

Brave New World

Background Lecture

When it was published in 1932, critics called *Brave New World* a “novel of ideas” in which Huxley had more interest in ideas than he had in plot or characters. The critics said that Huxley used his characters to voice opinions on the following: the way progress in science affects people; the pursuit of happiness; religion; division of labor in society; love, passion, and freedom, among others.

As utopian fiction, *Brave New World* explores what might or could happen as a result of advancements in science. To explain this concern, Huxley creates a fictional world about 500 years into the future. He uses this future world to comment on the potential dangers he saw in early twentieth-century thought and practice. One of the biggest dangers he sees is the modern world’s mad pursuit of happiness. In *Brave New World*, he explores a world that enjoys an external, materialistic, and sensual happiness but has lost the sense of internal happiness that comes from passions, intellectual interest, and spirituality.

Another modern scientific development of concern to him was the area of genetic and psychological engineering. Huxley shows a world in which humans, produced in bottles on an assembly line, are bred with specific characteristics according to predetermined specifications. He also creates a world that demonstrates the power of conditioning human behavior to brainwash people to follow the desires of a strong central government.

Satire is writing that exposes and censures foolishness and faults of individuals or of groups. The purpose of satire is not only to amuse, but also to correct the flaws that it points out. The tone of satire may be sympathetic, angry, or bitter. Satirists mock their subjects by means of dramatic incidents, sarcasm, irony, mockery, parody, exaggeration, etc. Direct satire confronts the reader with satiric comments, but indirect satire requires the reader to consider the behavior of the characters and then draw his or her own conclusions. For the most part, *Brave New World* is indirect satire; see if you can spot instances of direct satire. In addition, take note of what flaws of humanity are being ridiculed. The standards of what is desirable in human behavior and in *Brave New World*’s society are left for the reader to decide.

Brave New World is Huxley’s most powerful book and also his best known and most popular. It fits into the category of dystopian novels, whose genre includes *The Republic*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *1984*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, among many others.

Note: All references come from the Perennial Classics edition of *Brave New World*, published 1998.

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Notes

Note on Science fiction:

Science Fiction is a branch of literature with an emphasis on adventurous plots. Little concern is given to depicting an actual representation of ordinary life. While science fiction can be merely escapist and wish fulfilling, on another level it can comment on our present society by speculating about the future.

Because science fiction is based on scientific ideas, facts, and possibilities, the science fiction writer is able to imply possibilities from scientific assumptions and to extend them into the future, other times or dimensions, and life on other planets through variations of scientific laws.

Note on Utopian fiction:

Utopian fiction is related to science fiction in the sense that it describes an imagined human society. When the utopia is arranged by humans for the purpose of benefiting humans, we get a picture of what is seen as an ideal world; however, Utopian fiction can be, and frequently is, used to satirize modern society. In this situation, the new ideal world is a lot less than ideal; thus, it is called “dystopian.”

Note: The quotation from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* that includes the title of the novel has numerous parallels to *Brave New World*:

- It is spoken by an innocent.
- The speaker has been separated from society at large.
- It is ironic in both cases—Prospero responds: “’Tis new to thee”; Marx responds that John should see the world before being sure of its goodness.

Suggested Activities for Chapter 3:

To illustrate the dialogic nature of this chapter, the teacher may wish to have the students dramatize Chapter 3. If so, the teacher may want to make copies of the chapter, form small groups, and assign each group a section of the chapter to dramatize.