

## A GUIDE TO Brave New World

Aldous Huxley

“O brave new world / That has such people in’t!”

—William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (V,i)

### THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

*Brave New World* is a dystopian novel about a possible future world. It questions—and satirizes—human faith in scientific progress and raises issues of freedom, dignity, and individuality.

**Settings:** Two main settings in the twenty-sixth century: A futuristic London, England, presented in striking detail, and the traditional pueblo Malpais (“bad country”) on an Indian reservation in New Mexico.

**Protagonists:** Bernard Marx, a citizen who resists the loss of individuality, and John, called the Savage, a reservation resident who is taken to London.

**Conflicts:** **External conflict** between the Controller Mustapha Mond (representing scientific progress and social stability) and Bernard and John (representing freedom and individuality); **internal conflicts**, within Bernard, between his longing for freedom and his timidity; within John, between the pros and cons of traditional values and those of twenty-sixth-century London.

**Resolution:** Bernard is exiled and John commits suicide. The World State, with its worship of uniformity and stability, continues.

**Themes:** The price for technological progress is the loss of individuality and human freedom. The triumph of reason over passion and science over art leads to distortions of human nature.

### SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

*Brave New World* should pose few comprehension problems to upper-grade students. The strands of the plot are exciting and easy to follow. The novel reverses many of our common values, however, and therefore might trouble students. For example, promiscuity becomes correct sexual behavior, and the nuclear family, something sordid. Huxley’s classic novel does not promote such values. Rather, it is a **cautionary tale** that warns about a possible world of the future. Students might also have difficulty

understanding some of the characters. For instance, the feelings and motivations of John the Savage and the Controller are especially complex. Students probably will need help in understanding the Controller’s elaborate rationalizations and John’s frequent allusions to Shakespeare. John’s struggle will probably be seen as a noble quest, but the overall portrait of society in the future may leave some readers feeling helpless and hopeless. At the end of the novel John is driven to suicide.

### BACKGROUND

**Utopias and Dystopias.** Writers have imagined both utopias (perfect societies) and dystopias (dreadful or dysfunctional societies) for centuries. A well-known early portrait of a perfect society is described in Plato’s *Republic* (fourth century B.C.). It is a world ruled by enlightened philosopher-kings in which people are educated to fulfill the one occupation that best suits their natural abilities. In the early sixteenth century the English humanist Sir Thomas More chose a word derived from the Greek for “no place”—*Utopia*—as the title of his famous novel describing an island society in which war, intolerance, and private property were abolished. The word subsequently was applied to other imaginary ideal societies. In the late nineteenth century Edward Bellamy, an American, wrote a highly popular utopian novel, *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1888), about a future world with no poverty, crime, or warfare.

Satire often plays a large role in utopian and dystopian writing, and although Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) is much too complex to serve as a clear-cut example of the genre, it offers many satiric insights into human affairs. In 1872 Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* provided a highly ironic description of a commonwealth in which disease is a crime and in which people fear that machines will evolve consciousness. George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is a famous vision of a nightmarish human future, a warning against the dangers of a totalitarian state.

**Religion of the World State.** Religion provides a key example of the satire permeating *Brave New World*. American automobile manufacturer Henry Ford (1863–1947) functions as God. Dates are computed A.F., or After Ford, starting with the year his Model-T

car was first produced (1913); and Ford's assembly-line method for cost-effective production of identical vehicles has been adapted to the production of human beings. Ritual Solidarity Services occur in the Fordson Community Singery, a building boasting a clock called Big Henry. Ford's Day is a major festival. People speak of "Our Ford," make "the sign of the T," and say that "Ford's in his flivver; all's well with the world."

## MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

**Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning (D.H.C.),** high-ranking scientist whose first name is Thomas; Bernard Marx's boss.

**Henry Foster,** red-cheeked, enthusiastic Alpha (the highest of five classes of society), a scientist at the Central London Hatchery.

**Lenina Crowne,** pretty Hatchery nurse who finds it difficult to be as sexually promiscuous as the World State requires; she dates Henry Foster and is attracted to Bernard Marx and, later, to John.

**Mustapha Mond,** an Alpha-Plus, "his fordship," the Resident Controller for Western Europe, one of the Ten World Controllers.

**Bernard Marx,** physically imperfect Alpha-Plus, a psychologist and somewhat paranoid loner who resists the complete loss of his individuality.

**Fanny Crowne,** sensible Beta (second class) who works in the Bottling Room. She is a friend of Lenina Crowne but not a relative; the state distributes only ten thousand surnames among its two billion inhabitants.

**Benito Hoover,** Alpha who works in the Hatchery. Like several other characters, his name refers to two different historical persons, in this instance, Benito Mussolini, the Italian fascist leader, and Herbert Hoover, the U.S. president.

**Helmholtz Watson,** Alpha-Plus; an Emotional Engineer, writer, college lecturer, and poet; so sharp mentally as to feel discontent; friend of Bernard Marx.

**John,** called **the Savage,** child of two members of the World State but born and raised on a Savage (Indian) Reservation and later taken to London; destroyed psychologically by the modern world.

**Linda,** John's mother, a Beta who accidentally remained on a Savage Reservation while pregnant with John; embodiment of human frailty and mortality.

## PLOT

**Chapter I.** Through the device of a lecture tour for a group of teenage Alpha boys, the first three chapters of *Brave New World* provide basic **exposition**, describe the **setting**, and introduce some of the major **characters**. It is the year A.F. (After [Henry] Ford) 632 (A.D. 2545), and the D.H.C.—the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning—is escorting students through the

Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre. A shield over the main entrance displays the motto of the World State, "Community, Identity, Stability." The D.H.C. explains the Bokanovsky fertilizing process, which can produce up to ninety-six identical human beings from a single egg. Embryos are "bottled" in artificial wombs and subjected to conditioning to produce different grades, or castes, of people. The castes are identified by the first five letters of the Greek alphabet: *alpha, beta, gamma, delta, epsilon*. Conditioning guarantees that people will like being of their caste.

**Chapter II.** As the tour continues, the students watch Neo-Pavlovian conditioning in which lower-caste Delta babies are lured to colorful books and flowers, then hit with electrical shock. Thus programmed to hate books and nature, they will grow up to become economically useful consumers of expensive sports gear. The D.H.C. explains the outmoded concepts of "parents" and "birth," terms now considered smutty, and tells how hypnopaedia, or sleep-teaching, came to be used not for intellectual, but for *moral*, education.

**Chapter III. Exposition** continues outdoors. The students watch children playing erotic games. They are stunned to learn that such play was once considered abnormal and immoral. **Rising action** begins when the students and the D.H.C. encounter Mustapha Mond. From this point onward, the **omniscient narrator** alternates bits of different scenes and conversations to show that they are occurring simultaneously. Separated out, the scenes develop as follows: (1) Controller Mond explains to the students about the squalor of homes and the horror of families in the old society and describes the insanity of monogamy and romance. He lectures on history, including the Nine Years' War needed to inaugurate the World State, and such obstacles to progress and stability as Christianity, democracy, liberalism, and open access to books and knowledge of history. (2) Henry Foster and the Assistant Predestinator discuss the latest "feely" (a movie that affects touch and smell). (3) Lenina and Fanny change in the women's locker room and discuss their sex lives, particularly Lenina's tendency to date one man exclusively, as she has Henry Foster for the last four months, and her attraction to Bernard Marx. (4) In the nurseries, hypnopaedic suggestions continue to shape children's attitudes.

**Chapter IV.** Lenina arranges a July trip to the Savage Reservation in New Mexico with Bernard. She then flies off to play Obstacle Golf with Henry Foster, and Bernard is joined by his friend Helmholtz Watson. We learn about the **internal conflicts** of these two men. The physically imperfect Bernard feels inadequate and out of place in the Alpha caste. The physically and mentally gifted Helmholtz is intellectually discontent; he longs to write about something of genuine importance.

**Chapter V.** After golf Lenina and Henry discuss the castes, whose bodies are all of equal chemical value, and Lenina recalls a time in childhood when she awoke

during the night and became aware of hypnopaedic teaching. They go on to dinner and dancing, their experiences channeled and heightened by the drug *soma*. Bernard attends his required Solidarity Service. People sing hymns, consume *soma*, drink to the Coming of the Greater Being, and collapse exhausted into an “Orgy-porgy.” Bernard is painfully aware of his inability to become one with the others.

**Chapter VI.** The chapter develops in three scenes. (1) Lenina recalls her first date with Bernard. He wanted to contemplate nature, refused *soma*, said he did not want to be merely a part of the social body, and even wondered what it would be like not to be enslaved by conditioning. (2) Bernard asks the D.H.C. for permission to visit the New Mexican Reservation. The Director tells Bernard that he too once took a trip to New Mexico, where the woman accompanying him disappeared. Embarrassed at having shared a personal anecdote, the Director severely warns Bernard to conform to proper standards of “infantile” behavior. (3) Bernard and Lenina fly to Santa Fe. Phoning home, Bernard learns that the D.H.C. plans to move him to Iceland.

**Chapter VII.** Bernard and Lenina enter the pueblo of Malpais, an Indian community Linda finds filthy and incomprehensible. Bernard reminds her with **irony** of the motto “Civilization is sterilization.” They witness a violent snake dance, which culminates in a boy’s being whipped. John, a blond man in Indian garb, explains the ritual and says he wishes he had been sacrificed. He tells them that his mother, Linda, came from the “Other Place” and was abandoned by his father, Tomakin. (Bernard recalls that the D.H.C.’s first name is Thomas.) Linda greets Lenina with excitement and laments the primitive way of life she has had to endure for years.

**Chapter VIII.** In a series of **flashbacks**, John recalls his mother’s male visitors, a time when the village women attacked her for her promiscuity, and her stories of the Other Place, where everyone is clean and happy. Popé, Linda’s main lover, brought her the works of Shakespeare, and John was enthralled with the magic of the words. He also recounts his trying to kill Popé and having to watch the wedding of the girl he loved and not being allowed to participate in an initiation rite. Bernard understands that both he and John are outsiders in their worlds. In the main **plot complication**, he invites John and Linda to London.

**Chapter IX.** Bernard flies to Santa Fe and arranges to bring John and Linda to London as scientific curiosities.

**Chapter X.** In London the D.H.C. summons Bernard in order to punish him publicly for unorthodox behavior. In his defense Bernard produces the all-too-human Linda. She recognizes the Director as the Tomakin who made her “have a baby,” and when John addresses the Director as “My father,” the humiliated D.H.C. flees.

**Chapter XI.** Over the ensuing weeks Linda retreats into a *soma* stupor. Bernard’s success as a social lion goes

to his head. John tours a factory and is sickened at seeing groups of identical human beings who were created to suit each task. Eton, the famous school, bewilders him, and the feely he attends with Lenina disgusts him. He takes her home and leaves. She finds solace in *soma*; he rereads Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

**Chapter XII.** John refuses to attend a party Bernard arranges, and those who expected to see “the Savage” treat Bernard with contempt. Bernard has grown jealous of John’s friendship with Helmholtz, a friendship strengthened by their mutual love of poetry. Yet Helmholtz hurts John by laughing uncontrollably at the “ridiculous” situations on which *Romeo and Juliet* is based.

**Chapter XIII.** Lenina struggles with the strange feeling of wanting only one man, John. She visits him, and John confesses his love for her. He has wanted to do something to show that he is worthy of her and now wants to marry her. She is shocked by the suggestion and confused by his use of lines from Shakespeare. She undresses and offers herself to him, but he is appalled. He calls her a whore and slaps her. While she dresses, John receives a call and rushes out: someone is dying.

**Chapter XIV.** In the Hospital for the Dying, John sits at Linda’s bedside and recalls the events of their life together. A group of children engaged in death-conditioning overrun the hospital ward and outrage John. Linda dies in *soma*-caused confusion, and John sobs uncontrollably. In his grief he keeps repeating, “God, God, God.”

**Chapter XV.** John encounters a group of hospital workers receiving their daily *soma* ration. Telling them the drug is poison, he begins throwing *soma* tablets out a window. Bernard and Helmholtz arrive, and Helmholtz helps John fight off the furious and uncomprehending mob, while Bernard stands by indecisively. The police quell the riot and arrest Bernard, John, and Helmholtz.

**Chapter XVI.** Chapters XVI and XVII develop the novel’s main **themes**. The three men appear before Controller Mustapha Mond, who reveals that he, too, has read Shakespeare. He explains that it is now prohibited because it is old and beautiful: people can be allowed to like only new things. Besides, they would not understand anything that did not mirror their own perfectly stable world. The price of stability is the end of art; the caste system and the muzzling of science are also necessary to the smooth functioning of society. Bernard begs abjectly not to be exiled to Iceland; Helmholtz seems happy to choose exile to the Falkland Islands.

**Chapter XVII.** Alone with John, the Controller produces religious and philosophical books, including the Bible. He reads passages about God and discusses God and the meaning of life with John. The Controller remarks that there probably is a God, although He now manifests himself as an absence. He asserts that people believe only what they are conditioned to believe. John quotes Shakespeare in favor of nobility and human dignity—qualities not needed by society, according to the

Controller, because all struggle has been eliminated. John, however, continues to claim the right to be uncomfortable and unhappy.

**Chapter XVIII.** Bernard and Helmholtz bid farewell to John, who is ordered to stay in London as a continuing experiment; but he escapes and makes an abandoned lighthouse his hermitage. One day outsiders spot him whipping himself in self-purification, and reporters invade his retreat, leading to the **climax** of the story. John drives the reporters away, but Darwin Bonaparte secretly films John whipping himself to banish thoughts of Lenina. Bonaparte's feely, *The Savage of Surrey*, brings a throng of curiosity seekers to John's lighthouse. They swarm around him, treating him like a zoo animal and begging him to use the whip. He is driven to do so at the sight of Lenina. An Orgy-porgy of frenzied sensuality breaks out, and when John later awakens from it, he is overcome with remorse and despair. The next day people discover that he has hanged himself.

### APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

#### 1. Evaluating *Brave New World's* Predictions

Discussion groups might share their observations on whether or not some of Huxley's predictions seem to be drawing closer to reality:

- Mega-corporations and mega-governments running things
- Technology replacing human contact
- Virtual reality replacing real experiences

#### 2. Extending the Novel

Students might extend an idea from the novel in an expository essay:

- The motto of the World State is "Community, Identity, Stability." What motto might characterize contemporary American society?
- If you were one of the Ten World Controllers, what changes would you try to impose? Why would you make each change?

#### 3. Researching and Explaining Allusions

Students might research some of *Brave New World's* allusions and explain what they add to the novel's themes:

- The historical names borne by many characters: Marx, Lenina (Lenin), Benito Hoover, Diesel, Engels, Bokanovsky, Bakunin, Darwin, Bonaparte
- New Mexico: the mesa city of Acoma, the Zuni people, the Penitentes cult
- Allusions to Shakespeare's works in the novel's title and in the body of the work. Students might particularly benefit by comparing the characters, action, and themes of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* with those of *Brave New World*.

### MEET THE WRITER

Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) was the grandson of the great nineteenth-century biologist Thomas Huxley. He attended Oxford University, was employed in a government office during World War I, and was a schoolmaster at Eton. He later lived in the United States for many years and died there. Huxley was a prolific writer, producing novels, plays, and a long list of essays on a wide variety of social, cultural, historical, and literary topics. His "novels of ideas" have sometimes been criticized as fictionalized essays that make intellectual points instead of presenting fully realized characters. Nevertheless, *Brave New World* (1932) has remained a widely read evocation of the possible future of human civilization.

### READ ON

**Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited*.** Huxley's 1958 observations on a variety of social, scientific, and historical topics, including the opinion that some of his "prophecies" (social conditioning, drug use, loss of individuality) were rapidly coming true.

**Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*.** A classic English satire on human nature, human foibles, and social structures.

**T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men."** A 1925 modernist poem that explores the loss of vitality and individuality in the twentieth century.

**W. H. Auden, "The Unknown Citizen."** Ironic and satiric poem in the form of an inscription on a monument to a model citizen.

**George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.** A dystopian novel, published in 1949, about a future totalitarian world. It is a world ruled by "Big Brother," in which language is perverted for the purposes of the state and private life is virtually annihilated.

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