
The Idea Of Human Nature In The Picture Of Dorian Gray And Brave New World

Unequivocally, scientific conditioning cannot completely remove fundamental human nature. Although the conventional society presented in Brave New World increases socio-economic 'stability', it solely represses the potential for human growth. Through satirising the like of H.G. Wells and Aquinas' theory of human nature, Huxley iterates the point that eugenic breeding and other spiritually impoverished solutions cannot cure the ills of civilisation. Alternatively, through the adoption of Thomas Hobbes' 'Leviathan', The Picture of Dorian Gray advocates a more hedonistic and debauched perception of the human condition. It is true that Aristotle once argued that 'all human things are incapable of continuous activity'¹, suggesting that even pleasure cannot be continuous. Therefore, as it were in Dorian's case, the pursuit of pleasure is a futile and otiose venture, of which the consequences are historically fatal. In this sense, Wilde satirises the idiosyncrasies of an antiquated Victorian attitude during the decadent fin de siècle. Perhaps being liberated from a repressive society encourages debauchery, but to be conditioned to seek no emotional pleasure in fundamentals like sex is a step too far. Ultimately, societal conditioning cannot completely remove basic human nature, as both novels discuss the theory that society changes, but innate characteristics stay the same. Maslow's hierarchy of needs contends that we are conditioned to perpetually crave the need for air, space and beauty, or rather Art in Dorian's case. However, both novels address the idea that to become repressed or intemperate of these values, then you will suffer the same fate of either Dorian, or John the Savage.

It is imperative to consider that both novels dramatize the unspoken inequity of a feudal society, by bringing the destitute and the affluent face to face. More particularly, the central theme of Brave New World is dehumanisation. The novel suggests that a number of trends in the modern world are eroding the idea of human beings as unique individuals, each with his or her 'soul', and it depicts what might happen if these trends were to prevail. The middle class oligarchs of society such as advertisers, employers, psychologists and politicians find it convenient to group people into categories by factors like personality types, levels of education and interests. Their agenda turns us from complex individuals into stereotypical 'C2s', 'aspirers' and 'extroverts'. After we have been identified, we can be targeted by advertisements and products which reinforce this limited sense of who we are, and encourage us to continue to walk along the same restricted path, with the theoretical risk that our lives could become predictable or packaged. The worst horror of Brave new World is the D.H.C's piety through his slogan of 'Community. Identity. Stability'; science has given the Controllers the means to reach into people's personalities and adjust them so that they conform to the categories assigned to them, in order to achieve social 'stability'. Perhaps rather interestingly, Aldous Huxley's grandfather, the distinguished scientist T.H. Huxley, contended in his book, 'Methods and Results', that science might one day reveal human beings to be nothing more than conscious machines, our thoughts no more control our actions. Brave New World reflects upon this, ultimately showing us a society where people have been so influenced by the ideas of T.H. Huxley that they have begun to treat each other like 'turning machines' which are fundamentally 'being manipulated' by those superior to them. Conversely, despite the extent of the human conditioning in Brave New World, characters still, as Maslow argues, crave the need for air, space and beauty, and perhaps rather interestingly a significant scene occurs on the roof with the Epsilon elevator

operator. In spite of the Alpha's 'conditioning', the Epsilon begins to longingly cry 'Roof...roof', ultimately revealing underlying feelings of dissatisfaction against the convention. There is a very similar scene in Fritz Lang's 1927 film, 'Metropolis', in which women and children from the underground suddenly glimpse at the riches of beauty, as they notice the upper world through open elevator doors. Perhaps then, although we can be controlled by 'alphas' in society through advertisements and products, but genetically, our characteristics stay the same. Therefore arguing as Matt Ridley did, that Brave new World is rather 'an environmental, not a genetic, hell'2.

Similarly, The Picture of Dorian Gray discusses the wealth and dissidence of a Victorian society entering what Wilde coined, the fin de siècle. Due to bad harvests precipitating an agricultural slump⁶ towards the end of the century, the landed aristocracy maintained a precarious dominance over society, and many shared the determination of Lord Henry's brother to marry a rich American, as new industrialists joined the ruling class. Meanwhile, the agrarian poor streamed into the cities in search for work, but few found work with a substantial wage. Consequently, this caused a great rift between the affluent and the destitute; though more people had the vote, it was not enough to halt political unrest and even fear of revolution. The rift grew to the extent that on Victoria's golden jubilee year, 1887, the country witnessed 'Bloody Sunday', a massed protest in Trafalgar square that was callously dispersed by the police. Like the industrial feudal divisions created during the 'fin de siècle', literature too became divided over its depictions of the capital. The opulent inhabited the west end; the East End, which was once associated with a respectable working class, was now considered as 'Darkest England', as General Booth of the salvation army called it, charged with criminals and a desperate and diseased poor on the brink of insurrection. Despite taking you through nearly every place in London from the A-Z handbook, rather strikingly, Wilde fails to mention the middle class suburbs, department stores and ordinary homes. London in The Picture of Dorian Gray reflects Dorian's own divided nature: he embodies the best and the worst of the society in which he lives. Dorian would commonly be known as a flâneur- a wealthy wanderer who spends his time, as Walter Benjamin puts it, 'botanizing on the asphalt'^{3.4} This also involves being observed, and ultimately, the streets are set on which the flâneur displays himself, or melts into the crowd at will. Crucially, Dorian crosses the borderlands between social extremes. When Dorian speaks of 'this grey, monstrous London of ours, with its myriads of people, its sordid sinners, and its splendid sins', he expresses the ambivalent relationship of British Victorians to their capital. This 'supposed' London subsequently becomes for Dorian, a truer reality than his own world of art and privilege. The 'coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence' provide an intense experience that allows him to forget his own terrors. Conversely, it also reminds the reader that the ugly face of poverty shown here was a reality, one to be especially feared if no social change was forthcoming. Dorian has ultimately been conditioned by the duplicity. His once love for art has been conditioned into a grotesque lust for opium, pain and sex.

By the same token, Huxley's Brave New World and the social background of the 1920's discusses how the mass culture of a modern capitalist society is caricatured in several features of the World state, a world in which recreation, gossip based journalism, religion and careerism occupy people so much so that they never have time to reflect on who is controlling their behaviour and why. In this sense, Huxley's critical view is at least as relevant now as it was when the book was published in 1932, since today journalism is perhaps more intrusive, the cinema more pornographic and drug misuse more widespread. Following the deaths of over 8 million people in the Great War, the 1920's became a decade of widespread disillusionment

and dissidence against the archaic morality of old. Crucially, a significant proportion of the younger generation adopted forms of cynicism and were ready to advocate new forms of behaviour. In scientific circles, 'Modernist' approaches such as Einstein's theory of relativity, Freudian psychology and surrealist art called into question notions and customs which had previously been taken for granted. Consequently, *Brave New World* depicts sexual philanthropy, drug abuse and the replacement of religion with hysteric partying, as part of Huxley's satirical attitude towards his own period, as much as he is predicting the future. Huxley also satirises H.G. Wells's depiction of the human condition, arguing in an interview in 1963 that *Brave New World* was a 'parody of *Men Like Gods*, but gradually it got out of hand.' The resemblance between the two is clear; Wells' *Men like Gods* depicts a utopian society which has been created after five centuries of war. Wells' society survives through eugenic breeding and careful education. Imperatively, Huxley derides the ideals of 1920's 'progressive' thinkers, who proposed, like Wells, that scientific innovation and a shift in social organisation from the individual to the collective would bring about a much greater world for humanity. *Brave new World* contends that this is rather ironically a naïve view, and that such a change might instead bring about uniformity, passivity and spiritual impoverishment. Moreover, Huxley also ridicules the other proposed solution for humanity; he argues that the romantic alternative of rejecting science and embracing nature is an inadequate and a false goal. The greatest example of satire in the novel is encapsulated in chapter 18 (pages 227-8), where the ridicule on journalism supplies a form of comic catharsis after the earnest debate between John and Mond, and, by doing so increasing the impact on the final horror. Subsequently, *Brave New World* was designed to mock and discredit the proposed solutions for the uncontrollable and ever changing human condition.

Lord Henry, the sovereign leader of cynicism, plays the role of a World state scientist in the Fordian convention through his private conditioning of Dorian Gray. From the beginning of the novel, he intends to dominate young Dorian until he has penetrated his mind, and his own ideas return to him on Dorian's lips. While his praises of Dorian's beauty suggest erotic longing, his desire is not rooted in sex, but in scientific despotic power. To achieve this, he relies on the power of words- at first his own to implant a desire in Dorian by hypnotising him into believing that he is already there: 'You have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror'(pg 18). But he is also content to use the words of others to allow the 'mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music' in the book he has given Dorian to work their 'poison'. Similarly to H.G. Wells, Lord Henry adopts a form of eugenics on his protégé, to the extent that towards the end of the novel, he smugly reflects on the 'perfect type' he has made Dorian. However, like the supposed naivety of the 'progressive' scientists in the 1920s, Lord Henry becomes totally unaware of the nefarious consequences of his design. His experiments with Dorian are accompanied by ominous precedents: 'He had begun by vivisectioning himself, as he had ended by vivisectioning others' (pg.47). While there is little information about Lord Henry's past, it seems clear that the degree of belligerence to the self- implied in the word 'vivisection' has left him almost emotionless. Moreover, his dealings in social Darwinism⁵ and his contempt for private philanthropy leads him to rather ironically believe that 'the nineteenth century has gone bankrupt through an over expenditure of sympathy' (Pg. 35), which therefore avers that in future, the weak and feeble should be allowed to die out. Through playing God and eugenically breeding Dorian in his own image, Lord Henry becomes a figure of satire for the likes of Huxley to ridicule and deride in his own vivisection of 'progressive' ideas on humanity and the human condition in 1932.

Ultimately, the question of the human condition maintains, and consequently will maintain, a

blurred line in scientific and psychological circles. In many senses, we are all conditioned in our own distinctive way through genetics and environmental causes to function as unique human beings. Take John for example, despite his antipathy towards the conventions 'conditioning' in London's Hatchery Centre, he too has been environmentally manipulated by the terrible conditions of Malpais. He ultimately associates sex, humiliation and pain with suffering. It is this destructive view that consequently puts further power in his response to the poetry of Shakespeare. Fundamentally, our innate characteristics shall maintain the same, despite the societal changes around us. Granted, science has developed to the extent where we could eugenically breed a superior race of humans by, as Reinhard Heydrich put it, 'evacuating' the 'pockets of evil germ plasm' of our race. But, even within the extreme and perhaps eugenic conditions of Brave New World, characters such as Lenina, who we presume are content with society, contend underlying feelings of dissatisfaction. Her outward depiction of cheeriness, youth and happiness negate her perhaps rebellious choice of Bernard, who is rather, the most inferior member of his caste. Moreover, the conditioning presented in that of The Picture of Dorian Gray, is hedonistic, debauched and dissolute, but the likes of Lady Narborough, break the conditioned norm, by maintaining a faithful marriage instead of participating in the decadent lives of others. Unlike many in the early 20th century, she knows that this new age is merely a sinful and futile game. In this sense, both novels and perhaps two pieces of great fiction encourage the reader to explore the consequences of the 'progressive' plans for the future and the lives we lead.