

8. ALDOUS HUXLEY

(Godalming, 26th July 1894 – Los Angeles, 22nd November 1963)

An English writer and one of the most prominent members of the famous Huxley family, he is best known for his novels including his masterpiece *Brave New World* (1932), a dystopian novel as vibrant today as then. By the end of his life he was considered a leader of modern thought as well as an intellectual of the highest rank.



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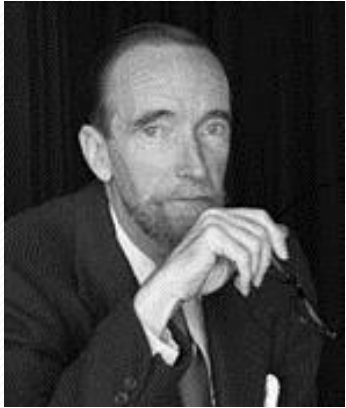
- **1894:** born into a well-to-do upper-middle class family, at 17 he suffered an attack of *keratitis punctata* which left him totally blind for over 18 months. He **learned Braille** but by using special glasses (and with the partial recovery of one eye) he was able to read again.
- **1913-15:** having turned from medicine to literature at **Oxford University**, he received his B.A. in English and published his first collection of poetry.
- **1921:** his first novel, *Crome Yellow*, a witty criticism of society won him widespread recognition and in the following eight years he published a dozen books.



He formed a close friendship with **D.H. Lawrence** (1885 – 1930), an English writer who shared Huxley's vision of the dehumanising effects of modernity and industrialisation: they travelled in Italy and France.

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- **1930s:** he moved from Italy (near Florence) to France where he wrote *Brave New World* (1932), a dark vision of a highly technological society of the future.
- **1937:** he moved to California with the guru figure **Gerald Heard** (1889-1971) who introduced him to Vedanta, meditation and vegetarianism.



He published an influential study of consciousness expansion through mescaline (a psychedelic alkaloid found in the Peyote cactus in Mexico, for ex.), *The Doors Of Perception* (1954) – he became a guru among Californian hippies and started using LSD.

- **1958:** *Brave New World Revisited* appeared followed by *Island* (1962), a utopian novel.
- **1963 (22nd November):** he died in Los Angeles on the same day in which **J. F. Kennedy** was **assassinated**.



Brave New World



- The novel opens in London in the year AD 2540 (in the book 632 A.F., After Ford): the majority of the population is unified under *The World State*, an eternally peaceful, stable, **global society** in which goods and resources are plentiful (because the population is kept limited to no more than two billion people) and everyone is happy.
- Natural reproduction has been done away with and children are “decanted” and raised in **Hatcheries** and Conditioning Centres, where they are divided into five castes (from Alphas to Epsilons) designed to fulfill predetermined positions within the social and economic strata of the World State.



Brave New World (1932)

- Indoctrination starts at birth through “*hypnopædia*”, i.e. recorded voices repeating slogans during sleep which teach people
 - to value **constant material consumption** (since “*spending is better than mending*”);
 - to make use of **soma**, a hallucinogen that takes users on hangover-free “holidays”, releasing them from the need of transcendence and solitude;
 - to consider **sex a social activity** (since “*everyone belongs to everyone else*”).



Words like “marriage”, “natural birth”, “parenthood”, “pregnancy” are **too obscene** to be mentioned in casual conversation!

Brave New World

- Spending time alone is considered an outrageous waste of time and money; moreover wanting to be an individual is horrifying so free time is spent enjoying the company of one's caste members and doing activities together.
- People typically die at age 60 having maintained good health and youthfulness their whole life: death isn't feared and, since no one has family, they have no ties to mourn.

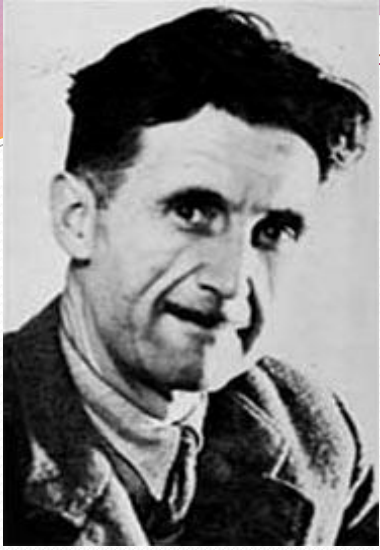


- But in The World State there is still an area, located somewhere in New Mexico, where people live in the “old way”: it is known as *The Savage Reservation* and the contact between the inhabitants of the two worlds will bring about tragic consequences...

Contemporary issues.

- Although the novel is set in the future, it contains issues of the early (as well as the late!) 20th century: the Industrial Revolution had transformed the world.
- In 1908 Henry Ford's first Model T rolled off his **assembly line**, built on the principles of
 - mass production,
 - homogeneity,
 - predictability,
 - consumption of disposable consumer goods.
- Banned, challenged and misunderstood at various times, this science fiction novel expresses, above all, **the fear of losing individual identity** in the fast-paced world of the future.





Orwell vs Huxley (1)

- Social critic Neil Postman puts into contrast the worlds of George Orwell (1903 – 1950)'s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) and Huxley's *Brave New World*:

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books.

*What Huxley feared was that there would be **no reason to ban a book**, for there would be no one who wanted to read one.*

*Orwell feared those who would deprive us of **information**.*

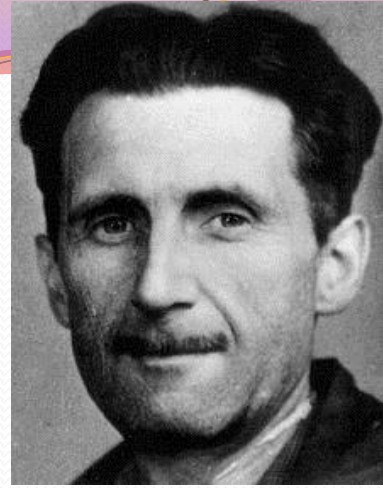
*Huxley feared those who would give us **so much** that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism.*



Orwell vs Huxley (2)

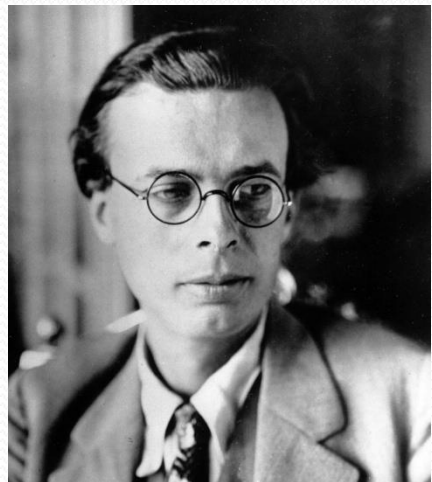
Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us.

*Huxley feared **the truth** would be **drowned** in a sea of irrelevance.*



Orwell feared we would become a captive culture.

*Huxley feared we would become **a trivial culture**.*



*In “1984” people are controlled by inflicting pain.
In “Brave New World” they are **controlled by inflicting pleasure**.*

*Orwell feared that what we fear will ruin us.
Huxley feared that **our desire will ruin us**.*