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This discussion guide includes references to Brave New World (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006).

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THE GREAT BOOKS FOUNDATION
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Discussion Guide for
Brave New World

ABOUT BRAVE NEW WORLD

Despite the fact that *Brave New World* (1932) was published shortly after Aldous Huxley had come to be an internationally recognized author, it received a tepid response from critics and readers alike. Many did not consider it an engaging work of literature and were put off by its unconcealed portrayal of casual sexuality and drug use. Although many reviews accused it of being flat as a work of fiction and didactic as a philosophical musing, Huxley had many years before made it clear that he often elected to write “puppets.” As he explained in a letter, he is “not a realist and [doesn’t] take much interest in the problem of portraying real living people.” Any flatness of characters is not a failure of characterization, but an intentional utilization of such puppets.

Moreover, before World War II, the novel was viewed as misguided in its predictions. Huxley described a society that was kept in control by the advances of technology and science. Instead of attributing the subjugation of the masses to evil political forces, Huxley depicts a populace that willingly submits to the authority of its elite scientists and technocrats.

After the war, readership of the novel skyrocketed, and in 1946 Huxley wrote a new foreword for the book. In it, he addressed some of the earlier criticisms, even acknowledging that “its defects as a work of art are considerable.” Greatest among these defects, he continued, was the philosophical incompleteness of only allowing John the Savage to choose between
the new civilization or the Indian reservation: “insanity on the one hand and lunacy on the other.” He intones his hope that, however rare, sanity is always a third choice, glaringly absent from his view of the future in *Brave New World*.

But despite its shortcomings, Huxley also evaluated his dystopian future as truer, and closer to total realization, than he had previously imagined. After the war, readers were inclined to agree. The phrase “brave new world,” originally from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, has taken on a colloquial meaning of its own. It is now used as a description of any social change that sacrifices one set of values for another. This new meaning demonstrates the view of Mustapha Mond, World Controller of Western Europe: “You’ve got to stick to one set of postulates” (236). While *Brave New World* focuses on the possible results of valuing technology and happiness above all else, the broader schema of prioritizing any one set of values at the expense of all others suggests countless other dystopian and utopian visions.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Is Bernard responsible for his difficulties fitting into society?

1. What does it mean that Bernard and Helmholtz are both “individuals”? (67)

2. Why does Bernard reject the friendly advances of Benito Hoover at the beginning of the novel, but take advantage of the company offered to him following his return from the reservation?

3. Does the rumor that he had alcohol in his blood surrogate prevent him from experiencing the advantages of being an Alpha?

4. Why does Bernard want “another chance” instead of being sent to an island? (226)

5. Why do Bernard’s views about soma change throughout the course of the novel?
Is John the Savage a sympathetic protagonist?

1. Is John’s love for Lenina more meaningful than the other intimate relationships in the novel?
2. Is John’s response to Lenina’s sexual advances in chapter 13 justified?
3. Why does John say to the Deltas, “I’ll make you be free whether you want to or not”? (213)
4. Why does John take his “right to be unhappy” so far? (240)

In the world of Huxley’s novel, is art beneficial to human society?

1. Why does John’s reading of Shakespeare change after he leaves the so-called primitive society and begins to live in the civilized world?
2. Why does Helmholtz feel that, “It’s not enough for the phrases to be good; what you make with them ought to be good too”? (69)
3. When Lenina first arrives at the reservation, how does music provide her with a point of connection between the two societies?
4. Why does the Controller believe that social stability is incompatible with “high art”? (220)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Do you agree that truth and beauty are opposed to comfort and happiness?
2. Is it true that “providence takes its cue from men”?
3. Is yearning for a better society the same as yearning for the unknown?
Can society both preserve its inhabitants from emotion and at the same time make them happy?

ABOUT ALDOUS HUXLEY

Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) was born on July 26 to a family that belonged to the Victorian intellectual elite in Britain. His grandfather was the staunch Darwinist Thomas Henry Huxley, his great-uncle the poet and social critic Matthew Arnold. He was raised in the countryside of Surrey, the same county that he would much later describe as the final home of John the Savage in *Brave New World*.

Precocious from a young age, and from a family of ample resources, he followed after his older brothers Julian and Trevenen in attending the prestigious Eton College boarding school. His years there were plagued with difficulties, including his mother’s death, eye infections that temporarily blinded him and permanently impaired his eyesight, and the suicide of his charismatic brother Trevenen, who was found hanging in a forest following a romance that was doomed by its disparity in social class.

Huxley has claimed that it was the problems with his eyesight that changed his course from medicine to literature. However, the scathing social satire that permeates his first books gives credence to the idea that he was also responding to the troubling circumstances of his brother’s suicide and questioning his aristocratic upbringing. In a letter written shortly before the publication of *Brave New World*, he reflected “whether it isn’t perhaps rather bad for one to have been born and brought up a bourgeois in tolerably easy circumstances.”

After graduating from Balliol College, Oxford, in 1916, and spending a few years in a government job, he returned to Eton as an instructor. Among his students was Eric Blair, who was to later adopt the pen name George Orwell. Throughout the 1920s Huxley worked as an editor and contributor for numerous periodicals and was a prolific writer of poetry, novels, essays, reviews, and travel pieces in his free time. By the time *Point
Counterpoint (1928) was released, his fourth novel in seven years, he had achieved international recognition. Huxley’s main interests changed after Brave New World to reflections on spirituality and the expansion of consciousness. During the last decades of his life he wrote philosophical treatises (The Perennial Philosophy, 1945) and personal reflections (The Doors of Perception, 1954) concerning topics as varied as comparative theology and his own experimentation with LSD and mescaline. Despite this shift in focus, he would continue writing about utopias for all of his life. In 1958 he wrote a book-length critical reflection titled Brave New World Revisited. This focused not on the novel itself, but on the dystopian predictions that had become increasingly worrisome to him. His final novel, Island (1962), is the counterpoint to Brave New World and envisions a more meaningful and spiritual utopian society. As Huxley had written in the 1946 foreword, this type of society would value “man’s Final End” above the concerns of technology and happiness that are so prevalent in Brave New World.

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