

Sweetness and Light

Aldous Huxley Suggests That We Read

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Abstract

The scientific reformation of the mid-to-late 19th century replaced religion with science, industrialization and capitalism as the public's new truths and knowledges around which to base their lives. Thus, the groundwork was laid for a society of narrow-minded individuals competing with their peers to accumulate material things to gain a superficial quality of happiness. During this industrial age, modernist author Aldous Huxley suggested reading fictional literature as the best method to counter these competitive mentalities. He argued that through its inherently entertaining form, fiction implicitly offers alternative ways of living that are conducive to more ethical treatment of others. Huxley's argument states that fiction makes us aware of universally shared emotions. This project explains why Huxley proposed literature as an effective counterweight to the influence of individualistic capitalism.

The scientific reformation of the mid-to-late 19th century, which began with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and was amplified and accelerated by Thomas Henry Huxley, put enormous strain on Western society's traditional moral values, and the materialism and individualism steadily coming to replace them horrified Aldous Huxley. As an intellectual and a writer, he, like others of similar professions at the time, viewed it as his responsibility to provide the public with new, alternative values that were better than those being doled out by capitalists. From a place of sincere compassion for his fellow human beings, Huxley spent his time and energy researching and writing about the possible solutions that might prevent society from becoming a colony of unthinking worker ants. To do so, he balanced his scientifically inclined ways of thinking, which he acquired from his legendary grandfather Thomas Henry Huxley, with the aesthetic ideals he inherited from his granduncle, the poet and moralist Matthew Arnold. From this unique historical and social position, Huxley argued that reading fiction counters the narrow-minded and competitive mentalities

promoted by the push towards increased industrialization and capitalistic practices by implicitly showing the reader alternative ways of living that are more conducive to a more ethical treatment of others.

In his essay "The Victory of Art over Humanity," Aldous Huxley suggests that "our leisures are now as highly mechanized as our labors...In the sphere of play no less than in that of work, creation has become the privilege of the few. The common man has always had to suffer from lack of money: he is now condemned to psychological poverty" (Huxley 78). He described these leisures as "ready-made distractions" and "effortless pleasures," lamenting that the masses spent their free time doing things that preoccupied their minds in superficial ways, such as going to the movies, listening to the radio, watching sports, and reading sensational journalism (Huxley 78). In his essay, "Writers and Readers," he describes sensational journalism, or, the "yellow press," as "writing [that] is not even intended to have a positive effect upon the reader—all that doughy, woolly, anodyne writing that exists merely to fill a gap of leisure, to kill time and prevent thought, to deaden and diffuse emotion" (Sawyer 76). Huxley saw this kind of writing as one of the mediums taken advantage of by capitalists in order to rob individuals of not only their creativity in the workplace but in their free time as well. Rhetoric and advertisements were constantly coercing the masses into buying into pastimes such as reading this kind of journalism, or buying products that would distract them from the project of edifying their minds. These efforts succeeded in keeping the masses in their submissive position as workers and consumers. This position, in consequence, kept in place the social structure of competition that discouraged people from communing with one another and finding meaning and significance in their lives as something that stemmed from their "state of mind about external circumstances," rather than from external circumstances themselves.

Huxley believed that time not spent working was extremely valuable because it could be used to improve the mind, to educate it and free it from the influences of those in power who perpetuated the spirit of separateness and competition amongst the masses of individuals. In thinking about what to suggest people should do with their free time instead, Aldous Huxley turned to Matthew Arnold and found inspiration. Arnold, who, most known for his poetry, also wrote essays that expressed societal concerns similar to those that Huxley wrote about in the next century. Writing in different centuries, they both stressed the threat that "vacuous entertainments" posed to people's ability to think freely. In reaction to this worry, Arnold proposed the idea that "art and culture

represented society's most effective means of elevating itself out of meaninglessness and vulgarity" (Sawyer 71). In his book, *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold uses Jonathan Swift's metaphors of a spider and a bee, taken from Swift's work, *The Battle of the Books*, as a means of explaining two different perspectives: an uncultured, and therefore undesirable perspective, and a cultured, and therefore desirable perspective. For the two authors, the spider represented the uncultured mind that chooses to keep to itself in the delusory domain of its web, where it feels self-satisfied and no need to expand its understanding of the world. The bee, on the other hand, represented the cultured mind that travels freely from flower to flower, gathering raw materials from myriad sources that can then be used to make honey and wax. The honey that bees make is sweet, and their wax can be made into candles, which provide light; therefore the bee gives humanity "the two noblest of things, which are sweetness and light," a conclusion of Swift's that Arnold liked very much (Sawyer 71). Thus, sweetness and light were the things that Arnold believed should exist in place of the "meaninglessness and vulgarity" that he saw arising from the "way-of-the-laboratory" mentality that his contemporary Thomas Henry Huxley was helping to establish. To help people make the transition from a spider-like perspective to a bee-like perspective, art and culture, in Arnold's mind, were the flowers that could endlessly serve as resources for the growth of sweetness and light in one's mind.

Implicit in the awareness and acknowledgement of a multitude of sources of truth and beauty—the qualities that engender and characterize a perspective full of sweetness and light—is the awareness and acknowledgement of the multitude of perspectives that exist due to the uniqueness of each individual. If one is open to expanding one's understanding of the world by learning from different sources, specifically, different books, one is most likely open to communing with the minds of others and expanding one's understanding of the world in that way as well. This openness comes from the comprehension that one does not know everything there is to know, that others know things that one doesn't know that might be beneficial to oneself. This mode of being in the world, of understanding it by traveling from flower to flower, source to source, mind to mind, rather than by sitting in one's web of self-satisfaction, is a mode of being that remedies the selfish individualism of capitalism that leads to the isolation of one's mind from the minds of others. The spider-like way of living, of being content to surround oneself in a web of pleasures and comforts acquired through competition against other spiders living remotely and conspiratorially

in their own webs, was the way of living that Arnold proposed could be cured with exposure to art and culture.

Huxley, aware of this theory of Arnold's, echoed it in essays he wrote primarily between 1929 and 1936—between World Wars—as he pondered possible cures for “Ford’s disease” and society’s “vacuous entertainments.” Like Arnold, he explored the potential for art and culture to bring about the positive changes he wished to see occur in his own society. Arnold and Huxley’s common belief was that art and culture could be the mode of transportation that would bring people from flower to flower and thereby enlighten them to the fact that they did not need to see their neighbor as their competition, or see those who were different than them in gender, race, or social or economic status as unworthy sources of wisdom, and that this perspective was actually detrimental to their well-being of themselves and others. The overarching change they believed needed to take place was in the way that people related to one another; more specifically, in the way people related their minds to the minds of others. If industrialization and capitalism were stoking the desire and need for pleasures and comforts and thereby perpetuating a widespread spirit of competition in society, art and culture needed to counteract the effects that these philosophies were having on the way people thought about one another, and as a consequence, treated one another. The forms of art and culture that could decrease the distance people perceived to exist between their own minds and those of others were the ones that needed promoting in order to offset the ostracization that was otherwise occurring between peoples’ minds and leading them to be narrow-minded, apathetic, and to feel justified in their poor treatment of others.

Narrow-mindedness, apathy, and self-righteousness were social qualities and states of mind accompanying the shift from religiously based to scientifically derived moral values, but it was the void created by this shift that allowed artists and intellectuals like Huxley to step in and present society with a different method of determining its moral standards. As an influential writer, Huxley felt a strong responsibility to fulfill duty and took it very seriously. In *Jesting Pilate*, an essay published in 1926, he explains that the artist is important to “fill the vacuum created in the popular mind by the decay of established religion” (Huxley 265). Huxley and other artists saw this “vacuum” as the opportune space in which they could attempt to guide society in a direction morally superior to the one in which science and capitalistic modes of thought were leading it. Yes, religion was no longer an adequate source of truth, but the fact that it was torn

down meant that something else could be built up in its place. According to Huxley, the wrong kinds of things were beginning to fill this vacuum: "The people of the West no longer share a literature and a system to ancient wisdom. All that they now have in common is science and information. Now, science is knowledge, not wisdom; deals with quantities, not with the qualities of which we are immediately aware. In as far as we are enjoying and suffering beings, its words seem to be mostly irrelevant and beside the point" (Sawyer 50). Darwin's scientific method, or, the "way of the laboratory," as inappropriately applied to society, led people to believe that hoarding quantities of money and material goods within the confines of their webs was the ultimate goal of life, not the qualitative search for greater knowledge and greater truth.

Therefore, quality, not quantity, was what Huxley believed should be of primary concern when deciding what to build up in the space created by the most recent scientific reformation—the quantitative approach to understanding and interpreting the world was identified by artists and intellectuals like Huxley as an insufficient means of creating a substantial, qualitative way of life for people. The quality that was lacking in the kind of quantitative life that capitalism propagated, by way of exploiting new scientific discoveries, was the quality and satisfaction gained by caring for others. Cognizance of our existence as members of the same species who are bonded by our existence on a single, fundamental plane, who are not superior or inferior to other humans or creatures, should inherently be accompanied by the desire to treat each other as we would treat ourselves—hopefully, with love and kindness. Treating oneself and others with love and kindness, according to Huxley and other like-minded intellectuals, were the means by which one could extract quality from life. If one treats oneself with love and kindness, one will most likely feel happy and fulfilled. If one treats others with love and kindness, one will be open to the greater knowledge and greater truth that others can offer oneself. In the unending pursuit of greater knowledge and greater truth that is life, we attribute a sense of quality and satisfaction to each step of improvement we make towards that end. We must remember the universal equality of all beings so that we will treat ourselves and each other well, and so that we will not self-impose an end to our individual pursuits of greater knowledge and greater truth.

How can people be made conscious of the bonds that connect us by rendering us equal to one another so that more people can live this qualitative kind of life? This was the question that Huxley and his contemporaries sought to find answers to in the midst of the World Wars. "True to his Arnold side, Aldous

believed that the artist more than the philosopher or scientist could lead civilization forward. Artists transcend the mono-dimensionality of the strictly logical or intellectual. They have the potential to get beyond the abstractions implicit to philosophy. And because they experience more widely they can also present more deeply to an audience" (Sawyer 54). As artists, Huxley and his contemporaries possessed the skills needed to unveil for society what the essence of our human feelings teaches us about the bonds that connect us. These skills were ones that allowed them to convey what they already knew—that there are common bonds that connect us—in such a way that a wide audience could understand this knowledge. Huxley, along with writers such as James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust who came to be a part of the Modernist movement, possessed these skills and this knowledge. They did not, however, necessarily believe that people could be taught that these bonds exist; they believed that the best way to convey them was by giving people the tools they needed to uncover the fact of their existence for themselves.

The tools that Huxley and other modernists wanted to give to society for this purpose were the books and essays they were writing that dealt implicitly with their understanding of our bonded existence by conveying the inner emotions of fictional characters. "Without an absolute truth or a shared absolute morality, many artists and writers came to believe that the only truths we can know for certain are those truths we experience in personal consciousness" (Sawyer 44). The most important truth that artists and writers wanted to show to their readers was the truth of our fundamental equality—the truth that, if more widely accepted, would improve social, national, and even global relations.

The way they believed this truth could best be shown was through fiction that makes known to readers that, as members of the human species, our inner feelings are alike in some fundamental way; therefore, "the modernists explored their interior lives and presented the interior lives of their characters and the pathology of their private world" (Sawyer 44) They expose the inner thoughts and feelings of their fictional characters in ways that allow readers to identify those thoughts and feelings with ones they themselves have felt. In this way, we as readers are shown parts of ourselves as existing in people other than ourselves. Specifically, we are shown that the emotional part of ourselves that experiences feelings such as anger, sadness, jealousy, joy, love, loneliness, grief, fear, etc., also exists in other people. Reading therefore causes the reader to not only know, but experience the essence of our human feelings, that is, the fact

that we all experience them. This experience reinstates the bond between the reader and the other, who may be a fictional character, on the basis that the two of them are fundamentally equal due to the fundamental similarity of our emotions. The ability for fiction to incite awareness of this bond in readers, is the reason why Huxley and other modernists stood behind literature a solution to the increasing distance being wedged between people's minds by the increasing spirit of capitalistic competition. If people know they are fundamentally equal, their minds will change so that they will think of and treat each other as such.

The theory that reading can cause so much of an impression on people's minds so as to alter it is one that has long been contemplated, and even feared. Around the mid-18th century, authors began to describe life more realistically, as opposed to fantastically, and the possibility for books to alter people's minds became more of a concern. Samuel Johnson discusses the potentiality for fiction to foster cognitive change in issue No. 4 of the "Rambler," a twice-weekly periodical essay he sustained between 1750 and 1752. He writes that realistic fiction "may perhaps be made of greater use than the solemnities of professed morality, and convey the knowledge of vice and virtue with more efficacy than axioms and definitions." Here Johnson highlights one of the most important powers attributed to literature: its ability to influence people using the highly effective mode of implicit, rather than explicit, instruction. Fiction is so extraordinarily influential because its form allows people to be much more receptive to it; we will be more receptive to captivating stories about other people than we would be to a person or text that preaches to us outright on a given topic, especially morality. Reading fiction comes across to the reader as a form of entertainment, but while it is an enjoyable act, it is always presenting the reader with new experiences from which life lessons can be learned and insights can be gained that might lead one to modify one's own ways of thinking and acting.

Johnson explains this phenomenon in the same issue of *The Rambler*: "When an adventurer is leveled with the rest of the world, and acts in such scenes of the universal drama, as may be the lot of any other man, young spectators fix their eyes upon him with closer attention, and hope by observing his behavior and successes to regulate their own practices, when they shall be engaged in the like part" (Johnson 268g). Because fiction describes such "scenes of the universal drama," scenes that capture "universal" situations and feelings to which readers can easily relate and subsequently apply to their own lives, Johnson felt

compelled to expound upon his concerns for the kinds of scenes authors present to society. He continues: "If the power of example is so great, as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will, care ought to be taken that, when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited" (Johnson 2689). He believed that readers would "regulate their own practices" in imitation of the practices of realistic characters that they found in the fiction to be usefully applicable to their own lives, therefore the characters presented should exhibit practices that would be beneficial for people to practice in reality, in society.

Thus, while expressing his concerns regarding the content of the material assimilated by readers of fiction, Johnson simultaneously promotes the idea of fiction as a medium that could be used to benefit the individual and society. Fiction can be a means to that end, he believed, if it describes the kinds of scenes and practices that would generate the kinds of cognitive changes in readers that will make them better people and better members of society. In the same essay in *The Rambler*, No. 4, Johnson gives examples of some of the life skills that fiction can teach readers, stating that "the purpose of these writings is surely not only to show mankind, but to provide that they may be seen hereafter with less hazard; to teach the means of avoiding the snares which are laid by the Treachery for Innocence, without infusing any wish for that superiority with which the betrayer flatters his vanity; to give the power of counteracting fraud, without the temptation to practice it; to initiate youth by mock encounters in the art of necessary defense, and to increase prudence without impairing virtue" (Johnson 2698-90). The skills that Johnson lists here revolve around the first that he mentions and sets off with a semicolon to encapsulate the rest: to see mankind with "less hazard," or, to see others more carefully, to see them not as disposable or dismissible, but as sources of sweetness and light. The skill of being able to see others in this way is one that Johnson believed could be acquired through the act of reading fiction, and one that if more people possessed, would lead to social improvement.

Johnson, who was said to be "instructor of mankind in their greatest and most important concerns," used *The Rambler* as a platform from which he could promote things such as reading fiction for the benefit of society (Johnson 2688). Modernists also believed in the transformative powers of fiction and desired to employ their own forms of writing towards the end of producing similar social benefits. What set Huxley and other modernists apart from Johnson was their

historical situation, which, given the recent scientific reformation and subsequent pervasiveness of capitalistic motivations, they perceived as in dire need of aid. In the eyes of these artists, the skill of seeing others with “less hazard,” identified by Johnson in 1750, was one that, more importantly than ever, their readers needed to learn. They believed that learning it could make a positive change in society because it would cause people to not only see others as sources of sweetness and light but to also value and care for them as such. For this reason, modernists infused their writings with their own knowledge of the sweetness and light that others possess, intending for the implicit evidence supporting this knowledge to be assimilated by their readers and applied to the way they thought about themselves and others. Then, instead of seeing their neighbor as an enemy competitor in the race toward material and economic success, they might see him or her as a person possessing unique and interesting ideas that could, like a character in a book, teach them something new and valuable.

Instruction in the way of seeing others with less hazard involves, on the part of the author, accomplishing the task of getting readers to experience a perspective that is different from their own but at the same time is comprehensible and in some way relatable. The communication of emotions accomplishes this task. If readers are pulled into the fictional life of a character, they experience a perspective different from their own. However, they simultaneously experience the emotions of that character, emotions with which they themselves are very familiar. This creates a bond, as mentioned earlier, between the reader and the character. This bond gives us the knowledge that we all view things in the same way that we all feel things—that is, differently—a conception that lends itself to making us aware of our fundamentally equal status as creatures who “view” and “feel.”

When we imagine ourselves in the shoes of a fictional character, we stop being ourselves and temporarily experience the world from a completely different perspective. The bond that has been created by the awareness of our fundamental equality as “viewing” and “feeling” creatures provides a liminal space in which we as readers can practice revising our mistaken belief in the omniscience of our minds—a belief we often fall into. In addition, we practice reconciling our minds with the new ways of thinking, speaking, and doing that we come into contact with when we are imagining life from the perspective of a character. These mental exercises, subtly induced by the act of reading, can lead

people to change their perspective or acquire life skills such as those outlined by Johnson.

It was Huxley's belief that by reading "good" books, or engaging with "good" art, people would change their perspectives to see each other with less hazard, to see each other as fundamentally equal. "'Great books can modify the character of those who read them,' wrote Huxley, and that is their best purpose: to take advantage of what the French philosopher, Jules de Gaultier, has said is one of the essential faculties of the human being—the power granted to man to conceive of himself as other than he is" (Sawyer 72). If one can imagine oneself as someone or something other than what oneself is, one has successfully ventured out of the exclusive safety of one's web to take in the sweetness and light offered by others, and in so doing, offered one's own sweetness and light to others. Huxley was sure that this model of living, as bees, not spiders, would be much more conducive to the well being of the individual and to that of society, and that reading fiction was the way that peoples' ways of life could be transformed from spider-like to bee-like.

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