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## ALDOUS HUXLEY

**Born:** Laleham, near Godalming, Surrey, England;  
July 26, 1894

**Died:** Los Angeles, California; November 22, 1963

*Widely renowned as a satiric novelist, Huxley contributed significantly to literary modernism's skeptical reassessment of the scientific and technological tendencies of twentieth century society.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Aldous Leonard Huxley was born on July 26, 1894, in Laleham, near Godalming, Surrey, England, the third son of Dr. Leonard Huxley, a teacher, editor, and writer, and Julia Arnold, niece of Matthew Arnold and sister of novelist Mrs. Humphrey Ward. Aldous was also the grandson of Thomas Henry Huxley, a well-known scientist, and the brother of scientist Sir Julian Huxley.

Huxley had planned on a career as a physician, but an affliction with nearly total blindness while studying at Eton altered his plans, and, upon partial recovery three years later, he entered Balliol College, Oxford, and earned a degree in English literature. While Huxley was at Oxford, World War I began, and he was refused enlistment because of his poor eyesight; eventually, he became totally disillusioned about the war and about the direction of twentieth century society, particularly after a visit to America in the Roaring Twenties, during which he was appalled by the material excesses and what he saw as a pervasive spiritual emptiness. The death of his mother when he was fourteen and of his brother Trevenen when Aldous was eighteen may have contributed to the skeptical bent of Aldous's mind. The Oxford years, however, did establish important literary connections for Huxley, since during his years there he met

Bertrand Russell, the Sitwells, D. H. Lawrence, and Lytton Strachey, among others, as well as his future wife, Maria Nys.

After graduation, Huxley worked briefly for the Air Board as a patriotic duty until his poor vision forced his resignation. He then taught at Eton, the preparatory school from which he had been graduated, but did not enjoy teaching, perhaps because of his somewhat introverted nature. He switched to a position as second assistant editor of *The Athenaeum*, a literary review; the increased salary allowed him to marry Nys in 1919. Then, in 1920 and 1921, he worked as drama critic for *The Westminster Gazette*, at the same time writing *Crome Yellow* (1921), his first novel, which began the development of his reputation as a skillful satiric novelist. (Although he had been publishing poetry and short stories since his college days, including *The Burning Wheel*, 1916, his first poetry volume, none had been very successful.)

The even more successful novels *Antic Hay* (1923) and *Those Barren Leaves* (1925) followed, allowing Huxley the financial security to leave journalistic work and travel widely in Europe and even once around the world, with stops in India, the Dutch East Indies, and the United States. In fact, from 1923 until his death in 1963, Huxley lived elsewhere than in England, returning there only for visits. From 1923 until 1930, he lived in Italy, studying and admiring Italian architecture and landscapes (painting being a hobby) but expressing contempt for Fascism. While there, he wrote *Point Counter Point* (1928), which was second only to *Brave New World* (1932) in popularity. The

latter was written during Huxley's years in southern France, at Sanery-sur-Mer; he had moved there in 1930 because of the pleasant climate and reasonable cost of living. During these years of residence in France, he also took a trip to Central America that was the basis for his successful travel book *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (1934). Given his diverse knowledge and interests, Huxley also wrote book reviews, newspaper articles, plays, short stories, and forewords, introductions, and prefaces for others' works—a total of some eighty-five works being written or edited by Huxley by the time of his death in 1963.

That death came in the United States, to which Huxley had emigrated from France in 1937 for several reasons, including not only his belief in impending disaster in Europe (on the eve of World War II) but also his love of the Mojave desert and its climate. The latter, particularly, in combination with the Bates method of visual reeducation, improved his eyesight.

Huxley remained politically engaged in the 1930's and early 1940's, attending to his humanistic concerns, working to avoid World War II, even writing a book, *Ends and Means*, in 1937 on war's motives and futility. Both during and after World War II, however, he turned to less practical considerations and embraced a kind of psychological and philosophical/religious mysticism as a solution to the lack of wholeness, to the fragmentation, of the modern world. That mystical focus is evident even in the 1941 study of Father Joseph, *Grey Eminence*, and in his important later novels, *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939), *Ape and Essence* (1948), and *Island* (1962). Paradoxically, however, given the Huxley family's scientific tradition, that mysticism was also pragmatic and empirical, involving an attempt to synthesize all of life's diverse elements. Thus, during his years in America, Huxley wrote scripts for Hollywood films and articles for *Playboy* and *Esquire* while at the same time writing essays on parapsychology and mystical novels (novels that also include the very earthy, such as the sexual elements in *Island*). Nor did the mystical concern preclude some political and social activity, such as Huxley's work for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization based on his concern with overpopulation, or his help in the Campaign Against Hunger in 1963.

Socially, too, he was active, talking with composer Igor Stravinsky, taking walks with author Thomas Mann, having picnics with screenwriter Anita Loos and actor Charlie Chaplin, and even going for drives with a juvenile delinquent (Huxley enjoyed and studied automobiles throughout his life).

The mystical concern did help Huxley deal with his wife's death from cancer in 1955 and with his own long struggle with cancer that ended on November 22, 1963, in Los Angeles, California. His life and work indeed reflect a highly varied but impressively unified mind that continually developed in a consistent way from early satiric skepticism to the confident mysticism of the later years and which throughout shows the constant human conflict between the intellectual and emotional polarities of the human personality. Huxley did in fact achieve the synthesis and unity that were the object of his lifetime search.

#### ANALYSIS

Huxley's primary thematic concern in his fiction is with the ramifications of humanness: what the authentic human values are, what lifestyles humans should adopt, and what type of society or world humans should create. He is particularly concerned, in that context, with the issue of modernist alienation and isolation in a complex scientific and technological society that, particularly in 1928 and 1932 (the respective dates of publication of his two most important novels, *Point Counter Point* and *Brave New World*), was in great upheaval because of the economic problems of capitalism that were all too evident. As a humanist in the classical and Renaissance sense of a broadly educated and talented person with a devotion to improving life on earth, Huxley particularly focuses upon the psychological effects of twentieth century life, of a life of nonstop action as it shapes human attitudes toward love, material possessions, and political structures, but especially as it affects the personal balance and happiness of individual human beings. If humans were not happier in the twentieth century than in the past (and Huxley firmly believed that they were not), then why not? Where did they err and lose the normal human balance of intellect and emotion, body and soul, love and hate, self-concern and concern for others—all the balances involved in being naturally adjusted and contented?

Implicit in such an assumption of balanced “naturalness” is the Romantic conception of humans living in harmony with nature, with all of the created, living world, and thus with themselves. Such a Goetheian Romantic stance inevitably led Huxley to be critical of science and technology and of any positive human future based upon such products of the rational side of human beings. Hence, Huxley continuously presents the scientist as a threat and his creations, his machines, as a similar danger because they control those who use them. The use of machines is implicitly connected to corrupted values in *Point Counter Point* and *Brave New World*, for example. In the former, this theme is depicted in Lucy Tantamount’s fascination with airplanes and fast travel as a way to avoid real emotion in relationships, as a way to speed to a new and superficial love relationship. Hence, Lucy deserts Walter Bidlake because he is too caring: too deep in his attachments, too unlike the mechanistic superficiality and temporariness and rapid pace of Lucy’s modern life. Similarly, machines in *Brave New World* adversely affect the normal freedom and balance and harmony in life; for example, mechanical birth processes that allow the creation of perfectly planned, robotic humans who are further controlled by science-created soma, a drug for pleasure and distraction that deprives humans of the pain and suffering that motivate thought and questioning, and thus intellectual development. The result is an acceptance of controlled, thoughtless, superficial lives that lack both emotional depth and intellectual attainment.

It was this kind of presentation of science and technology that led H. G. Wells, the positivist science-fiction writer, to write a letter to Huxley damning him for treason to science after *Brave New World* was published. Such presentation also led to Huxley’s being criticized for cynicism, with many critics not wanting to, or at any rate failing to, note the real human potential for success implicit in both *Point Counter Point* and *Brave New World*. Those successes include the balanced-living Mark and Mary Rampion in the former (who do their own housework, read and discuss ideas, and live emotionally and fully, as well) and Bernard and Helmholtz in the latter.

There are also unbalanced and tragic characters in Huxley’s novels, characters who embody Huxley’s ideas about flaws in human development,

flaws that lead to unnaturalness and psychological aberration. The purpose of these characters in Huxley’s novels of ideas is to illustrate the causative forces of psychological aberration, such as Spandrell’s unnatural closeness to his mother, which causes him to hate her, himself, and everyone else when she remarries. He is led to murder as a product of his hate-filled imbalance. Such scenes merely illustrate one type of human perversion and do not indicate the cynical views of the author.

More justified criticisms of Huxley’s novels are that the concern with ideas is so pervasive that characterization is often limited to speeches and dialogue as a way to present ideas, and that plot unity is often lacking because too many characters are used to represent the *mélange* of ideas involved. However, both *Point Counter Point* and *Brave New World* present positive, hopeful ideas as well as negative ones, as Huxley conveys his messages about the need for more human psychological balance and for more skeptical analysis of the “advancements” in science and technology.

## POINT COUNTER POINT

**First published:** 1928

**Type of work:** Novel

*In early twentieth century England, a range of interrelated characters illustrate the modern world’s complexity and the difficulty of harmonious, sane existence within it.*

*Point Counter Point*, Huxley’s greatest novelistic success except for *Brave New World*, is a complex work involving a multitude of characters who represent various extremes of imbalance in earthly life, imbalances that detract from naturalness and harmony. As such, these characters are the most inclusive presentation of Huxley’s ideas about erroneous human values and actions and about the complex social, political, economic, and psychological causes of such actions and values.

The novel unfolds in a very diffuse way. The introductory section is structured around a party given by Lord Edward Tantamount and his wife, which is attended by a multitude of the “rich and famous,” including nearly all of the characters

whose lives are alternately focused upon in the rest of the novel. At the party, the central conflict is also foreshadowed, that between the socialist Illidge, Lord Tantamount's scientific assistant, and the ultraconservative, capitalistically privileged leader of a reactionary political group, Everard Webley. That plotline then develops with Spandrell's very Freudian and psychologically violent perverseness contributing to the radical violence implicit within Illidge's perspective. (Spandrell has been too psychologically attached to his mother, and her remarriage devastates him, turning him into a pathological being, the villain of the novel.) At Spandrell's urging, he and Illidge eventually perform the central action of the novel, the murder of Webley. That murder leads to the novel's climactic moment, the somewhat tragically heroic

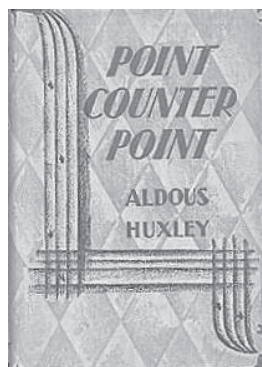
decision by Spandrell to destroy himself by forcing the police to kill him, illustrating the destructiveness of the social, political, and psychological counterpoints in twentieth century society.

The other plot line counterpoints develop in similarly tragic ways. The painter John Bidlake's psychosexual excessiveness is paralleled by that of the editor Burlap and

the Tantamounts' spoiled daughter Lucy, all three characters pursuing sexual pleasure at the expense of other characters, such as John Bidlake's wives and models, Burlap's rejected secretary Ethel Cobbett (who commits suicide), and Walter Bidlake, from whom Lucy drifts away out of boredom in her pursuit of sexual adventures. These psychosexually excessive characters are themselves also seen as tragic, John Bidlake unable to cope with death, Lucy pursuing sexuality in a desperate attempt to escape thought and deep feeling, and Burlap regressing to an almost infantile sexual relationship with Beatrice Gilray.

The tragic lives of the psychosexually excessive are counterpointed by the equally tragic lives of the religiously and intellectually excessive. Fanatically Christian Rachel Quarles almost totally retreats from her husband and children into

religious isolation, in the process bringing Walter Bidlake's mistress, Marjorie, into the same kind of mystical isolation, which leaves Marjorie totally incapable of helping Walter cope with his rejection by Lucy Tantamount. Similarly, Walter's intellectual excessiveness makes him incapable of contentment with either Marjorie or Lucy, since, like Don Quixote, he has read so much idealistic literature that he is continually searching for more than reality affords. Thus, his life is continual tragic dissatisfaction. Also, the philosophically excessive Philip Quarles continually withdraws into thought and avoids feeling, and thus cannot relate to his son, little Phil, or even feel very affected by Phil's death. He is also so withdrawn that he nearly drives his wife into an affair with Webley, a circumstance prevented only by Phil's sudden illness and Webley's murder. Philip Quarles's future is as bleak as that of most of the other characters, since he remains trapped within his personal imbalance. The intellectually scientific are also presented as a counterpoint to the psychosexually excessive, with Lord Edward Tantamount embodying the withdrawn, socially dysfunctional scientist who cannot sexually relate to his wife and who is only happy doing experiments in his laboratory. Thus, at the novel's end, only the Rampions, Mark and Mary, remain as embodiments of the possibility of synthesis and balance in an imbalanced, fragmented modern world that is resoundingly rejected by Huxley in this profoundly satiric novel.



## BRAVE NEW WORLD

**First published:** 1932

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the future world imagined in this novel, there is no provision for complete and emotional human existence.*

*Brave New World* continues the presentation of human psychological and other imbalances of *Point Counter Point*, but in a more creative and unified way. It is set in a future society in which control over individuals is nearly absolute and in which there is virtually no possibility of maintaining a sane, balanced, and fully human existence.



Through the future setting of a scientifically created and controlled technological society, operating in artificial harmony by virtue of nearly deadened human emotional and intellectual attributes, Huxley focuses on the danger of what twentieth century society could become if the values of order, profit, and power continue to prevail over spontaneous creativity, mutual respect and pleasure, and cooperative idealism.

The citizens in this “brave new world” are controlled and conditioned from birth, in fact before birth, by means of genetic engineering, or mechanical childbirth processes. Humans are then subjected to a variety of operant conditioning techniques, including hypnopaedia, or sleep-teaching, which fit them for their carefully planned roles in the society. This role preparation is involved even in the genetic engineering, too, as the embryonic rocket engineers’ birth tubes are kept in constant motion to prepare the engineers to work in weightless environments in which right-side-up and upside-down positions alternate constantly. In the words of the director of the genetics institute, “They learn to associate topsy-turvydom with well-being; in fact, they’re only truly happy when they’re standing on their heads.” The conditioning continues throughout life, the sleep teaching reinforced by the entertainment drug soma, which encourages narcissistic self-indulgence and thus lack of concern for larger decisions of societal direction made by the few in power.

The system of scientific and technological control, directed by Mustapha Mond, is not yet perfect. Some humans continue to be dissatisfied and want more than what is prescribed for them. Mond, who fears real human experience and thus uses control and artificial creation to avoid such balance, has trouble particularly with the emotional and intellectual longings of several characters, with their often subconscious desire to be whole. Specifically, Bernard keeps longing for real love, not just entertainment sex, and the same is

true to some extent of Lenina (thus the important Freudian psychology element again in Huxley’s work). Also, Helmholtz keeps feeling unfulfilled because of some deeply suppressed need that has not been totally eliminated.

The Savage, though, is particularly problematic for Mond. The Savage realizes the total imbalance, the total inhumanness, of the society in its elimination of both deep feeling and intellectual attainment. He believes in feeling, in living, and in experiencing real human pain and thus real human joy—even the pain of death, which defines and creates human joy. When Mond questions him, the Savage admits that he is “claiming the right to be unhappy.” Mond responds with the following:

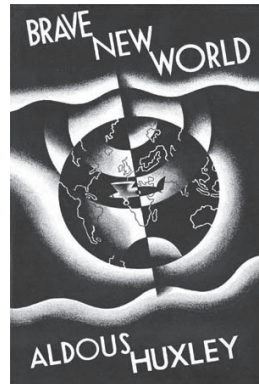
Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.

The Savage’s response is simply, “I claim them all.” They are all part of being human, of being in the real world, and Huxley sees the drug-induced life of scientific and technological society as destructive of that real world. Thus, the Savage dies tragically by hanging himself, in primitive reaction against a world that has eliminated the side of human beings that he represents.

### SUMMARY

In *Brave New World*, which describes a future society that seems perfectly orderly, harmonious, and controlled but which is actually depraved, unhappy, and hellish, Aldous Huxley embodies his principal ideas. He also embodies them in *Point Counter Point*, in a diffuse portrait of imbalanced characters in early twentieth century England.

One of those principal ideas is that humanness and authentic human values involve recognition of and participation in all the dichotomies of human existence: emotion and intellect, mind and body, body and soul, love and hate, self-concern and concern for others. Without that balance and total development, humans are doomed to incomplete, and often tragic, lives. The other principal



belief is that modern society is itself unbalanced in its overly scientific and technological orientation, leading to intellect dominating emotion and thus to final tragedy unless drastic adjustments are made. It is that idea that continues to make Huxley's two great novels tremendously important in solving the problems of today's world.

John L. Grigsby

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Aldous Huxley's title *Point Counter Point* relate to the structure of the novel?
- Miranda in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (pr. 1611, pb. 1623) says, "O brave new world/ That has such people in it." How does Huxley's use of the phrase establish the tone of his novel?
- Which novel, Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), now seems more prophetic? Justify your answer.
- Huxley came from a family in which several members were notably scientific. What is his attitude toward science as expressed or implied in his best-known novels?
- In claiming the right to be unhappy, is the Savage in *Brave New World* conceding that technologically controlled beings are indeed happy?

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