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The Use of Satire in Aldous Huxley's Brave New World

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The Use of Satire in Aldous Huxley's Brave New World

Abstract

Satire is successful when the writer can make an audience believe the idea presented is not only logical, but practical; the most effective satirists can even convince the reader to consider the idea as a reasonable solution to a problem. Often, satire is used to bring to light certain social or moral issues or absurdities, and even more ridiculous resolutions to said problems. While certain satires are appealing in their obvious disgust of humanity, other works are not so blatant in their mockery, presenting more realistic situations. One of the most famous satirists of the 20th century, Aldous Huxley employed such tactics in *Brave New World* and *Ape and Essence*, not to mention other famous novels and essays. In *Brave New World*, Huxley shows how appalling it would be to remain ignorant in happiness, and lack the potential to develop as a frail, error-prone being. The greatest satirical aspect of this book is that the human race, while trying to better itself and gain knowledge, ends up becoming its own adversary and enemy. Because of this successfully ironic portrayal of human nature, Huxley remains one of the most successful 20th century satirists.

“Tomorrow is a satire on today, and shows its weakness.” -Edward Young

Satire is defined as “the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices” (Oxford Dictionary). It is successful when the writer can make an audience believe the idea presented is not only logical, but practical; the most effective satirists can even convince the reader to consider the idea as a reasonable solution to a problem.

Often, satire is used to bring to light certain social or moral issues or absurdities, and even more ridiculous resolutions to said problems. The scorn and derision in many famous satires is what gives them their flair. While certain satires are appealing in their obvious disgust of humanity, other works are not so blatant in their mockery, presenting more realistic situations. One of the most famous satirists of the 20th century, Aldous Huxley employed such tactics in *Brave New World* and *Ape and Essence*, not to mention other famous novels and essays. He is quoted in a letter to George Orwell to say, “Within the next generation I believe that the world's leaders will discover that infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government, than clubs and prisons, and that the lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging them and kicking them into obedience.” In *Brave New World*, Huxley explores this idea of a society controlled by pleasure, ignorance, and conditioning.

It is the year 2540 AD, and there is no war, no hunger, no pain, and “if anything goes wrong, there's soma”, a powerful hallucinogenic drug which has all of the pleasures of modern-day drugs and none of the negatives. People are expected to copulate frequently if not daily, and there are no more pregnancies, humans being grown and then “decanted” from machines. Society is based on a caste system, which ranges from the Epsilons, who are mindless drones, up through Alphas, who are the top of society. Fetuses are exposed to chemicals and drugs while growing, which then stunt their intelligence or growth. After being decanted, the infants are subjected to conditioning through adulthood, which controls many of their thoughts and actions. Art has been replaced with games, feelies (which are like movies, only you feel what is happening), and sex. Society is set up so that solitude is rare, and when it does occur, people are programmed to seek out interaction or soma dreams.

The most striking dialogue scene in the book is when John, a Savage from an “uncultured” Indian tribe, and Mustapha Mond, a World Controller, finally meet and speak with

each other. It is this dialogue which fully portrays the satirical nature of the book. Mond explains how the world is stable and people are happy, even though they're only happy because they don't know about what they can't have. To John, it is a pathetic existence, but Mustapha defends it well, having even sacrificed a free life to serve the happiness of others:

That's the price we have to pay for stability. You've got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art. We've sacrificed the high art.

Trading art for social stability seems ridiculous, but it seems to have worked well for Mond and the rest of that society. It's impossible to tell if the masses would accept it if they knew the choice that had been made for them, because it's outside of their capacity to realize what they're missing. The idea that anyone with the ability to think for himself would choose blind ignorance is ridiculous to the reader. John Stuart Mill once said "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied, than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." Mond is a direct critic of this idea; his world is filled with satisfied fools, and he chooses to keep it that way.

Actual happiness always looks pretty squalid in comparison with the overcompensations for misery. And being contented has none of the glamour of a good fight against misfortune, none of the picturesqueness of a struggle with temptation, or a fatal overthrow by passion or doubt. Happiness is never grand.

Mond is being sarcastic here, trying to prove a point. He believes that there is no value in the acquisition of actual happiness, the fight against the odds to attain it. However the point he is attempting to prove actually seems to become an argument for real happiness. The first time I read this, I wasn't sure what he was trying to say because I didn't understand the sarcasm; however upon closer inspection, the irony becomes apparent. Mond is trying to explain all the benefits of true happiness away as drawbacks, but it is the chance of failure and the struggle which makes happiness mean something.

It isn't only art that's incompatible with happiness; it's also science. Science is dangerous; we have to keep it most carefully chained and muzzled.

The irony and satirical nature of this statement is incredibly frightening. The idea that science must be kept in check so that humanity's happiness prevails seems completely nonsensical. However Mond goes on to explain that while there are thousands of ways certain

processes such as production could be completely automated, it does not benefit society, because it creates too much free time. This seems at first like it would be an excellent result to have, but studies showed that people actually aren't happier with more free time, because it is just more time to fill; there are no struggles or negatives that need to be dealt with, and so they spent the extra hours given to them on soma. Scientific studies are supposed to be something humanity strives for, and the idea that they are obsolete in "modern society" seems ridiculous to the reader.

But he manifests himself in different ways to different men. In premodern times he manifested himself as the being that's described in these books. Now... Well, he manifests himself as an absence; as though he weren't there at all... God isn't compatible with machinery and scientific medicine and universal happiness.

The idea that Huxley's modern society became not only independent of any religion, but that it seems to be stable without one is absurd, but terrifying to the reader. Later, while John feels it is "natural to feel there is a God", Mond explains it away by saying it is a conditioned response. Because there are no pains or old age in society, the controllers of modern times felt there was also no need for religion, which is thought to be a crutch to many. Now that God has been explained away, it is easy to defend his absence in society, and there is no apparent reason to change it.

'The gods are just and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us; the dark and vicious place where thee he got cost him his eyes,' and Edmund answers-you remember, he's wounded, he's dying-'Thou hast spoken right; 'tis true. The wheel has come full circle; I am here.' What about that now? Doesn't there seem to be a God managing things, punishing, rewarding? ...Are you quite sure that the Edmund in that pneumatic chair hasn't been just as heavily punished as the Edmund who's wounded and bleeding to death? The gods are just. Haven't they used his pleasant vices as an instrument to degrade him?

John makes the point of the whole book in this quote. And it is completely true; the humans of the "modern day" have been punished as much if not more than Shakespeare's Edmund, for the modern Edmund never even experienced real happiness or had real challenges. The claims of modern society about having gotten rid of misery are only half true; for it is quite possible for humans to be degraded, even if they do not realize they are at a disadvantage.

Edmund's life has been devalued more than a life without the pleasurable activities afforded in modern society. All the things thought to be beneficial are actually horrible for quality of life.

'You got rid of them. Yes, that's just like you. Getting rid of everything unpleasant instead of learning to put up with it. Whether 'tis better in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them. But you don't do either. Neither suffer nor oppose. You just abolish the slings and arrows. It's too easy....What you need is something with tears for a change. Nothing costs enough here.'

Again, this quote is not so much satirical as that it displays an argument against the ridiculous nature of society. There are no challenges in society, and so people do not need virtues in order to overcome them. There is no suffering, no need to fight; it's too easy, and thus has less worth.

'I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.'

'In fact,' said Mustapha Mond, 'you're claiming the right to be unhappy.'

'All right then,' said the Savage defiantly, 'I'm claiming the right to be unhappy.'

'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 to-morrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.' There was a long silence.

'I claim them all,' said the Savage at last. Mustapha Mond shrugged his shoulders. 'You're welcome,' he said.

This is one of the most dramatic scenes in the book, and surely the most moving character interaction. It embodies the true conflict in *Brave New World*: it is better to have the potential to feel awful than have no say over what you feel. Not only does the risk make the endeavor worth it, but without the risk, the venture is worth little. Suffering the hurts and terrors of the world makes the beauty and joy more exalted, and gives them more value. The right to be unhappy has a value in itself as well. It is during the rough and sad times that we grow, discover our values, and who we can be. Without that ability, humans would remain ignorant and childish,

as shown in the story. Though many live to be happy, the true value in life comes from living through hard times, and persevering so as to become complete, whole human beings.

In *Brave New World*, Huxley shows how appalling it would be to remain ignorant in happiness, and lack the potential to develop as a frail, error-prone being. The greatest satirical aspect of this book is that the human race, while trying to better itself and gain knowledge, ends up becoming its own adversary and enemy. Deliciously sardonic, Huxley portrays the efforts of man as not only futile, but detrimental. Because of this successfully ironic portrayal of human nature, Huxley remains one of the most successful 20th century satirists.