

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley

Historical Context: Brave New World

 EXPLORING Novels, 2003

When Huxley wrote [*Brave New World*](#) in 1931 it was at the beginning of a worldwide depression. The American stock market crash of 1929 had closed banks, wiped out many people's savings, and caused unemployment rates to soar. To make matters worse, American [farmers](#) were suffering from some of the worst droughts in history, leading to widespread poverty and migration out of the farming belt. People longed for the kind of economic security that Huxley gives to the citizens of his fictional world. The effects of the crash were beginning to be felt worldwide, including in England, where Huxley lived. However much economic issues were on his mind, Huxley was also very much aware of the social and scientific changes that had begun to sweep the world in the beginning of the century, and particularly through the [1920s](#). Technology was rapidly replacing many workers, but [politicians](#) promised that progress would solve the unemployment and economic problems. Instead, workers were forced to take whatever jobs were available. More often than not, unskilled or semi-skilled laborers worked long hours without overtime pay, under unsafe conditions, and without benefits such as health insurance or pensions. Unlike the inhabitants of the brave new world, they had no job guarantees and no security. Furthermore, they often had little time for leisure and little money to spend on entertainment or on material luxuries. In order to increase consumer demand for the products being produced, manufacturers turned to [advertising](#) in order to convince people they ought to spend their money buying products and services. Also, Henry Ford, who invented the modern factory assembly line in 1914, was now able to efficiently mass produce cars. For the first time, car parts were interchangeable and easily obtained, and Ford deliberately kept the price of his Model T low enough so that his workers could afford them. In order to pay for the new [automobiles](#), many people who did not have enough cash needed to stretch out payments over time, and thus buying on credit became acceptable. Soon, people were buying other items on credit, fueling the economy by engaging in overspending and taking on debt. All of these economic upheavals affected Huxley's vision of the future. First, he saw Ford's production and management techniques as revolutionary, and chose to make Ford not just a hero to the characters in his novels but an actual god. Huxley also saw that technology could eventually give workers enormous amounts of leisure time. The result could be more time spent creating art and solving social problems, but Huxley's Controllers, perceiving those activities as threatening to the order they've created, decide to provide foolish distractions to preoccupy their workers. These future workers do their duty and buy more and more material goods to keep the economy rolling, even to the point of throwing away clothes rather than mending them.

In Huxley's day, people's values and ideas were changing rapidly. The 1920s generation of youth rejected the more puritanical Victorian values of their parents' generation. Men and women flirted with modern ideas, such as communism, and questioned the rigid attitudes about social class. Some embraced the idea of free love (sex outside of marriage or commitment), as advocated by people like author Gertrude Stein (1874-1946). Others were talking publicly about sex, or using contraceptives, which were being popularized by Margaret Sanger (1883-1966), the American leader of the birth-control movement.

Women began to smoke in public, cut their hair into short, boyish bobs, and wear much shorter, looser skirts. These new sexual attitudes are taken to an extreme in *Brave New World*.

Scientists were also beginning to explore the possibilities of human engineering. Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936) showed that one can create a conditioned response in animals. For example, he rang a bell whenever he fed a group of dogs, and over time Pavlov's dogs began to salivate at the sound of a bell, even when no food was presented to them. Pavlov's fellow scientist, John B. Watson (1878-1958), founded the Behaviorist School of psychology: he believed that human beings could be reduced to a network of stimuli and responses, which could then be controlled by whoever experimented on them. In the [1930s](#), German Nobel Prize winner Hans Spemann (1869-1941) developed the controversial science of experimental embryology, manipulating the experience of a human fetus in the womb in order to influence it. The eugenics movement—which was an attempt to limit the childbearing of lower-class, ethnic citizens—was popular in the 1920s as well.

Meanwhile, the fad of hypnopaedia, or sleep teaching, was popular in the 1920s and 1930s. People hoped to teach themselves passively by listening to instructional tapes while they were sleeping. Although the electroencephalograph, a device invented in 1929 that measures brain waves, would prove that people have a limited ability to learn information while asleep, it also proved that hypnopaedia can influence emotions and beliefs. Meanwhile, the ideas of Viennese physician Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the father of modern psychoanalysis, were also becoming popular. He believed, among other things, that most psychological problems stem from early childhood experiences. Huxley incorporated all of these technological and psychological discoveries into his novel, having the Controllers misuse this information about controlling human behavior to oppress their citizens.

Brave New World was written just before dictators such as Adolph Hitler in Germany, Benito Mussolini in Italy, Joseph Stalin in Russia, and Mao Tse-tung in China created totalitarian states in countries that were troubled by economic and political problems. These leaders often used extreme tactics to control their citizens, from propaganda and censorship to mass murder. Huxley could not have predicted what was on the horizon. The grim totalitarian state that would come about would be incorporated into author George Orwell's futuristic anti-utopian novel *1984* (1948) and strongly influenced by Huxley's *Brave New World*.

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Themes and Construction: Brave New World

 EXPLORING Novels, 2003

Themes

Brave New World is Aldous Huxley's satirical look at a totalitarian society of the future, in which the present-day trends (it was written in 1931) have been taken to extremes. When an outsider encounters this world, he cannot accept its values and chooses to die rather than try to conform to this "brave new world."

Free Will versus Enslavement

Only the Controllers of society, the ten elite rulers, have [freedom](#) of choice. Everyone else has been conditioned from the time they were embryos to accept unquestioningly all the values and beliefs of the carefully ordered society. Upper-class Alphas are allowed a little freedom because their higher intellect makes it harder for them to completely accept the rules of society. For example, they are occasionally allowed to travel to the Indian reservation to see how outsiders live. It is hoped that exposure to an "inferior" and "primitive" society will finally squelch any doubts about their own society's superiority. Beyond this, however, there is no room in "civilized" society for free will, creativity, imagination, or diversity, all of which can lead to conflict, war, and destruction. Therefore, dissidents who want these freedoms are exiled to remote corners of the earth. Anyone who feels upset for any reason quickly ingests a dose of the tranquilizer "soma."

John the Savage believes that the price to be paid for harmony in this society is too great. He sees the people as enslaved, addicted to drugs, and weakened and dehumanized by their inability to handle delayed gratification or pain of any sort. He exercises his freedom of choice by killing himself rather than becoming a part of such a world.

Class Conflict

As a result of conditioning, class conflict has been eliminated in Huxley's future world. The Controllers have decided there should be five social classes, from the superior, highly intelligent, and physically attractive Alphas, who have the most desirable and intellectually demanding jobs, to the inferior, mentally deficient, and physically unattractive Epsilons, who do the least desirable, menial jobs (Huxley makes the Alphas tall and fair and the Epsilons dark skinned, reflecting the prejudices at the time the novel was written). All people are genetically bred and conditioned from birth to be best adapted to the lives they will lead, and to accept the class system wholeheartedly.

Members of different classes not only look physically different, but wear distinctive clothing colors to make sure that no one can be mistaken for a member of a different group. Here, Huxley points out the shallowness in our own society: members of different social classes dress differently in order to be associated with their own class. Only John the Savage can see people as they really are because he has not been conditioned to accept unquestioningly the rigid class [structure](#). Thus, when he sees a dark-skinned person of a lower caste, he is reminded of Othello, a Shakespearean character who was both dark-skinned and admirable. John does not think to judge a person by his appearance.

Because Huxley was from a distinguished, educated, upper-class British family, he was very aware of the hypocrisies of the privileged classes. The Controller and Director represent the arrogant hypocrisy of the ruling class.

Sex

The inhabitants of Huxley's future world have very unusual attitudes toward sex by the standards of contemporary society. Promiscuity is considered healthy and superior to committed, monogamous relationships. Even small children are encouraged to engage in erotic play. The Controllers realize that strong loyalties created by committed relationships can cause conflicts between people, upsetting productivity and harmony. Since the needs of society are far more important than the needs of the individual, the Controllers strongly believe that sacrificing human attachments—even the attachment between children and their parents—is a small price to pay for social harmony. Women use contraception to avoid pregnancy, and if they do get pregnant accidentally, they hurry to the abortion center, a place Linda recalls with great fondness. She regrets bitterly having had to give birth in what she feels was a "dirty" affair.

People in Huxley's day were becoming more accepting of casual sex than previous generations, and they had much greater access to birth control. However, as Huxley shows, even with the best [technology](#) to prevent pregnancy, people can only maintain their loose sexual mores by sacrificing intimacy and commitment.

Science and Technology

Science and technology provide the means for controlling the lives of the citizens in *Brave New World*. First, cloning is used to create hundreds of human beings from the same fertilized egg. Then the genetically similar eggs are placed in bottles, where the growing embryos and fetuses are exposed to external stimulation and chemical alteration to condition them for their lives after being "decanted" or "hatched" (words used in place of "born").

Babies and children are subject to cruel conditioning. They are exposed to flowers, representing the beauty of nature, and given electric shocks to make them averse to nature. They are brought to the crematorium, where they play and are given treats so that they will associate [death](#) with pleasantness and therefore not object when society determines it is time for them to die. Also, hypnopaedia, or sleep teaching, is used to indoctrinate children. All of these extreme methods of conditioning could conceivably work.

Adults use "soma," a tranquilizer, to deaden feelings of pain or passion. Frivolous gadgets and hi-tech entertainment provide distractions, preventing the childlike citizens from engaging in rich emotional and intellectual lives, or from experiencing challenges that might lead to emotional and intellectual growth. Indeed, the Controller feels that technology's purpose is to make the distance between the feeling of desire and the gratification of that desire so short that citizens are continually content, and not tempted to spend their time thinking and questioning.

Since books are taboo and knowledge restricted only to the powerful elite minority, the citizens do not realize that technology has been used to limit their lives. In fact, in writing this novel of ideas Huxley aims to make contemporary citizens question the ethics of using technology for social purposes, and to realize the dangers of misuse of technology by totalitarian governments.

Knowledge and Ignorance

To control the citizens, the Controllers make sure people are taught only what they need to know to function within society and no more. Knowledge is dangerous. Books are strictly forbidden. Art and culture, which stimulate the intellect, emotions, and spirit, are reduced to pale imitations of the real thing. There is synthetic music and ridiculous popular songs that celebrate the values of society. Movies appeal to the lowest common denominator. Another great threat to contemplation and introspection is the citizens' conditioned belief that wanting to be alone is strange. They seek shallow relationships with each other, minus intimacy and commitment, rather than spend time alone thinking. After all, if they did spend too much time in contemplation, they might, like Bernard Marx and Helmholtz Watson, start questioning the meaning of their lives and the function of the society.

Only the Controller has access to the great literature and culture of the past. He enjoys discussing Shakespeare with John the Savage. Huxley, by making his primitive character have only Shakespeare's works on which to base his perceptions, shows the power of such great literature: that it can capture an enormous range of human experience, to which the citizens of the brave new world are completely oblivious. In the end, however, the people who accidentally attain knowledge have only two choices if they are to survive: they can become oppressors or outcasts.

Construction

Point of View

Aldous Huxley tells the story of *Brave New World* in a third-person, omniscient (all-knowing) voice. The narrative is chronological for the most part, jumping backward in time only to reveal some history, as when the Director explains to Bernard Marx what happened when he visited the Indian reservation, or when John and Linda recall their lives on the reservation before meeting Bernard and Lenina. The first six chapters have very little action and are instead devoted to explaining how this society functions. This is accomplished by having the reader overhear the tour that the Director, and later the Controller, lead through "hatchery," or human birth factory, lecturing to some students.

Once one is familiarized with this future world, the reader learns more about the characters through their dialogue and interaction. For example, Bernard and Lenina's conversation on their date shows how deeply conditioned Lenina is to her way of life, and how difficult it is for Bernard to meet society's expectations of how he should feel and behave. Throughout the rest of the book, Huxley continues to reveal the way the society functions, but instead of having the reader overhear lectures, he portrays seemingly ordinary events, showing how they unfold in this very different society. When Huxley finally presents the arguments for and against the compromises the society makes in order to achieve harmony, he does this in the form of a dialogue between Mustapha Mond and John the Savage. The book ends with a sober and powerful description of John's vain struggle to carve out a life for himself as a hermit. This is contrasted with the humorous, satirical tone of much of the book, making it especially moving.

Setting

Set in London, England, six hundred years in the future, *Brave New World* portrays a totalitarian society where freedom, diversity, and conflict have been replaced by efficiency, [progress](#), and harmony. The contrast between our world and that of the inhabitants of Huxley's [futuristic society](#) is made especially

clear when Huxley introduces us to the Indian reservation in New Mexico, where the "primitive" culture of the natives has been maintained. Huxley chose London as his main setting because it was his home, but he implies, by mentioning the ten world controllers, that the entire world operates the same way that the society in London does.

Irony and Satire

Brave New World is also considered a novel of ideas, otherwise known as an apologue: Because the ideas in the book are what is most important, the [characterization](#) and plot are secondary to the concepts Huxley presents. In order to portray the [absurdity](#) of the future society's values as well as our contemporary society's values, he uses satire (holding up human folly to ridicule), parody (a humorous twist on a recognizable style of an author or work), and irony (words meaning something very different from what they literally mean, or what the characters think they mean). Ordinary scenes the reader can recognize, such as church services and dates, incorporate behavior, internal thoughts, and dialogue that reveal the twisted and absurd values of the citizens of the future. Because the roots of many of the practices seen in this futuristic society can be found in contemporary ideas, the reader is led to question the values of contemporary society. For example, people today are taught to value progress and efficiency. However, when taken to the absurd extreme of babies being hatched in bottles for maximum efficiency, the reader realizes that not all progress and efficiency is good. Huxley even satirizes sentimentality by having the citizens of the future sing sentimental songs about "dear old mom," only they sing a version in which they fondly recall their "dear old bottle," the one in which they grew as fetuses. Being sentimental about one's origin in a test tube will strike many readers as funny, as well as ironic.

Allusion

Throughout the book, evidence of Huxley's vast knowledge of science, technology, literature, and music can be found. He makes frequent allusions to Shakespeare, mostly through the character of John, who quotes the bard whenever he needs to express a strong human emotion. Indeed, the title itself is from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in which the sheltered Miranda first encounters some men and declares, "How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world / That has such people in't!" Huxley also makes many allusions to powerful, influential people of his day, naming characters, buildings, and religions after them. For example, Henry Ford (1863-1947) is as a god; his name is used in interjections (Oh my Ford!), in calculating the year (A.F., or After Ford, instead of A.D., which stands for "anno domini"—in the year of our Lord). Even the Christian cross has been altered to resemble the T from the old Model T car built by Ford.

The character of the Savage is reminiscent of the Noble Savage—the concept that primitive people are more innocent and pure of heart than civilized people. However, Huxley is careful not to portray him as heroic or his primitive culture as ideal. The reader sympathize with him because he is the person who most represents current values.

One of the more subtle influences on the story, however, is Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the founder of modern psychoanalysis. The Savage is a prime example of someone who suffers from what Freud termed the Oedipus complex, a powerful desire to connect with one's mother. At one point, when he sees his mother with her lover, he identifies with Hamlet, who also had an Oedipal complex, an overattachment to his mother that prevented him from accepting her as sexually independent of him. Freud believed that childhood experiences shape adult perceptions, feelings, and behaviors, and the characters in the novel

are all clearly compelled to feel and act according to the lessons they learned as children, even when faced with evidence that their behavior results in personal suffering.

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Vocabulary in the novel

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