them with her husband, who even shrieks and claws at him to escape. "Millie!" Montag says to her in the form of a desperate plea. "Listen. . . . We can't burn these. I want to look at them, at least look at them once. Then if what the Captain says is true, we'll burn them together . . . You must help me" (Bradbury 66).

During this scene, he takes a risk, bargaining with the universe to put things back the way they were. He tries to strike a deal that, if he gains nothing from reading the books, then he was right all along, and that nothing is wrong with his life and society. Unfortunately for him, this bargain does not work in his favor . . .

The third stage Montag faces—which is usually the most intense—is anger. When his wife Mildred is entertaining guests in their home, Montag observes their conversation and grows infuriated by their superficiality and frivolous, cavalier attitude about their husbands and war. With Professor Faber buzzing in his ear to be quiet and give up the entire time, Montag brings them a book of poetry and starts to read it aloud. “ Montag, hold on, don’t . . .” Faber pleads. “ Did you hear them,” Montag replies, “ did you hear these monsters talking about monsters?” (97-98). Faber continues trying to convince Montag to give up. “ What good is this, what’ll you prove?” he begs, to which Montag replies, “ Scare hell out of them, that’s what, scare the living daylights out!” (98). The use of Faber in this scene is very clever, as it exposes the deterioration of Montag’s patience much better than he could on his own. It is at this moment that the protagonist realizes the truth of his life and expresses his frustration about his inability to change it. He intentionally uses literature—something most people in his society are conditioned to fear and disrespect—against them in an almost-sadistic expression of anger.

Fourthly, Montag suffers through the stage of depression. “ Once it becomes clear that anger and bargaining are not going to reverse the loss,” Patricelli writes, “ people may then sink into a depression stage where they confront the inevitability and reality of the loss and their own helplessness to change

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it" (2). Clarisse is dead. He has killed Beatty. Mildred has betrayed him. His plan with Faber has failed. He is being hunted by the mechanical hound—a terrifyingly effective horror that, throughout the novel, he has shown a great fear for—and is clearly at wit's end. This is when Montag undergoes the depression stage. "My God, how did this happen?" Montag cries out to Faber during their final meeting. "It was only the other night everything was fine and the next thing I know I'm drowning. How many times can a man go down and still be alive? I can't breathe" (Bradbury 131). The use of the metaphor of "drowning" in this section conveys perfectly Montag's state of mind—the hopelessness and futility of any attempts at resistance. He has failed at everything thus far, and it is implied that he just wants to die. He has "[gone] down" so many times already that he is surprised he has not already fallen, and is not expecting himself to make it much longer. At this moment, he believes that resisting the truth is not a viable choice, and that failure is the only option.

The last stage Montag sees out—which is also the last in most other cases—is acceptance. Because the truth Montag accepts is not death but the reality of societal failures, this particular example of acceptance is slightly more hopeful than that of Kübler-Ross's original subjects, mainly because it hints at a future where things could be made better. At the end of the novel when Montag meets the Book People (a group of intellectual hermits dedicating their lives to the preservation of literature through memorization), he comes to the realization that there are still those who strive for a brighter future, and that not all is lost. He agrees to commit his own life to their ways, and starts memorizing the Book of Ecclesiastes. Through the encouragement and

welcoming nature of Granger, Montag comes to accept what life has in store for him, and turns his eye to the potential of rebuilding civilization. " Yes, thought Montag, that's the one I'll save for noon. For noon . . . When we reach the city" (165). The optimistic and hopeful view these last sentences portray certainly embodies the final stage, acceptance, and indicates Montag's agreement with his fate and what the universe has in store for him.