

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Aldous Huxley

PLOT ANALYSIS

In telling the story of a civilization where suffering and pain have been eradicated at the price of personal autonomy, *Brave New World* explores the dehumanizing effects of technology, and implies that pain is necessary for life to have meaning. The story begins with three expository chapters describing the futuristic society of World State. In this society, marriage, family, and procreation have been eliminated, and babies are genetically engineered and grown in bottles. Citizens are programmed to be productive and complaisant through a combination of biological manipulation, psychological conditioning, and a drug called soma. A character named Mustapha Mond explains that in the previous era, people suffered from poverty, disease, unhappiness, and wars. A new society, named for the twentieth century automotive manufacturer Henry Ford, was formed to improve the human experience. These chapters do not include many significant elements of the plot, but they introduce the major themes of the novel. They signal to the reader that World State brainwashes its citizens to remain obedient, and suggest the reader should be skeptical about how truly utopian the society really is. The World State emerges as the antagonist of the novel, a sinister force

that prevents characters from achieving meaningful happiness or free will.

The plot is initiated when Bernard, the novel's initial protagonist, asks Lenina on a date to visit a Reservation. The reader can infer that Reservations serve as sort of human zoos where World State citizens can gawk at what civilization used to be like. We can soon tell that despite their mutual attraction, Bernard and Lenina are incompatible. Bernard does not want to participate in Obstacle Golf, but wants to go on a walk and get to know Lenina. Lenina wants to act like everyone else and enjoy the same activities without thinking or talking too much. We see that most of the main characters struggle to conform to society to one degree or another. Lenina is mostly content to follow the rules, but questions the government-enforced promiscuity, and feels oddly attracted to Bernard, despite the fact that he is an outsider. Bernard more profoundly questions World State's habit of drugging citizens, and wonders if his life might have more meaning if he experienced the full range of human emotion. Bernard's friend, Helmholtz, is even more disturbed by World State, and longs to create art that can act as a sort of x-ray for human experience, rather than propaganda that enforces World State policies.

The conflict of the novel is developed on the eve of Lenina and Bernard's trip, when the Director tells Bernard about his own visit to the Reservation, raising further questions about how successful the society really is at creating an

ideal existence. The Director describes being separated from the woman he was with, hurting himself, and having a painful and arduous trip back to the Reservation. The physical and emotional difficulty of the experience make it one of his most significant memories, and he admits that he still dreams about it. This recollection introduces the idea that pain is necessary for meaning, and also foreshadows John and Linda's relationship to the Director. At the Reservation, John and Lenina witness several scenes directly contrasting the two ideas of civilization presented by the novel: the Native American-like civilization of the Reservation, and the futuristic civilization of World State. Unlike in World State, residents of the Reservation grow old, have disease, hunger, and treat each other with cruelty. At the same time, they create art, experience love and marriage, and have a powerful religious system.

At the Reservation, Lenina and Bernard meet John, a white-skinned resident who Bernard realizes is the Director's son, setting up the eventual collision of the opposing cultures. John tells them his memories of growing up on the reservation with Linda, where he experienced maternal love and the joy of reading Shakespeare and learning skills, but also the pain of ostracism. Linda, still effectively brainwashed by her World State upbringing, speaks rapturously of her time in World State, and eagerly accepts Bernard's offer to bring her home. Back at World State John joyfully greets his father but the citizens, unaccustomed to displays of deep emotion,

laugh at him. Bernard enjoys momentary popularity as the officials who once shunned him now clamor for time with John. Bernard's dissatisfactions melt away as he begins to feel powerful and important. John emerges as the novel's protagonist at this point, and our sympathies shift to him as he yearns for an emotional relationship with Lenina and worries about Linda, who exists in a drugged stupor. Lenina, confused by John's refusal to have sex with her, takes off her clothes and tries to embrace him, but John flies into a rage and beats her, showing the dark, dangerous side of human emotions and morality.

The climax of the novel occurs when Linda dies and John, deranged by grief, tries to stage a revolution. Helmholtz joins in, while Bernard watches, unsure whether it is safer for him to join or call for help. In this scene, Bernard becomes entirely unsympathetic for his cowardice and lack of morality. Mustapha Mond exiles Bernard and Helmholtz, then discusses religion, literature, and art with John. Citing Shakespeare, John argues for the importance of pain and difficulty, saying, "I don't want comfort... I want God, I want poetry, I want danger, I want freedom, I want goodness." Mond replies that John is asking for the right to be unhappy, a right that the book asserts is central to the experience of being human. The falling action of the novel takes place after John exiles himself from the city, and attempts to live a life as free of comfort and ease as possible. Reporters find him whipping himself, and soon he is surrounded by a crowd of onlookers demanding a show. The crowd's frenzy turns into an orgy,

which John participates in. The next day, horrified by what he's done, he hangs himself.

THEMES IN BRAVE NEW WORLD

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.

Individuality:

By imagining a world in which individuality is forbidden, *Brave New World* asks us to consider what individual identity is and why it is valuable. The World State sees individuality as incompatible with happiness and social stability because it interferes with the smooth functioning of the community. The Controllers do everything they can to prevent people developing individual identities. “Bokanovsky’s Process” means that most citizens of the World States are biological duplicates of one another. “Hypnopædic” slogans and “Solidarity Services” encourage citizens to think of themselves as part of a whole rather than as separate individuals. The Controller explains that people are sent to the islands when they “have got too self-consciously individual to fit into community life.” For Bernard, Helmholtz, and John, rebelling against the World State involves becoming self-conscious individuals. Bernard wants to feel “as though I were more me.” Helmholtz writes his first real poem about the experience of being alone, and when the Controller asks John what he knows about God, John thinks “about solitude.” In the end, John and Helmholtz choose to suffer in order to preserve their individuality. Bernard,

however, never chooses individuality. He has been forced to be an individual due to his faulty conditioning. He tries to resist being sent to an island. For Bernard, individuality is a curse.

Happiness and Agency:

Initially, the characters in *Brave New World* share the same ideas about what happiness is: freedom from emotional suffering, sickness, age and political upheaval, together with easy access to everything they desire. However, the characters differ in their understanding of the role personal agency plays in happiness. Bernard believes he wants personal agency, in that he wants to feel “as though I were more me.” Yet when the Controller offers Bernard the chance to live as an individual in Iceland, he begs to be allowed to stay in the World State—he’s not ready to sacrifice personal comfort for autonomy. Helmholtz seeks to express himself through poetry, but his idea that “a lot of wind and storms” are necessary for good poetry suggests that happiness and self-expression are incompatible, and he will only achieve personal agency through suffering. John seeks personal freedom through suffering and self-denial, but his self-imposed deprivations make him miserable. He gives in to the lure of pleasure by taking part in an orgy, then kills himself.

CHARACTERS IN BRAVE NEW WORLD

John – The son of the Director and Linda, John is the only major character to have grown up outside of the World State. The consummate outsider, he has spent his life alienated from his village on the New Mexico Savage Reservation, and he finds himself similarly unable to fit in to World State society. His entire worldview is based on his knowledge of Shakespeare's plays, which he can quote with great facility.

Bernard Marx – An Alpha male who fails to fit in because of his inferior physical stature. He holds unorthodox beliefs about sexual relationships, sports, and community events. His insecurity about his size and status makes him discontented with the World State. Bernard's surname recalls Karl Marx, the nineteenth-century German author best known for writing *Capital*, a monumental critique of capitalist society. Unlike his famous namesake, Bernard's discontent stems from his frustrated desire to fit into his own society, rather than from a systematic or philosophical criticism of it. When threatened, Bernard can be petty and cruel.

Helmholtz Watson – An Alpha lecturer at the College of Emotional Engineering, Helmholtz is a prime example of his caste, but feels that his work is empty and meaningless and would like to use his writing abilities for something more meaningful. He and Bernard are friends because they find common ground in their discontent with the World State, but Helmholtz's criticisms of the World State are more philosophical and intellectual than Bernard's more petty complaints. As a result, Helmholtz often finds Bernard's boastfulness and cowardice tedious.

Lenina Crowne – A vaccination worker at the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre. She is an object of desire for a number of major and minor characters, including Bernard Marx and John. Her behavior is sometimes intriguingly unorthodox, which makes her attractive to the reader. For example, she defies her culture's conventions by dating one man exclusively for several months, she is attracted to Bernard—the misfit—and she develops a violent passion for John the Savage. Ultimately, her values are those of a conventional World State citizen: her primary means of relating to other people is through sex, and she is unable to share Bernard's disaffection or to comprehend John's alternate system of values.

Mustapha Mond – The Resident World Controller of Western Europe, one of only ten World Controllers. He was once an ambitious, young scientist performing illicit research. When his work was discovered, he was given the choice of going into exile or training to become a World Controller. He chose to give up science, and now he censors scientific discoveries and exiles people for unorthodox beliefs. He also keeps a collection of forbidden literature in his safe, including Shakespeare and religious writings. The name Mond means “world,” and Mond is indeed the most powerful character in the world of this novel.

Fanny Crowne – Lenina Crowne’s friend (they have the same last name because only about ten thousand last names are in use in the World State). Fanny’s role is mainly to voice the conventional values of her caste and society. Specifically, she warns Lenina that she should have more men in her life because it looks bad to concentrate on one man for too long.

Henry Foster – One of Lenina’s many lovers, he is a perfectly conventional Alpha male, casually discussing Lenina’s body with his coworkers. His success with Lenina, and his casual attitude about it, infuriate the jealous Bernard.

Linda – John’s mother, and a Beta. While visiting the New Mexico Savage Reservation, she became pregnant with the Director’s son. During a storm, she got lost,

suffered a head injury and was left behind. A group of Indians found her and brought her to their village. Linda could not get an abortion on the Reservation, and she was too ashamed to return to the World State with a baby. Her World State-conditioned promiscuity makes her a social outcast. She is desperate to return to the World State and to soma.

The Director - The Director administrates the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre. He is a threatening figure, with the power to exile Bernard to Iceland. But he is secretly vulnerable because he fathered a child (John), a scandalous and obscene act in the World State.

The Arch-Community-Songster - The Arch-Community-Songster is the secular, shallow equivalent of an archbishop in the World State society.

Popé - Popé was Linda's lover on the New Mexico Savage Reservation. He gave Linda a copy of The Complete Works of Shakespeare.

The Warden - The Warden is the talkative chief administrator for the New Mexico Savage Reservation. He is an Alpha.

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