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The Meaning Of Life As Discussed In *Brave New World*

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English Writing 1510: Writing and Critical Inquiry

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September 28, 2016

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* prophesizes a future society which has dismissed many of the foundational beliefs of today. The World State he describes has obscured history, impeded scientific progress, and eliminated the family structure, all in an effort to establish and maintain a stable society. In predicting such a future, Huxley has implored his readers to re-examine their own values. *Brave New World* forces the reader to consider whether the society depicted is favorable to their own, raising many of the complex questions surrounding the meaning and purpose of life.

Of the many philosophical conundrums brought up in *Brave New World*, there is one that is perhaps the most unanswerable: What is an individual's purpose in life? Huxley raises this question by challenging its conventional answers. Each of his main characters search for meaning in one of the places people look in today's society, whether it be in their religion, in their personal lives, or in their profession. By placing those characters in a stable, content society, Huxley sheds new light on how potentially fulfilling each source of purpose would be. He uses the character John the Savage to put divine religious belief in perspective. John finds many sources of meaning in his life, but his driving purpose in life is to do right in the eyes of God. John serves as an example to show how a life devoted to a non-human God is a life full of deprivation, guilt, and unhappiness. This point is thoroughly expressed by John's suicide. Even though he claims that "God's the reason for everything noble and fine and heroic," John's life ends not in a hero's death, but rather with him taking his own life out of shame and despair (Huxley, *Brave New World* 213). In contrast, Huxley uses the character Fanny to illustrate how easy life is when one's purpose is to be a compliant and productive member of society. Fanny is never described as only having minor personal conflicts, and each one easily solved; her main function in the novel is to give Lenina advice on how to be happy. The fact that she serves that

function suggests that she is an expert on the subject of being happy, especially since she is completely immersed in a society where “Everybody’s happy now” (Huxley, *Brave New World* 77). However, Huxley still brings this source of purpose into question by subtly suggesting that Fanny’s life of the devout citizen is not completely fulfilling since she’s “been feeling rather out of sorts lately” and has been advised to get a “Pregnancy Substitute” (*Brave New World*, 44). He continues to use the rest of the main characters to highlight the benefits and drawbacks of different sources of purpose, including Helmholtz, whose pursuit of artistic truth caused him to be plagued by a feeling of insufficiency, and Bernard, whose battle for respect only convinced those whose respect he sought to ridicule and shun him. For the many readers who found meaning in society, artistic truth, the respect of peers, or God, *Brave New World* was a call to revisit their answer to the question of purpose.

Another quandary Huxley brings up is that if “every one belongs to every one else,” does anyone matter (*Brave New World* 46)? This question is raised because of the lack of intimate personal relationships in the World State. Huxley designed his New World without many possibilities for intimate personal attachment by abolishing the family structure, prohibiting monogamy, and devaluing sexual relations. In the World State, family is unnecessary since humans are manufactured in factories like the “Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre” (*Brave New World* 15). Any form of passion is frowned upon since, in the words of Mustapha Mond, “[when] feeling strongly...how could they be stable?” and stability is the World State’s first priority (*Brave New World* 47). Sexual relations are stripped of their intimacy and personal value because citizens are conditioned from early childhood that anyone is allowed to have sex with anyone, and that erotic play like “hunt-the-zipper” is just another way to entertain themselves (*Brave New World* 184). Instead of making love, people “have” one

another, and Huxley uses Bernard to comment on how objectifying someone “degrad[es them] to so much mutton”—no better than meat (*Brave New World* 51). While strong feeling is discouraged in the controlled society, there is the definite possibility that close personal relationships exist in the form of friendship. These few close relationships that are allowed to form, though, differ from the intimate attachments of today in regard to how they deal with death. In *Brave New World*, children are conditioned to accept death as an unremarkable fact of life, one that occurs with no ceremony or period of grief. They are also conditioned to dismiss any kind of history as unimportant, to accept that “history is bunk” (*Brave New World* 40). This implies that when someone dies in this society, their deaths are not mourned and their lives are not remembered. In seeing how the *Brave New World* society functions without intimate personal relationships, the role those relationships play in determining the meaning of life is re-examined.

One of the most important questions Huxley evokes is whether or not society should determine the purpose of the individual. Huxley poses this question to the reader by presenting a character, John, who battles for freedom of belief against the backdrop of a future in which society is in almost complete control of an individual’s beliefs. John debates this issue in the novel with Mustapha Mond, saying that a man upon whom society has forced a comfortable life in is being “just as heavily punished as the Edmund who’s wounded and bleeding to death” for his vices (*Brave New World* 211-12). This demonstrates how John challenges the benefits of a society united in purpose, raising the question of what role society should play in determining the purpose of an individual, and also how important this question is in the framework of the novel, since it describes the main conflict between John and the New World. The role of society in deciding the purpose of life is central to the narrative because the novel’s vision of humanity is

one in which society has almost absolute control over the beliefs of its citizens. When reading *Brave New World*, this question is unavoidable. In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley posed the question: “Does a majority of the population think it worth while to take a good deal of trouble, in order to halt and, if possible, reverse the current drift toward totalitarian control of everything?” (338). *Brave New World* made it so the reader must face this question, they must consider whether it is worth it to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to decide for themselves what their purpose is in life or whether it would just be better to let the controllers of the world provide direction in exchange for free will.

When looking back on *Brave New World* in *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley expressed hope for a fortunate period in between “the disorderly world of liberalism and the much too orderly *Brave New World* where perfect efficiency left no room for freedom of personal initiative” (*Brave New World Revisited* 237). While it may seem impossible for the brainwashing of *Brave New World* to occur, since belief cannot be forced and “[t]here may be plenty of compelling arguments for a man's credibility; but no argument can force us to believe him,” it is possible that man will grow weary of inconvenience and instability (Pieper 35). One cause for this weariness, war, was predicted in *Brave New World*, when Mustapha Mond points out: “What's the point of truth or beauty or knowledge when anthrax bombs are popping all around you?” (Huxley 205). Before this all-controlling society comes to power, though, Huxley was depending on a time “during which the more fortunate third of the human race would make the best of both worlds” (*Brave New World Revisited* 236). John the Savage is a representation of this in-between period. He did not belong to either society, but came from both the old and new worlds. The clash of “civilized” and “savage” is evident even in his name, which combines the John of English colonists such as John Smith and John Rolfe with the term “Savage” which was

applied to Native Americans during the period of colonization. The downfall of the fortunate period of history, though, is foreshadowed by John's death. Although John had been exposed to some of the best of both worlds, like Shakespeare and feelies, John was stuck. He could not join the new world without sacrificing his freedom, and he could not return to the old world without sacrificing his happiness. The novel ends with John's dead body slowly rotating, "like two unhurried compass needles," as directionless in life as he was in death. John's short life represents how much the fortunate window of time is shrinking. His inability to escape the new society and to resist its temptations illustrates how the new age of conditioners and controllers is something we cannot outrun for very long. John's tragic ending by his own hand shows how that serendipitous era of transition cannot exist for any substantial amount of time, if at all. *Brave New World* ends with that message of hopelessness, and years after it was first published, Huxley reaffirmed this despair by declaring that "[t]he completely organized society, the scientific caste system, the abolition of free will by methodical conditioning, the servitude made acceptable by regular doses of chemically induced happiness, the orthodoxies drummed in by nightly courses of sleep-teaching—these things were coming," and that there may be no intermission from one horror to the next since "[t]he blessed interval between too little order and the nightmare of too much has not begun and shows no sign of beginning" (*Brave New World Revisited* 238).

Works Cited

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