William Stafford (1914-1993) was an American poet. In 1970, he was named Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, a position known now as Poet Laureate. In this poem, the speaker describes book burning, a common method of censorship in which people set fire to books they object to on political, cultural, or religious grounds. In a 1991 interview, Stafford once said that he wrote this poem after purposefully burning a book that he found “attractive, shallow, and misleading… Why should I keep it around?” he thought.

**Burning a Book**
by William Stafford

Protecting each other, right in the center

a few pages glow a long time.

The cover goes first, then outer leaves
curling away, then spine and a scattering.

Truth, **brittle** and faint, burns easily,
its fire as hot as the fire lies make—
flame doesn’t care. You can usually find
a few **charred** words in the ashes.

And some books ought to burn, trying for character
but just faking it. More disturbing
than book ashes are whole libraries that no one
got around to writing—**desolate**
towns, miles of unthought in cities,
and the **terrorized** countryside where wild dogs
own anything that moves. If a book
isn’t written, no one needs to burn it—
ignorance can dance in the absence of fire.

So I’ve burned books. And there are many
I haven’t even written, and nobody has.
1. What is the central image of the first stanza?
   A. a book refusing to burn
   B. a book burning by accident
   C. a book burning from its outermost layers inwards
   D. the differences between how truth and lies burn

2. According to the speaker, what is more disturbing than book burning?
   A. empty libraries that towns cannot afford to fill
   B. wild dogs that keep people from learning
   C. not bothering to write certain books at all
   D. people who hate reading books

3. Which of the following best summarizes the theme of this poem?
   A. Ignorance and a lack of new ideas are greater threats to society than burning books.
   B. Book burning creates ignorance and chaos in societies; free speech should be encouraged.
   C. The worst threat of censorship is its ability to erase prominent writers from history.
   D. We are all guilty of censorship when we reject ideas that do not align with our own.

4. Which lines from the poem best support the answer to question 3?
   A. “The cover goes first, then outer leaves / curling away, then spine and a scattering”
   B. “More disturbing / than book ashes are whole libraries that no one / got around to writing”
   C. “the terrorized countryside where wild dogs / own anything that moves”
   D. “So I’ve burned books. And there are many / I haven’t even written, and nobody has.”

5. What does the word “unthought” mean as used in line 13?
   A. hostility toward censorship
   B. an inability to read
   C. acceptance of book-burning
   D. lack of ideas

6. Which lines from the poem best support the answer to question 5?
   A. “trying for character / but just faking it”
   B. “whole libraries that no one / got around to writing”
   C. “terrorized countryside”
   D. “where wild dogs / own anything that moves”

Choose a common theme from the list below that best supports both the poem, and the novel, Fahrenheit 451. In a well-developed paragraph, explain how the author uses symbolism and tone to develop the theme of the poem. Cite textual evidence to support your analysis.

1. Books are a controversial and important part of our society and our lives.
2. Our reliance on technology can spiral out of control if we let it.
3. Knowledge is both joyful and painful.
4. We can be confined by our own self-censorship.