

## Brave New World

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<<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/bravenew>>

### Context

Aldous Huxley was born in Surrey, England on July 26, 1894 to an illustrious family deeply rooted in England's literary and scientific tradition. Huxley's father, Leonard Huxley, was the son of Thomas Henry Huxley, a well-known biologist who gained the nickname "Darwin's bulldog" for championing Charles Darwin's evolutionary ideas. His mother, Julia Arnold, was related to the important nineteenth-century poet and essayist Matthew Arnold.

Raised in this family of scientists, writers, and teachers (his father was a writer and teacher, and his mother a schoolmistress), Huxley received an excellent education, first at home, then at Eton, providing him with access to numerous fields of knowledge. Huxley was an avid student, and during his lifetime he was renowned as a generalist, an intellectual who had mastered the use of the English language but was also informed about cutting-edge developments in science and other fields. Although much of his scientific understanding was superficial—he was easily convinced of findings that remained somewhat on the fringe of mainstream science—his education at the intersection of science and literature allowed him to integrate current scientific findings into his novels and essays in a way that few other writers of his time were able to do.

Aside from his education, another major influence on Huxley's life and writing was an eye disease contracted in his teenage years that left him almost blind. As a teenager Huxley had dreamed about becoming a doctor, but the degeneration of his eyesight prevented him from pursuing his chosen career. It also severely restricted the activities he could pursue. Because of his near blindness, he depended heavily on his first wife, Maria, to take care of him. Blindness and vision are motifs that permeate much of Huxley's writing.

After graduating from Oxford in 1916, Huxley began to make a name for himself writing satirical pieces about the British upper class. Though these writings were skillful and gained Huxley an audience and literary name, they were generally considered to offer little depth beyond their lightweight criticisms of social manners. Huxley continued to write prolifically, working as an essayist and journalist, and publishing four volumes of poetry before beginning to work on novels. Without giving up his other writing, beginning in 1921, Huxley produced a series of novels at an astonishing rate: *Crome Yellow* was published in 1921, followed by *Antic Hay* in 1923, *Those Barren Leaves* in 1925, and *Point Counter Point* in 1928. During these years, Huxley left his early satires behind and became more interested in writing about subjects with deeper philosophical and ethical significance. Much of his work deals with the conflict between the interests of the individual and society, often focusing on the problem of self-realization within the context of social responsibility. These themes reached their zenith in Huxley's *Brave New World*, published in 1932. His most enduring work imagined a fictional future in which free will and individuality have been sacrificed in deference to complete social stability.

*Brave New World* marked a step in a new direction for Huxley, combining his skill for satire with his fascination with science to create a dystopian (anti-utopian) world in which a totalitarian government controlled society by the use of science and technology. Through its exploration of the pitfalls of linking science, technology, and politics, and its argument that such a link will likely reduce human individuality, *Brave New World* deals with similar themes as George Orwell's famous novel *1984*. Orwell wrote his novel in 1949, after the dangers of totalitarian governments had been played out to tragic effect in World War II, and during the great struggle of the Cold War and the arms race which so powerfully underlined the role of technology in the modern world. Huxley anticipated all of these developments. Hitler came to power in Germany a year after the publication of *Brave New World*. World War II broke out six years after. The atomic bomb was dropped thirteen years after its publication, initiating the Cold War and what President Eisenhower referred to as a frightening buildup of the "military-industrial complex." Huxley's novel seems, in many ways, to prophesize the major themes and struggles that dominated life and debate in the second half of the twentieth century, and continue to dominate it in the twenty-first.

After publishing *Brave New World*, Huxley continued to live in England, making frequent journeys to Italy. In 1937 Huxley moved to California. An ardent pacifist, he had become alarmed at the growing military buildup in Europe, and determined to remove himself from the possibility of war. Already famous as a writer of novels and essays, he tried to make a living as a screenwriter. He had little success. Huxley never seemed to grasp the requirements of the form, and his erudite literary style did not translate well to the screen.

In the late forties, Huxley started to experiment with hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD and mescaline. He also maintained an interest in occult phenomena, such as hypnotism, séances, and other activities occupying the border between science and mysticism. Huxley's experiments with drugs led him to write several books that had profound influences on the sixties counterculture. The book he wrote about his experiences with mescaline, *The Doors of Perception*, influenced a young man named Jim Morrison and his friends, and they named the band they formed The Doors. (The phrase, "the doors of perception" comes from a William Blake poem called *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.) In his last major work, *Island*, published in 1962, Huxley describes a doomed utopia called Pala that serves as a contrast to his earlier vision of dystopia. A central aspect of Pala's ideal culture is the use of a hallucinogenic drug called "moksha," which provides an interesting context in which to view *soma*, the drug in *Brave New World* that serves as one

tool of the totalitarian state. Huxley died on November 22, 1963, in Los Angeles.

### Utopias and Dystopias

*Brave New World* belongs to the genre of utopian literature. A utopia is an imaginary society organized to create ideal conditions for human beings, eliminating hatred, pain, neglect, and all of the other evils of the world.

The word utopia comes from Sir Thomas More's novel *Utopia* (1516), and it is derived from Greek roots that could be translated to mean either "good place" or "no place." Books that include descriptions of utopian societies were written long before More's novel, however. Plato's *Republic* is a prime example. Sometimes the societies described are meant to represent the perfect society, but sometimes utopias are created to satirize existing societies, or simply to speculate about what life might be like under different conditions. In the 1920's, just before *Brave New World* was written, a number of bitterly satirical novels were written to describe the horrors of a planned or totalitarian society. The societies they describe are called dystopias, places where things are badly awry. Either term, utopia or dystopia, could correctly be used to describe *Brave New World*.

### Themes

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

**The Use of Technology to Control Society** - *Brave New World* warns of the dangers of giving the state control over new and powerful technologies. One illustration of this theme is the rigid control of reproduction through technological and medical intervention, including the surgical removal of ovaries, the Bokanovsky Process, and hypnopaedic conditioning. Another is the creation of complicated entertainment machines that generate both harmless leisure and the high levels of consumption and production that are the basis of the World State's stability. *Soma* is a third example of the kind of medical, biological, and psychological technologies that *Brave New World* criticizes most sharply. It is important to recognize the distinction between science and technology. Whereas the State talks about progress and science, what it really means is the bettering of technology, not increased scientific exploration and experimentation. The state uses science as a means to build technology that can create a seamless, happy, superficial world through things such as the "feelies." The state censors and limits science, however, since it sees the fundamental basis behind science, the search for truth, as threatening to the State's control. The State's focus on happiness and stability means that it uses the results of scientific research, inasmuch as they contribute to technologies of control, but does not support science itself.

**The Consumer Society** - It is important to understand that *Brave New World* is not simply a warning about what *could* happen to society if things go wrong, it is also a satire of the society in which Huxley existed, and which still exists today. While the attitudes and behaviors of World State citizens at first appear bizarre, cruel, or scandalous, many clues point to the conclusion that the World State is simply an extreme—but logically developed—version of our society's economic values, in which individual happiness is defined as the ability to satisfy needs, and success as a society is equated with economic growth and prosperity.

**The Incompatibility of Happiness and Truth** - *Brave New World* is full of characters who do everything they can to avoid facing the truth about their own situations. The almost universal use of the drug *soma* is probably the most pervasive example of such willful self-delusion. *Soma* clouds the realities of the present and replaces them with happy hallucinations, and is thus a tool for promoting social stability. But even Shakespeare can be used to avoid facing the truth, as John demonstrates by his insistence on viewing Lenina through the lens of Shakespeare's world, first as a Juliet and later as an "impudent strumpet." According to Mustapha Mond, the World State prioritizes happiness at the expense of truth by design: he believes that people are better off with happiness than with truth. What are these two abstract entities that Mond juxtaposes? It seems clear enough from Mond's argument that happiness refers to the immediate gratification of every citizen's desire for food, sex, drugs, nice clothes, and other consumer items. It is less clear what Mond means by truth, or specifically *what* truths he sees the World State society as covering up. From Mond's discussion with John, it is possible to identify two main types of truth that the World State seeks to eliminate. First, as Mond's own past indicates, the World State controls and muffles all efforts by citizens to gain any sort of scientific, or empirical truth. Second, the government attempts to destroy all kinds of "human" truths, such as love, friendship, and personal connection. These two types of truth are quite different from each other: objective truth involves coming to a definitive conclusion of fact, while a "human" truth can only be explored, not defined. Yet both kinds of truth are united in the passion that an individual might feel for them. As a young man, Mustapha Mond became enraptured with the delight of making discoveries, just as John loves the language and intensity of Shakespeare. The search for truth then, also seems to involve a great deal of individual effort, of striving and fighting against odds. The very will to search for truth is an *individual* desire that the communal society of *Brave New World*, based as it is on anonymity and lack of thought, cannot allow to exist. Truth and individuality thus become entwined in the novel's thematic structure.

**The Dangers of an All-Powerful State** - Like George Orwell's *1984*, this novel depicts a dystopia in which an all-powerful state controls the behaviors and actions of its people in order to preserve its own stability and power. But a major difference between the two is that, whereas in *1984* control is maintained by constant government surveillance, secret police, and torture, power in *Brave New World* is maintained through technological interventions that start before birth and last until death, and that actually change what people want. The government of *1984* maintains power through force and intimidation. The government of *Brave New World* retains control by making its citizens so happy and superficially fulfilled that they don't care about their personal freedom. In *Brave New World* the consequences of state control are a loss of dignity, morals, values, and emotions—in short, a loss of humanity.

### **Motifs**

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.*

**"Pneumatic"** - The word "pneumatic" is used with remarkable frequency to describe two things: Lenina's body and chairs. "Pneumatic" is an adjective that means that something has air pockets or works by means of compressed air. In the case of the chairs (in the feely theater and in Mond's office), it probably means that the chairs' cushions are inflated with air. In Lenina's case, the word is used by both Henry Foster and Benito Hoover to describe what she's like to have sex with. She herself remarks that her lovers usually find her "pneumatic," patting her legs as she does so. In reference to Lenina it probably means "balloon-like" or "bouncy," describing her flesh. The use of this odd word to describe the physical characteristics of both a woman and a piece of furniture underscores the novel's theme that human sexuality has been degraded to the level of a commodity.

**Ford, "my Ford," "Year of our Ford," etc.** - Throughout *Brave New World*, the citizens of the World State substitute the name of Henry Ford, the early twentieth-century industrialist and founder of the Ford Motor Company, wherever people in our own world would say Lord" (i.e., Christ). This demonstrates that even at the level of casual conversation and habit, religion has been replaced by reverence for technology—specifically the efficient, mechanized factory production of goods that Henry Ford pioneered.

**Alienation** - The motif of alienation provides a counterpoint to the motif of total conformity that pervades the World State. Bernard Marx, Helmholtz Watson, and John are alienated from the World State, each for his own reasons. Bernard is alienated because he is a misfit, too small and powerless for the position he has been conditioned to enjoy. Helmholtz is alienated for the opposite reason: he is too intelligent even to play the role of an Alpha Plus. John is alienated on multiple levels and at multiple sites: not only does the Indian community reject him, but he is both unwilling and unable to become part of the World State. The motif of alienation is one of the driving forces of the narrative: it provides the main characters with their primary motivations.

**Sex** - *Brave New World* abounds with references to sex. At the heart of the World State's control of its population is its rigid control over sexual mores and reproductive rights. Reproductive rights are controlled through an authoritarian system that sterilizes about two thirds of women, requires the rest to use contraceptives, and surgically removes ovaries when it needs to produce new humans. The act of sex is controlled by a system of social rewards for promiscuity and lack of commitment. John, an outsider, is tortured by his desire for Lenina and her inability to return his love as such. The conflict between John's desire for love and Lenina's desire for sex illustrates the profound difference in values between the World State and the humanity represented by Shakespeare's works.

**Shakespeare** - Shakespeare provides the language through which John understands the world. Through John's use of Shakespeare, the novel makes contact with the rich themes explored in plays like *The Tempest*. It also creates a stark contrast between the utilitarian simplicity and inane babble of the World State's propaganda and the nuanced, elegant verse of a time "before Ford." Shakespeare's plays provide many examples of precisely the kind of human relations—passionate, intense, and often tragic—that the World State is committed to eliminating.

### **Symbols**

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.*

**Soma** - The drug *soma* is a symbol of the use of instant gratification to control the World State's populace. It is also a symbol of the powerful influence of science and technology on society. As a kind of "sacrament," it also represents the use of religion to control society.