



Aldous Huxley

(1894-1963)

Life

Aldous Leonard Huxley was born in 1894 into a **family renowned for its contribution to science and literature**. His father was the assistant editor of the influential liberal *Cornhill Magazine*, while his grandfather was Thomas Henry Huxley, the eminent scientist and teacher who had championed Darwin's theory of evolution. His mother also came from a prominent family, the Arnolds, so he was connected, both on the maternal and paternal sides, with that distinguished intellectual aristocracy which was such a dominant force in late 19th-century England.

He was educated at Eton and Oxford but was obliged to leave his medical studies because of defective eyesight. After leaving university, he decided to devote himself to writing. He married comparatively early and spent most of the Twenties in Italy, until the political climate forced him to move to France. **He travelled widely** not only in Europe but also in the East and in America, collecting material for his books. He **supported the Peace Movement** and when the Civil War broke out in Spain in 1936, he wrote pamphlets against it. He lived in California from 1937 on, writing and lecturing at universities. He died in 1963.

Works

Huxley was **one of the most versatile English writers of the 20th century**. He published novels, travel books, short stories, biographies and essays about various subject matters like painting, music, science, philosophy and religion in a style which is highly wrought but extremely readable, humorous and sophisticated, shocking and witty. His literary development went through three phases, progressing from a purely aesthetic interest, through a politico-ethical commitment regarding scientific progress and the negative aspects of modern civilisation, to a predominantly religious point of view.

The first phase includes his first short stories and **novels of ideas**, which were among the best representations of the 'Roaring Twenties' (→ 6.5). Like T.S. Eliot (→ 6.13) and James Joyce (→ 6.17), Huxley was deeply **affected by the gradual breakdown of the 19th-century ideals**, which had caused the alienation of a world dragging itself from one World War to another through economic depression and totalitarian political tragedies. In these early works he expressed a **rejection of this modern civilisation, its mechanisation and corrupted rationalism**. Their apparent

positive surface is only used to mock the intellectual mood of the 1920s and to express the writer's bitter satirical attitude, pessimism and scepticism.

The novel which established his reputation was *Crome Yellow* (1921). Characterised by disillusionment and satirical eloquence, this book is a conversation piece and presents a gallery of characters, who are primarily vehicles for the writer's ideas. Huxley's second novel, *Antic Hay* (1923) created a considerable sensation, because of its frank and detailed treatment of sexual matters. The scene is set in post-war London, which has much in common with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (→ T50): it is a world of broken images, where the 'dead tree gives no shelter' and **men and women try to forget the atrocities of war by living a crazy life**; only in the world of pure art can one hope to find some order to set against the prevailing anarchy. The novels *Those Barren Leaves* (1925) and *Point Counter Point* (1928) illustrated the nihilistic atmosphere of the 1920s.

The second phase opens with the publication of the **anti-utopian novel** *Brave New World* (1932), probably the most disturbing of his 'novels of exploration'. Here **he stated that the true enemy of mankind was ordinary human selfishness**, which prevented man from seeing himself as a part of the great chain of beings. Huxley was not against rationalism, but saw a danger in the humanistic dream of a well-regulated society, where the democratic synthesis between equality and freedom might be replaced by the psychological contrast between equality and happiness. In his later books *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) and *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939) he commented on the **Thirties, years of fear and violence**, and in the essay *Ends and Means* (1937) he stated that 'the means condition the end' and that therefore the much-invoked dictum 'the end justifies the means' was demonstrably wrong.

Huxley's pessimism as regards the future of modern man seems to have led him to explore **metaphysics and mysticism in his third phase**. These new interests prompted him to experiment with various hallucinogenic drugs used to widen the area of consciousness, as the key to a deeper understanding of reality. These experiences offered him the theoretical basis for his last novels, *Ape and Essence* (1948) and *Island* (1962), which was his final attempt to turn upside down the appalling mechanical dimension of reality he had described in *Brave New World*.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the text and answer the following questions.

- 1 Did Huxley get involved in the political issues of his time?
- 2 What did Huxley write?
- 3 What did he express in his early works? What did these novels mock?
- 4 What is the setting of his second novel similar to?
- 5 What kind of novel is *Brave New World*?
- 6 What is the theme of his masterpiece?
- 7 What new interests did he develop in the third phase of his literary production?



Brave New World

(1932)

PLOT AND SETTING

The novel starts abruptly and from the very first sentences the reader is faced with the vividly imagined reality of a 'new world', set in A.F. 632 (a.d. 2540), where A.F. is for 'after Ford'; the Ford in question is the American Henry Ford, who introduced the assembly line in the car industry. After a terrible Nine Years' War, a new world has been created, where **private property** has been **abolished** and the **State controls everything**. **People**, both intellectuals and labourers, are **classified and selected according to their future role in society**; generation and birth are not natural, but artificially produced in hatcheries and conditioning centres, and from the time of their birth, people are brainwashed into a happy state. Desires are relieved or satisfied as soon as they arise by entertainment, copulation, ritual and by a **synthetic drug, soma**, which is also **used to solve any problems**; as a result, nobody complains and nobody is dissatisfied. Not all the world, however, follows these rules; in the '**wild reservation**' in **New Mexico** people continue to live naturally, children are born, grow up, have desires, fall in love, marry and die.

ORIGIN OF THE TITLE

The title of Huxley's most famous novel is taken from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (→ 2.10), when Miranda, the girl who has grown up on an isolated island with her father, seeing other human beings for the first time, says: 'How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world that has such people in it!' (Act V, Scene I, lines 186-187). Her exclamation reveals a theme connected to future, either utopian or anti-utopian, ideals.

MAIN CHARACTERS

John, the Savage, is a '**natural man**' who has the opportunity to leave his 'wild' country, a New Mexican village, to come into civilisation. **At first, he is attracted by the new world**, but **later on he, disgusted by almost everything** he has seen in the Fordian society, and overwrought by his mother's death for soma abuse, causes a riot. Then calmed by soma vapour and a 'synthetic anti-riot speech', he is taken to the office of **Mustapha Mond, the Resident Controller for Western Europe** and the villain of the book. John and Mustapha discuss the merits of civilisation and their first concern is happiness and its price. The Savage defends the beauty of literature and

Shakespeare's plays, which he read in the reservation, while Mustapha claims that every creative art and act must be sacrificed to the stability on which happiness depends. **Mustapha's goal** remains '**happiness**' while the **Savage** insists on **freedom**, on the right to be unhappy, even with the ugliness, fear and pain which that right must entail. In the end, John becomes a victim of scientific experiments and finally commits suicide. His death symbolises Huxley's deep pessimism as regards the future of the Western civilisation.

THEMES

Brave New World is a **revolt against the horrors of the imaginary world** described by Herbert G. Wells (1866-1946) in his novels *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *Men like Gods* (1923), which portray how the world may be in a thousand years' time, if progress is not checked in some way.

Huxley's novel is an anti-utopia and a satire of the Wellsian world; it **represents the triumph** of all that the writer feared and disliked, that is, **a world where mankind has been dehumanised and scientific progress has advanced dramatically**. The most important questions *Brave New World* is concerned with are: **the value of the individual in a highly organised society**, whether people really want to be happy, whether or not **hardship and sacrifice are essentials of human existence** and **what happens to human beings if utopias can be achieved**. Huxley does not offer any clear solutions to all these issues, since he is not interested in showing that one kind of utopian aspiration is better than another or that any given utopia cannot work, but in raising doubts about the desirability of any utopian solutions.

STYLE

The **tone** he uses in this novel is **ironic, allusive**, full of references and quotations; **flashback technique** is frequently adopted to connect the various episodes of John's past life to his new experiences. A constantly **shifting point of view**, often **achieved through free indirect thought**, makes for a fluid narrative, which dissolves the author's opinions into those of the characters. The writer does not let himself be distracted by the possibility of literary experimentation, since his aim is the development of an idea.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the text and answer the following questions about *Brave New World*.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Where does the title of this novel come from? | 4 Who are the main characters? |
| 2 When does it take place? | 5 What are the main themes? |
| 3 What world has been created after a terrible Nine Years' War? | 6 What are the most important stylistic features? |



The conditioning centre

The Director of the Hatchery Centre (D.H.C.) is showing a group of students how eight-month-old babies' feelings are trained by conditioning. He is assisted by another official, Henry Foster.

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Brave New World
(1932)

Chapter 2

The nurses stiffened to attention¹ as the D.H.C.² came in.

'Set out³ the books,' he said curtly⁴.

In silence the nurses obeyed his command. Between the rose bowls⁵ the books were duly⁶ set out – a row of nursery quartos⁷ opened invitingly each at some gaily coloured image of beast or fish or bird.

'Now bring in the children.'

They hurried out of the room and returned in a minute or two, each pushing a kind of tall dumb-waiter laden⁸, on all its four wire-netted shelves⁹, with eight-month-old babies, all exactly alike (a Bokanovsky Group¹⁰, it was evident) and all (since their caste was Delta) dressed in khaki.

'Put them down on the floor.'

The infants were unloaded.

'Now turn them so that they can see the flowers and books.'

Turned, the babies at once fell silent, then began to crawl¹¹ towards those clusters¹² of sleek¹³ colours, those shapes so gay and brilliant on the white pages. As they approached, the sun came out of a momentary eclipse behind a cloud. The roses flamed up as though with a sudden passion from within; a new and profound significance seemed to suffuse the shining pages of the books. From the ranks of the crawling babies came little squeals of excitement, gurgles and twitterings¹⁴ of pleasure.

The Director rubbed his hands. 'Excellent!' he said. 'It might almost have been done on purpose.'

The swiftest crawlers were already at their goal. Small hands reached out uncertainly, touched, grasped, unpetaling the transfigured roses, crumpling¹⁵ the illuminated¹⁶ pages of the books. The Director waited until all were happily busy. Then, 'Watch carefully,' he said. And, lifting his hand, he gave the signal.

The Head Nurse, who was standing by a switchboard¹⁷ at the other end of the room, pressed down a little lever.

There was a violent explosion. Shriller and ever shriller¹⁸, a siren shrieked. Alarm bells maddeningly sounded.

The children started, screamed; their faces were distorted with terror.

'And now,' the Director shouted (for the noise was deafening), 'now we proceed to rub in¹⁹ the lesson with a mild electric shock.'

He waved his hand again, and the Head Nurse pressed a second lever. The screaming of the babies suddenly changed its tone. There was something desperate, almost insane, about the sharp spasmodic yelps²⁰ to which they now gave utterance. Their little bodies twitched²¹ and stiffened; their limbs moved jerkily²² as if to the tug of unseen wires.

'We can electrify that whole strip of floor,' bawled²⁴ the Director in explanation. 'But that's enough,' he signalled to the nurse.

The explosions ceased, the bells stopped ringing, the shriek of the siren died down from tone to tone into silence. The stiffly²⁵ twitching bodies relaxed, and what had become the sob and yelp of infant maniacs broadened out once more into a normal howl²⁶ of ordinary terror.

'Offer them the flowers and the books again.'

The nurses obeyed; but at the approach of the roses, at the mere sight of those gaily coloured images of pussy and cock-a-doodle-doo and baa-baa black sheep, the infants shrank away in horror, the volume of their howling suddenly increased.

'Observe,' said the Director triumphantly, 'observe.'

- 1 stiffened to attention. Si irrigidirono sull'attenti.
- 2 D.H.C. Director of the Hatchery Centre. Il direttore del Centro di Incubazione.
- 3 Set out. Preparate.
- 4 curtly. Bruscamente.
- 5 rose bowls. Ciotole di rose.
- 6 duly. Opportunamente.
- 7 a row ... quartos. Una fila di libricini per bambini.
- 8 dumb-waiter laden. Montavivande carico.
- 9 wire-netted shelves. Scaffali di rete metallica.
- 10 Bokanovsky Group. Riferimento a una tecnica ingegnosa di riproduzione ideata da Huxley. Il nome 'Bokanovsky' è legato a Ivan Vasilevich Bokanovsky, un rivoluzionario russo.
- 11 crawl. Gattinare.
- 12 clusters. Ammassi.
- 13 sleek. Lucenti.
- 14 squeals ... twitterings. Gridolini di eccitazione, gorgoglii e cinguettii.
- 15 crumpling. Spiegazzando.
- 16 illuminated. Miniature, ornate da miniature.
- 17 switchboard. Pannello di comando.
- 18 Shriller and even shriller. Sempre più lacerante.
- 19 rub in. Far assorbire.
- 20 yelps. Urla di dolore.
- 21 twitched. Si contrassero.
- 22 jerkily. A strappi.
- 23 as if to the tug. Come tirati.
- 24 bawled. Urlò.
- 25 stiffly. Rigidamente.
- 26 the sob ... howl. Il singhiozzo e l'urlo di bambini pazzi si allargò ancora una volta in un urlo triste.

