

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley SHMOOP PREMIUM Summary

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Brave New World begins in an uncomfortably sterile and controlled futuristic society, commonly referred to as “the World State.” We join the story as a group of young students are receiving a factory tour of the “London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre” from the center’s director, whose name is... The Director. It’s all a little creepy.

The Director explains to the students the process by which humans are grown inside bottles and then conditioned (read: brainwashed) to believe certain moral “truths.” This conditioning, also known as “hypnopaedia” or “sleep-teaching,” instructs the citizens to believe in the value of society over the individual. Each person exists to serve the community. It’s their job to be consumers and workers, which in turn keeps the economy stable and strong. Buy lots of clothes. Use lots of transportation. Do your job.

To make the system run more smoothly, humans are divided into various castes: Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas, and... drum roll...Epsilons. Alphas are smart, tall, and muscular; Epsilons short, dumb, and ugly. These people figured out that the best way to keep non-Alphas stupid is to give them dangerous substances while they’re still in the test tube. In this case, they use alcohol and oxygen deprivation. Also, the lower castes are grown in batches, so that 100 Epsilons are all exact copies of one another. And you thought having an older brother was tough. Imagine having 99 clones!

Moving right along, we meet two more of the novel’s characters, Lenina Crowne and Henry Foster, both workers in the hatchery. Lenina is gorgeous. Henry has been sleeping with her. So has everyone else. However, this arrangement is the status quo. In the World State, sex is casual, regular (as in, once-a-day), and explicit. “Every one belongs to every one else,” which means when a man wants to sleep with a woman, he publicly says, “Hey, you, let’s have sex tonight,” and she says, “OK.” (Basically.) Even little kids play games with each other like hunt-the-zipper (just use your imagination). Also, orgies are a required bi-weekly event.

The other big activity in this world is taking a narcotic called *soma*—a drug that sends its users off into “lunar eternity,” a trippy escape from reality. We receive much of this information from the Director during his tour, but the rest is delivered via Mustapha Mond, a big-deal guy who happens to be one of ten World Controllers.

Mustapha explains to the same “group of students” (read: “plot device”) how this society came about. The short version is that the world got gradually more and more screwed up until the world population collectively said, “Oh we can’t take this anymore! Please take away all of our liberties and individuality in the name of universal stability!” And the Powers That Be said, “OK.” And now there’s no war, no sadness, no individuality, no history, no literature (!), no families, no emotional ties to others, no solitude allowed, no scientific freedom, and no religion (God has been replaced by “Ford,” as in Henry Ford, as in the man who perfected the assembly line and mass production). But still, there’s sex. A lot of it.

So that’s your basic set-up. While we’re getting dealt this info, we meet another character, Bernard Marx, an Alpha-Plus psychologist who, for some reason or another, doesn’t have the great physical characteristic of most Alphas. He’s short. Bernard feels isolated because he’s “different,” and all his time alone lets him ponder big thoughts such as: “I wish everyone wasn’t so promiscuous and could take love seriously,” “I totally want Lenina, but I’d rather have a nice long talk than have sex with her.” When he finally does get around to asking Lenina out, he’s embarrassed that she publicly discusses their plans for sex.

Next we meet Helmholtz Watson, another Alpha-Plus male who shares Bernard’s dissatisfaction with their

controlled, structured lives but fortunately doesn't share Bernard's physical deficiencies: Helmholtz is really attractive. So good looking, in fact, that the first time we meet him he's being offered a foursome—with three women. But he actually passes on the offer and instead shoots the beans with Bernard about how dissatisfied they are with their lives. Since he writes meaningless hypnopædia sayings all day, Helmholtz expresses a desire to create something more intense and more passionate—he just doesn't know what that might be.

Up next is Bernard's date with Lenina. He wants to spend some time talking, or maybe holding hands during a long walk on the beach. This confuses Lenina, who wants to take drugs and have sex. Ultimately, Bernard gives in to her seductive ways, but he has to take a few grams of *soma* before he can bring himself to get into bed with her. The next morning, he expresses regret—they should have waited, he tells her, before having sex. He wants to be an adult, not an infant. He wants to see what happens when there's some amount of time in between desire and fulfillment. Lenina doesn't get it.

So it's on these rocky, somewhat uncomfortable terms that Bernard and Lenina plan a vacation together to a Savage Reservation in New Mexico. What's a Savage Reservation, you ask? Basically, a part of the world that hasn't been brought up to speed with the whole technology/mind control/dystopia thing. Before he goes, Bernard has to get a permission slip from the Director—his boss, whom we met in the very beginning of the novel.



The Director reveals, sort of by accident, that he

visited the Reservation himself when he was younger, also with a woman. Then he lost the woman. She went missing on the Reservation, they couldn't find her, and he had to come back alone. Embarrassed at this personal disclosure, the Director recovers by chewing out Bernard for acting like an adult instead of an infant. Apparently, everyone does know what goes on behind closed doors. Bernard acts the rebel, exulting in the fact that he's established himself as an individual by breaking the rules.

Bernard then goes on his trip with Lenina. Unfortunately, once he arrives, he finds out from Helmholtz via a phone call that the Director is planning on deporting him (Bernard) to an island. Talk about a buzzkill. Looks like "islands" are a place for misfits and miscreants, so getting sent to one is like getting voted off the island, except backwards. Bernard, far from taking pride in his individuality, freaks out, whimpers for a bit, and finally just runs away from reality by taking *soma*. Remember kids, drugs; aren't the answer.

Meanwhile, the vacation continues, which means a tour through the Reservation. Lenina is horrified by what she sees there. Everyone is dirty, their clothes are tattered, and everything smells bad. On the other hand, Bernard is all about examining "the savages" with scientific zeal. During their tour, the couple watches a ritualistic dance in which a young man is willingly beaten as a means to honor the gods.

Afterwards, they are approached by John, a white man (in contrast to the Native Americans) who has apparently been raised on the Reservation. The story quickly comes out: John's mother came to the Reservation from the "Other Place," got stranded there, and then gave birth to John. Bernard puts two and two together and realizes that John is the son of the Director. Little bulbs labeled "Blackmail opportunity!" start to light up in Bernard's mind.

Meanwhile, John and Lenina are falling deeper and deeper in love with each other. John brings Lenina and Bernard back to his home, and there we meet his mother, Linda, who is like Lenina plus twenty years. Living in squalor for the last twenty years has been absolute torture for her. Bernard and John bond because both have been isolated from their communities—Bernard because he's physically deficient; John

because he's the only white guy around and because his mother sleeps around. A lot. In fact, the only thing John ever had to be happy about as a kid was this book his mother found for him, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. So John just quotes Shakespeare all the time—he feels it is the best way to express himself.

Bernard, whose blackmail wheels are still turning, puts Lenina to bed (she's in a voluntary soma-coma) and makes a phone call to Mustapha Mond, the World Controller we met earlier. They all agree that it would be of "scientific interest" to bring John and Linda back to the civilized world, just to see what happens.

Bernard proceeds to do so. He shows up at the factory, where the Director makes a big fuss by publicly firing him and declaring his deportation to an island. Bernard counters by bringing out John, who's all "Dad!", and Linda, who's all "Remember me?" Keep in mind that, in this world, children are grown in bottles, not born. All concepts of "mother" and "father" are considered dirty and primitive—so outing the Director as a father totally ruins him. He runs from the room covering his ears, which pretty much means Bernard isn't getting deported after all.

Thus begins a grand and tragically misguided social experiment. Linda feels she's suffered enough for one lifetime, so she becomes a full-on *soma* addict and basically absents herself from reality. Everyone realizes this will kill her in a very short amount of time, but no one cares except John, and no one listens to him. Bernard starts parading John around as his own personal discovery, so he becomes a big celebrity, which helps to compensate for the fact that he's short. Now that he's wildly popular, Bernard forgets all about his earlier desires to be an individual.

Helmholtz, on the other hand, bonds with John, and the two share touching moments over the Shakespeare book that John brought with him. Helmholtz finally realizes that it is possible to write intense, passionate stuff.

Meanwhile, John isn't too impressed with the civilized world. He likes all the technology and comforts, but is disgusted by the process of growing humans and the fact that the lower castes exist in batches of dozens of identical clones.

He has the hots for Lenina, but where he comes from, chastity is super-important until marriage. This confuses Lenina, who really wants some sex with John and for the first time in her life is being turned down. When she confronts John (confronts = "Have sex with me! Now!"), he flips out, calls her a whore, and quotes some Shakespeare about how no one should go breaking any virginity knots before the marriage knot has been tied. Goodness knows where things would have gone from there, except John gets a phone call that his mother Linda is dying, so he rushes out.

Linda, still high on *soma*, dies shortly after John arrives at the hospital. He is grief-stricken, but in this new world, everyone has been conditioned to think of death as no big deal. So no one understands his emotion. Angered by this and by the circumstances of his mother's death, and by the fact that Lenina just tried to take his virginity, John freaks out. He finds a group of Deltas waiting to receive their daily *soma* ration and spiritedly chucks the dozens of boxes of drugs out of the window, trying to explain to these drones that they can only be free without it.

This causes a riot. Bernard and Helmholtz Watson arrive on the scene shortly before the police, who pacify the Deltas with *soma* and take the three men (Bernard, Helmholtz, and John) into custody. "Into custody" ends up being "Mustapha Mond's office," where Bernard acts like a complete wuss, rats on his two friends ("It's not my fault! It's their fault!"), and is taken away.

Mustapha reveals that he used to be a chemist but gave up science to serve universal happiness instead. He tells Helmholtz that, actually, being sent to an island is the greatest thing ever, because you get to meet all the people who weren't OK with being brainwashed for most of their lives. Helmholtz agrees with this assessment and leaves, cheerily looking forward to his new life on an island.

This leaves John and Mustapha, who engage in lengthy, didactic arguments about literature, passion, emotion, suffering, and God. John concludes that he doesn't want a life where people are always happy—he wants the freedom to be unhappy, the freedom to suffer.

Despite this great chat, Mustapha won't let John live on an island with Helmholtz—he wants to continue the social experiment. Furious, John runs away to an abandoned lighthouse and sets to flogging and starving himself. Oh, and ritually throwing up to cleanse himself of the horrors of civilization and his desire to have sex with Lenina. This is all going according to plan until word gets out, and John's lighthouse is descended upon by reporters. His spiritual self-denial is video-recorded and made into a popular movie. Everyone's been so desensitized to human suffering that they think it's thrilling to watch a guy beating himself.

Eventually Lenina herself shows up. John hates himself for wanting her in such a sexual way, so he flogs himself and finally her. Of course, there's a big crowd standing around watching because they want to see the movie reenacted. They're so into the scene that they all take part, flogging themselves and each other. It's not too long after that the whole thing turns into an orgy, which makes sense, as violence and sex are closely associated through much of the novel.

The next day, after everyone's left, John wakes up and "remember[s]—everything," which suggests (but doesn't explicitly say) that in the midst of the frenzied mass orgy he had sex with Lenina. Wracked with guilt, John hangs himself from the lighthouse rafters, and we end the novel with the image of John's dead body slowly rotating in the air. We think it's safe to say nobody lives happily-ever-after in this story.