Brave New World
Aldous Huxley

Themes: totalitarianism, individualism, technology, value systems

In Brave New World, Aldous Huxley conjures up a horrifying, but often comic, vision of a future Utopia in which humans are processed, conditioned, regimented, and drugged into total social conformity. The story, set in a futuristic London, focuses on the misadventures of Bernard Marx. Disaffected with the regimentation of society, Bernard and his girlfriend, Lenina, visit the American Southwest where Native Americans are permitted to live in an "uncivilized" state. There they come upon a fair-skinned young man named John, who turns out to be the son of a Londoner, and Bernard brings John back to "civilized" London.

For a while, the "Savage" creates a sensation. Eventually the Savage becomes increasingly horrified by the "brave new world" and retreats into reading Shakespeare's plays. He falls passionately in love with Lenina, but has convinced himself that any sexual contact between them would be a grievous sin—a stance that completely baffles Lenina who has been conditioned to enjoy promiscuous sex without any emotional commitment. In despair, the Savage precipitates a riot. Bernard is exiled for his participation and the Savage holes up in an abandoned lighthouse, where he grows food and mortifies his flesh as penance for his lust for Lenina. In the end, reporters discover the Savage and photograph his bizarre rituals of self-flagellation. A nightly carnival ensues as swarms of London curiosity seekers come to witness the antics of this strange creature. Finally the Savage, in shame and desperation, hangs himself.

A fantasy of the future that sheds a blazing critical light on the present, Brave New World remains Huxley's most enduring masterpiece.

Questions for Classroom Discussion

1. Few of Huxley's predictions have proven to be perfectly accurate, yet many aspects of the Utopia of Brave New World feel uncomfortably like our world. Talk about the book as a prophetic vision of the future. Which aspects of the book did you find most disturbing? Which hit closest to home? Which seem the most far-fetched?

2. When Brave New World was first published in 1932, the world was plunged into depression, fascism was on the rise in Western Europe, and Marxism appealed to increasing numbers of intellectuals in Europe and America. Place the book in the context of its historical moment. Which parts transcend its time and place?
3. The two greatest obscenities in the society of Brave New World are birth and mother. Why?

4. Toward the end of the book, the Controller Mustapha Mond sums up the benefits of living in the "brave new world" Utopia: "The world's stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get." It sounds like perfection, and yet the world Mond describes is deeply, intentionally horrifying. Why? What exactly is so bad about this society of the future? Is there anything good about it, anything we could learn from and try to adapt to our own uses?

5. As dehumanizing and oppressive as the brave new world Utopia is, the alternative in the "savage reserve" is in many ways worse—dirty, violent, unhealthy, cruel, and uncomfortable. What point is Huxley making about human nature and the nature of human communities? Is his vision totally negative—or does the book hold out some shred of hope, some alternative mode that fosters both freedom and community?

6. One of the most striking—and comic—aspects of Huxley's Utopia is the way our sexual mores and assumptions have been turned on their head: monogamy is bad, passion is deviation, casual, meaningless sex is the socially approved norm. What is Huxley getting at here? Is there any expression of human sexuality that he finds acceptable? Is sex at the heart of the "problem" in his view of human nature?


8. In many ways, the main characters of the book are cartoon figures—Helmholtz Watson the alienated superman, Bernard Marx the cowardly, hypocritical intellectual, Mustapha Mond the cynical all-knowing leader, John the doomed idealist. Discuss the book as an allegory and elaborate on what each character stands for. When John starts reading Shakespeare, he discovers that the words make his emotions "more real"—they even make other people more real. Talk about the power of language in the book, the power of the word to influence thought and behavior. Why did Huxley choose Shakespeare as the medium of John's intellectual awakening?

9. Could anything like Brave New World really happen? Has it happened in some form that we don't fully recognize?
Brave New World Revisited

Unlike the earlier book that inspired it, Brave New World Revisited is not a work of fiction—although its message is, in many ways, more disturbing than the classic novel’s. For while Brave New World, published in 1932, predicted a totalitarian society precipitated by various forms of mind control, these 1958 essays postdate the rise of Hitler, Stalin, and other dictators who actually manipulated whole populations in some of the ways that Huxley had predicted. "Brave New World presents a fanciful and somewhat ribald picture of a society, in which the attempt to recreate human beings in the likeness of termites has been pushed almost to the limits of the possible," Huxley writes. "That we are being propelled in the direction of Brave New World is obvious. But no less obvious is the fact that we can, if we so desire, refuse to cooperate with the blind forces that are propelling us."

Huxley is concerned primarily with the loss of human freedoms. He views overpopulation due to advances in medicine and technology as the most pressing problem, resulting in widespread misery around the globe. At the same time, modern technology has led to the concentration of economic and political power, to a society controlled by Big Business and Big Government, which Huxley calls "over-organization." In Brave New World, Huxley "imagined" dictatorship by drugs (he invented a euphoria-inducing drug called "soma"), but his fictional depiction of chemical persuasion, he feels, has nothing on the reality of our over-medicated society. There are many other kind of mind control at work today as well—propaganda spewed by media owned by a corporate elite, the subtle (and not so subtle) manipulation of advertising, and the possibilities of subconscious persuasion through hypnosis, subliminal projection, and hypnopaedia (teaching a person while he sleeps). Huxley feels that we know what ought to be done to guarantee our freedoms, yet forty years after Brave New World Revisited was published, so many of the threats to individual freedom that he cites continue, and new ones have appeared. His book continues to challenge complacency and enter a plea that we educate ourselves in freedom before it is too late.

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Huxley wrote Brave New World Revisited at the height of the Cold War. Can any of his predictions now be dismissed in light of the fall of the Soviet Union? Do you think that Huxley's concerns about dictatorship by drugs have become even more possible in the age of Prozac and other psychological medications?

2. When Huxley wrote these articles, DDT still was considered a scientific advance. What other aspects of Huxley’s articles seem dated? Which of his predictions have become even more timely?
3. Huxley writes of economic censorship, with the press controlled by the Big Business/Big Government elite. Has this censorship been diluted by the rise of the Internet? Alternatively, in what ways could the Internet pose new threats to our freedoms?

4. The birth control pill was not available when Huxley wrote *Brave New World Revisited*. Has its dissemination helped solve any of the problems that he predicted?

5. Should legislation be enacted that curtails the rights of government, advertisers, or religious organizations to manipulate the mind of individuals?

About the Author
Poet, playwright, novelist and short story writer, travel writer, essayist, critic, philosopher, mystic, and social prophet, Aldous Huxley was one of the most accomplished and influential English literary figures of the mid-20th century. He was born in Surrey in 1894, and his books include Crome Yellow, Antic Hay, Those Barren Leaves, Point Counter Point, Brave New World, and The Doors of Perception. From 1937 on, Huxley made his home in Southern California. He died in 1963. Today he is remembered as one of the great explorers of 20th century literature, a writer who continually reinvented himself as he pushed his way deeper and deeper into the mysteries of human consciousness.