

ALDOUS HUXLEY

A biographical essay by
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Lineage

Aldous Huxley was born in Godalming, Surrey, England in 1894. He was the third son of the writer and school master Leonard Huxley, and his first wife, Julia Arnold, who founded Prior's Field School. Julia was the niece of poet and critic Matthew Arnold. Huxley was furthermore the grandson of Thomas Henry Huxley, the zoologist, naturalist and a vocal advocate of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. His older brother Julian became a prominent biologist and university lecturer. Huxley's education began in his father's botanical laboratory, after which he enrolled at Hillside School near Godalming. He was taught there by his own mother for several years until she became terminally ill. She passed away in 1911 when he was 14.

Literary Beginnings

At age 19, Huxley earned a scholarship to Balliol College at Oxford University, where he studied English literature, reading—it is reported—with the aid of a magnifying glass and eye drops that dilated his pupils. In January 1926, he volunteered to join the British Army in the Great War, but was rejected on health grounds, being half-blind in one eye. In June of same year at age 22, he graduated BA with First Class honors. His brother Julian wrote: "I believe his blindness was a blessing in disguise. For one thing, it put an end to the idea of taking up medicine as a career. His uniqueness lay in his universalism. He was able to take knowledge for his province."

Following his years at Balliol, from April to July of 1917, he was in charge of ordering supplies at the Air Ministry. He taught French for a year at Eton, where Eric Blair (who was to take the pen name George Orwell) was one of his pupils. He was mainly remembered as being an incompetent school master unable to keep order in class—in spite of his brilliant command of language.

Clearly important to his literary aspirations was the time during WW I that he spent at Garsington Manor near Oxford, the home of socialite Lady Ottoline Morrell, a gathering place for intellectuals and writers such as Virginia Woolf, Bertrand Russell, T.S. Eliot, and D.H. Lawrence. With his encyclopedic knowledge, coupled

with his wit and skill as a conversationalist, it was with the Bloomsbury Set at Garsington that Huxley established his reputation as a young man of intellectual prowess.

Leveraging his talents, Huxley contributed articles to such periodicals as *The Athenaeum*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Vogue*. He published several collections of poetry as well. The publication of his novel *Chrome Yellow* in 1921, a parody of the intelligentsia and experiences at Garsington, established Huxley as an important writer and sold well enough to allow him to pursue a literary career. While travelling about Europe with his family for the next several years, living in Italy for part of the time, he produced the commercially successful novels *Antic Hay* (1923), *Those Barren Leaves* (1925) and *Point Counter Point* (1928) which, like *Chrome*, were satires of contemporary society and conventional morality.

In late 1932, after purchasing a villa in the south of France, he began work on what is widely considered to be one of the Western canon's most important novels of the 20th century.

Marital Life

Married in 1919 at age 25 to MARIA NYS, a Belgian whom he met at Garsington, Oxfordshire and lived with for 36 years until her death in 1955. They had one child, Matthew Huxley (b.1920, d.2005) who had a career as a writer, anthropologist, and prominent epidemiologist.

Married again in 1956 at age 62 to LAURA ARCHERA (1911 – 2007)who was 45. In 1968 (five years after Huxley's death), she would write a biography of their life together titled , *This Timeless Moment*.

Life in the United States

In 1937, 43-year-old Huxley moved to Los Angeles with his wife Maria and son, living mainly in southern California, until his death in 1963. All totaled he spent 26 years in the States. He also lived for a time in Taos, New Mexico, a secondary setting in this evening's novel.

During his stay in LA, he earned a substantial income as a Hollywood screenwriter—an income he used in part, reportedly, to transport Jewish writers and artist refugees from Hitler's Germany to the US.

It was in 1938 that his friend Anita Loos, a novelist and screenwriter, put him in touch with MGM who hired Huxley as a screen writer for *Madame Curie*. Huxley received screen credit for *Pride and Prejudice* (1940) and was paid for his work on a number of other films, including *Jane Eyre* (1944). Huxley was subsequently

commissioned by Walt Disney in 1945 to write a script based on *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*. The script was not used, however.

Beginning in 1939 and continuing until his death, Huxley had an extensive association with the Vedanta Society of Southern California, founded and headed by swami Prabhavananda. Together with Gerald Heard* and other followers, he was initiated by the Swami and was taught spiritual medication. In 1944 Huxley wrote the introduction to the *Bhagavad Gita*, published by the Vedanta Society. All in all, from 1941 until 1960 Huxley contributed numerous articles for the Society's principal publication, *Vedanta and the West*. Huxley was close friend of Jiddu Krishnamurti, a world famous Indian mystic, prophet, and spiritual leader.

When Huxley turned 59 in 1953, he and his wife Maria applied for United States citizenship and 'presented themselves' for examination. When Huxley stated his objection to bear arms for the defense of the US and, furthermore, would not state that his objections were based on 'religious grounds'—the only excuse allowed under the McCarran Act, the presiding judge adjourned the proceedings. Huxley withdrew his application. Nevertheless, he remained in the US.

Later, at age 64 while still in the US in 1958, he outlined several of his global concerns in a televised interview with journalist Mike Wallace: namely, the difficulties and dangers of world over-population, the tendency toward hierarchical social organization, the importance of evaluating the use of technology in mass societies susceptible to shallow persuasion, the tendency to promote politicians to a naïve public as trustworthy leaders.

Huxley passed from this life to the next on 22 November, in Los Angeles in 1963 at age 69, succumbing to laryngeal cancer. Much is made of the fact, by some, that his death was overshadowed by the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy on the same day.

By the end of his life, Huxley was widely acknowledged as one of the pre-eminent intellectuals of his time. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in seven different years. Huxley's memorial service took place in London in December 1963 which was officiated by his older brother Julian, and on 27 October 1971 his ashes were interred in the family grave at Watts Cemetery in Compton, Guilford, Surrey, England.

* Gerald Heard: English writer, resident in the US beginning in 1937. He wrote about mystical religion and science for the BBC before coming to the States with the Huxleys. His ideas greatly influenced Huxley and his study of Eastern religion.

Published Works

11 Novels / **6** Short Story Collections/ **9** Poetry Anthologies / **23** Essay Collections / **8** Screenplays / **3** Travel Books / **5** Plays / **48** Articles for *Vendanta & the West*

A Sampling of Titles

Ape and Essence / Mortal Coils / Words & Their Meanings / Science, Liberty and Peace / The Doors of Perception / The Human Situation / Religion & Time / God in the World / Reflections on Progress / Who Are We / Knowledge & Understanding / Symbol & Immediate Experience / Pacifism and Philosophy / The Art of Seeing / The Politics of Ecology