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Jessica Eylem

The Women of *Brave New World*: Aldous Huxley and the Gendered Agenda of Eugenics

Between the World Wars, the concept of eugenics was continuously debated. It started with the ideas surrounding Social Darwinism. Eugenics followers used Social Darwinism along with their own beliefs to create different definitions for those they deemed “unfit” for society. Joanne Woiak states that, “as recent international comparative scholarship has illustrated, eugenics took on many different forms depending on what theories of heredity, “unfit” groups, and social reforms were emphasized in specific contexts. Even within any one country, several variants of eugenics usually co-existed or even competed” (Woiak 110). This has created a long history surrounding the eugenics movement, with it becoming increasingly discussed around the second world war as Hitler released *Mein Kampf* in 1924. The discussion of eugenics thus became popular, as it began to become associated with fear. The ideas began circulating into novels with the world’s fate increasingly unknown with a second world war brewing. One of these such novels was *Brave New World*, written by Aldous Huxley. Huxley grew up with his father firmly believing in the ideology of Social Darwinism and his brother leading one of the pro-eugenics movements in his home country of Britain. These ideas were then established into his novel, as the circle he was a part of was “drawn to eugenics” and believed in its ability to improve the human race (Woiak 110). Through his novel, we can see how eugenics can be discussed within a dystopian novel and a new form of the concept that began to look at gender and how it could be improved.

*Brave New World*, written by Huxley in 1931, is a futuristic dystopian novel where humans are bred through test tubes. Humans are genetically modified to keep those with valued characteristics at the top of society, while those below are manipulated into thinking they are doing their service for the overall running of the Fordian state. Huxley’s novel uses the idea of

eugenics as a basis for what this new world lives by. On the surface, he is taking the definition of eugenics and the idea that it involves mostly science and technology fairly directly, but below this he uses the novel to also envision how eugenics could be expanded well beyond just race. In this world, women are slowly being bred out of society, as the qualities they possess are becoming less and less appreciated. Eugenics and the idea of what makes a person valuable becomes a theme of *Brave New World*, as women are consistently under-appreciated and stripped of what makes them an asset to our world. This is seen as the women of the novel struggle to find their place without disrupting the new roles they have been given, especially since they have been conditioned to fear going against anything asked of them. Huxley uses this a way of beginning to explore how gender could fit into the ideas surrounding eugenics. He destroys the female body and throughout the continuation of his novel, feminine characteristics are destroyed and perceived as unnecessary.

There has been discussion on how Huxley explores gender equality in *Brave New World*. Without analyzing the novel and its contents, it could be seen as providing the same opportunities to both genders. On the other hand, through a feminist viewing, scholars have identified various areas in the novel which promote men as being vastly superior. For example, Deanna Madden concludes that in *Brave New World* there is a “subtle message that women are inherently inferior: less intelligent, less capable of seeing beyond their own immediate physical comforts, [and] less likely to make heroic gesture or defy status quo” (Madden 291). Women are treated much worse than the men of the novel and are not given the chance to become anything more, as society has decided that they are inferior and keeps them as such through science. This is seen, by some, as Huxley using a satirical approach to eugenics to promote more gender equality in the world. I argue instead that Huxley uses this novel as a means of expressing a new

view towards the gendered agenda that eugenics could possess. Through his novel, we see a new vision of a world where eugenics has expanded beyond just the scientific use of improving the quality of life, but also to get rid of women. They have been scared into thinking that they must act in a certain way or their life is not of value. Huxley's novel affirms an idea that some of the dominant intellectual minds considered women as a group that could be possibly be phased out with eugenics or even used as a method of scaring women into a certain constraint.

It is important to note that there has been debate on whether Huxley believed in more than just improving the health of our world, which has become increasingly so with the new information coming out on his own private writings. It has come out in one of his personal letters that he believed, "about 99.5% of the entire population of the planet [was] stupid and philistine" (Woiak 105). His nonfiction writings and letters add to a view that he presumed that eugenics could be used as more than just a means to improve hereditary qualities. With this new information coming out, it can be concluded that in some ways, Huxley used *Brave New World* as a way to introduce a viewpoint that the female gender was "unfit" for society, especially the qualities that are normally associated with them. His novel is riddled with eugenic ideologies of improving certain qualities of life, but at the same time expands this to begin the process of removing the female body. It gives a look into how Huxley saw eugenics as a possibility to include not just race but also gender. By analyzing the female characters and the language used to discuss unwanted qualities of life, Huxley's own viewpoint of what eugenics could entail becomes clear.

*Brave New World* begins with the Director leading a group of young men through what is considered the genetically modified process of human breeding through test tubes. The first chapter states that only men are learning this process, as women are not allowed to be in the part

of society that controls the overall running of the Fordian state. Here is where some of the ideas of the society begin to be articulated: the most important being men are at the top.

Throughout the novel, we never meet a woman who holds a position higher than working in the Fertilizing Room. They are not allowed to make any important decisions for the state; which is heightened by the fact that we only learn about this state through male characters. This continues throughout the next few chapters as the young men run into Mustapha Mond, who is the resident Controller for Western Europe. His conversation with the young men gives a sense of the discussion the novel is having specifically in relation to gender and eugenics. Mond starts the descriptions of what qualities are no longer advocated for in the Fordian state, giving clear indication that all of these are normally associated with women. He starts by saying that he wants the young men to try and imagine what it was like to have a mother and a home. This is continued with him saying how these were “reeking with emotion. What suffocating intimacies, what dangerous, insane...Manically, the mother brooded over her children (*her* children) ...brooded over them like a cat over kittens” (Huxley 37). Mond is exposing the view that more stereotypically feminine qualities were “unfit” and unwanted in this new society. The Fordian state no longer wants families, mothers, monogamy, or even emotion. The state wants social stability which can only be achieved by getting rid of emotion and many qualities normally associated with women. Women thus feel the need to find a way to stay wanted in the new society that Huxley has created for them, where women are suddenly becoming the new quality trying to be modified out which has been done through conditioning of fear.

Now that ample information has been given surrounding the inter war period, Huxley himself, and how the novel positions itself within the first few chapters, we must view how this expands into the rest of the novel: more specifically with women. *Brave New World* is an

extension of Huxley's view that there could be a gendered agenda surrounding eugenics. Where this becomes clear is with the only three women who are given any major speaking roles in the novel. These women are Fanny, Lenina, and Linda. Through them, we can see the different approaches women took to survive in the world they were living in. All of them are manipulated into believing that what they have been taught their entire lives is the only way to live. They are expected not to speak out of place or resist anything they are told to do because if they do they will be removed. Through this manipulation we can begin to see what depriving women of freedom and emotion can lead to. They will do anything they can to survive, even if this means adopting characteristics that are normally associated with men. Each female character also can be seen as corresponding with three more generic stereotypes of women during the inter war period. This begins a discussion on what these stereotypes reveal about the historical context of the time and where eugenics could have been heading, especially in a more gendered agenda. Women were expected to survive by any means possible; epitomized through these three characters because there was always a fear that they would be the next to be deemed "unfit".

To start off, Fanny is a prime example of one of these such women who realizes the place she needs to occupy in order to stay alive. She mirrors women during the inter war period who would stay home because they felt it was their duty to do so and were scared to do any different. While she stays home and does as the Fordian society expects her too, she understands the implications of what is going on and lack of freedom women have. Fanny understands that in order to survive, she must remain in the constraints placed upon her and not question anything. As she seems to be aware of everything happening, she becomes the smartest of all the women since she knows that there is still worse to come if she does not comply. In the novel itself, she is presented as a close friend of Lenina, who plays a much larger role in the overall plot. Fanny

questions many of Lenina's actions, as they go against what the state has told them to follow. This starts at the beginning of the novel when Lenina is telling Fanny that she is planning on going on a date with a man she has been seeing for a few months. Monogamy is rejected in this society, leading to Fanny openly object saying, "I really do think you ought to be careful. It's such a horribly bad form to go on and on like this with one man...And you know how strongly the D.H.C. objects to anything intense or long-drawn" (Huxley 41). She understands the rules that have been set forth for women and is trying to save Lenina from doing something that could result in her being sent away (or modified out of society). She intensifies this argument even more by adding on that "one's got to make an effort...one's got to play the game" (Huxley 43). Fanny understands what it means to adhere to societal norms. Huxley uses her as an example of how women should act if a more gendered approach to eugenics were to occur. Fanny does not want any of her friends to disrupt their place in society because she knows what will happen if they do. She becomes a mirror for a number of women during the inter war period because she knows that by not going against the Fordian state, she is safe from being deemed "unfit" and sterilized. Women during the inter war period were worried this may happen to them, especially with feminine characteristics openly discouraged, as Hitler's power began increasing more and more. Huxley positions Fanny into the novel as an example of women that would not be phased out with a more gendered approach to eugenics. If women did everything that was asked of them, they would be safe.

Lenina is the female character of the novel that many view as showing the gender equality that Huxley introduces, but this is merely on the surface level. She questions what the Fordian state requires of her, while still acknowledging how scared she is to go against what she has been manipulated into thinking. She understands what she needs to do to appear as someone

who follows blindly. Lenina understands she must keep a certain image to maintain her place in. She knows that to appear normal, she must look the part and partake in the sexual prowess of the state. I argue that while she does this, her inner thoughts reveal her desire to revolt against what is wanted of her. She questions why she has to date multiple men and why she must hide her desires for the Savage (whom appears later in the novel). She does understand why she must repress her emotions, while at the same time fearing what will happen if she acts on anything. This is why she talks everything out with Fanny. Fanny becomes her conscience for understanding what she has to do in order to maintain in the Fordian state. Through her we can see what a gendered agenda of eugenics would do to women. She is at a cross roads the entire novel to truly understand who she is.

This does not stop her inner thoughts and her want to go against everything she has been taught. For example, she finds herself beginning to have feelings for the Savage after he is brought back to the Fordian state with her and Bernard. These desires go against what the society has taught her to believe, as she finds herself wanting to be with just him and no one else. Along with this, he is a part of a different social rank than her, meaning she is forbidden from pursuing anything with him. Her thoughts scare her, so she decides to seduce the Savage because she thinks that this is the only way she can give in to her true desires and thus get rid of them. She believes that becoming the sexual aggressor is the only way she can stop the thoughts she is having. In this way, she then puts herself into a more stereotypically male-gendered space of being lecherous and making her intentions towards the Savage well known. She is willing to do anything to stop the thoughts that she knows are wrong.

While the Fordian state does want women to be just as promiscuous as men (to seemingly promote gender equality), women are still supposed to adhere to what the men want and wait for

them to make the first move. They are still required to appear as wholesome pillars of virtue. Lenina is supposed to wait for the Savage to make a move instead of herself, but she feels her desires and emotions are more important than what the state wants. This is reinforced when she decides to ask out Bernard, even though men normally do the asking out and Bernard is notoriously someone stays away from. She talks to him and gets to know him, even when characters like Fanny tell her not to. Bernard says himself that Lenina is “Wretched, in a word, because she had behaved as any healthy and virtuous English girl ought to behave and not in some other, abnormal, extraordinary way” simply both by talking to him and at the same time using him as a way to date more than one person (Huxley 64). This reinforces Lenina as the female character who Huxley places as one whom would be discouraged with the gendered agenda of eugenics. Lenina does not know what to do and finds herself constantly questioning her actions. No one else seems to like Bernard, yet Lenina takes it upon herself to get to know him and sleep with him. After a while though, she begins to question why she is dating him because of how unique and different he is from everyone else; showing how she still judges people based on how she was conditioned too. Lenina thus mirrors women during the inter war period who would do everything they could to resist their desires to go against the roles placed upon them, knowing that if they were to revolt their lives would be put in danger. Lenina understands that she must play the game in order to save herself from being removed but at the same time wonders if it is what she truly wants.

Linda is the female character in *Brave New World* that represents the extent of what manipulation can do to a person's psyche, especially a gendered one. When we first are introduced to her, we learn that she had once been a part of the Fordian state but got lost on vacation. Once this happened, she was taken in by the inhabitants of the land she was visiting. There, she gives

birth to a child, whom we later learn is the Savage (which is the same character that Lenina eventually develops feelings for). All Linda had ever known was Fordian values, so she begins to hate herself once she has a child and realizes she does not epitomize what is wanted anymore. With her we can see how once you presented any of the qualities deemed “unfit” for society, you were immediately ostracized. She represents what society during the interwar period (and the novel) deemed “unfit”, which is referent from the descriptions given about her. For example, at one point it is said “Linda...nobody had the smallest desire to see Linda. To say one was a mother—that was past a joke; it was an obscenity...Finally—and this was by far the strongest reason for people’s not wanting to see poor Linda—was her appearance. Fat; having lost youth; with bad teeth, and a blotched complexion, and that figure...” (Huxley 153). Linda is undesirable. Compared back with what is said towards the beginning of the novel, here is where we can begin to see more into Huxley’s possible viewpoint, as it is stated multiple times that a motherly figure was not wanted. Linda is the beginning to how a gendered agenda would be applied to eugenics. As she is emotional, her physique is not up to beauty standards, and she behaves in a way that draws negative attention to herself. She would be one of the first to go under this new outlook. No one wants to be around her because she is the woman that does not fit into the Fordian state. She is included, by Huxley, as an example of everything that could be used as a way of identifying women who could be slowly etched out. This is even more evident as the parallels between her and people deemed unfit during the interwar period are uncanny. She essentially acts as a mental patient, even for a brief while in the novel not being allowed to move from the hospital. As mental patients were some of the first to be sterilized, she becomes an indication of sorts of women that would be exterminated under a new gendered approach

towards eugenics, which is furthered by the fact that out of the three major women of the novel, she is the only one who dies.

These three women show how underappreciated women and their feminine characteristics were during the interwar period. Through the style used to describe women and feminine characteristics we can begin to see the manipulation used to force these women into the roles that they occupied. This was enforced through tactics of fear and conditioning that lead these women to believe that they were playing a part in the Fordian state just like everyone else. What can be concluded is the new extension of the concept of eugenics that Huxley begins to address and explore within the constraints of this novel. If gender were to be slowly engulfed into the concept of eugenics, women would have to learn a new way of adhering to what was asked of them. With *Brave New World*, we can see how the two women that listened to what was required of them did not die, while the one who exemplified everything hated by the state did. Expanding a view of eugenics in comparison with dystopian novels can begin to expose patterns of women losing more and more of their rights. As Huxley was a front-runner of dystopian literature during the interwar period, his novel provides a glimpse into what a world with a more gendered approach to eugenics could have looked like; expanding the definition on what the concept means and ways it could have been used, especially through fear.

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