A SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO HUXLEY'S "BRAVE NEW WORLD" VIA LACAN

Clementina Alexandra MIHAILESCU
"Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu

Abstract : The paper expands upon Huxley's novel "Brave New World" approached via Lacan's socio-psychological model with a view to underlining how the novelist's irony can coexist with his need for warmth, for human feelings, for human understanding. Lacan's three registers of human reality will be closely analyzed in relation to Huxley's characters in order to prove their loss of identity within an artificially constructed social and political environment.

Keywords: Huxley, Lacan, human understanding, irony, register, the imaginary, the symbolic.

Aldous Huxley lived 71 years, a rather long period of time which enabled him to psychologically assimilate and to artistically render the horrors of the two world wars. "Brave New World" is an unpoetic presentation of a society which closely resembles the communist regime in Eastern Europe countries. It is a warning against any type of totalitarian society because the idea of accomplishing the perfect state, perfect life or perfect human being can almost never come true.

Kelly's concept of "searching for understanding" and Vianu's idea that reading Huxley is "an alchemy of understanding" turned me into a keen but sympathetic reader of Huxley's novel "Brave New World" in order to discover how the novelist's irony – his main literary device – coexists with his "need for warmth, for human feeling" (Vianu, 12), for human understanding.

As Kelly's and Vianu's approaches are based on understanding people, (in our case, Huxley's characters), one alternative could be to get both imaginatively and psychologically engaged in analysing the characters' human behavior even if most of them are techno-made products of the 25th century. The action is mainly focused on the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre where everything and everybody is so developed that even the power of thinking is no longer needed. Planning, work division, mechanical thinking and gesturing all suggest an awesome inner emptiness. People resemble sophisticated robots, artificially created in bottles, "conditioned" for a precise type of life or work. Their "planned" happiness arises from a ration of a drug called "soma" per day. This drug assures them the so-called journeys into "eternity" where dreams seem to come true. Standardization still allows for classes of beings, namely Alpha, Beta, Delta and Epsilon, with the Alphas on top, doing the skilled work and being well off, while the Epsilons are the lowest in degree, queuing for their daily ratio of "soma".

Since "understanding" has been approached by Kelly in terms of "going to the place and keeping it under strict scrutiny" (in Miller, 207), our approach implies a close look at that society in order to get a fuller sense of the variety of experiences, directions or deviations, existing in such a standardized environment.

Before embarking on the psychological approach meant to facilitate our understanding of both the status of standardized egos and of possible deviations from them, the plot of the novel will be shortly dealt with. The plot mainly involves the Alphas. Lenina, a young healthy Alpha girl, totally deprived of moral virtues has as many love affairs as possible because this

BDD-A21835 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

is the "imperative" of that world; all she knows is that she must never bear a child, as this could be the most disgraceful thing; likewise is family life regarded, where father and mother are equally disgusting, children being artificially created in bottles, "socially predestined" and "preconditioned by hypnopaedia" (Vianu, 10).

Bernard Marx is regarded as being under the level of ordinary Alpha males because in his bottle with blood-surrogate people suspect that someone poured alcohol, thinking he was a Gamma. This somehow weird character likes solitude, despises Lenina because of her immoral conduct, even aspires to "think"; however, this turns into a failure. Helmholtz, his friend, even aspires to become a writer. Both are punished at the end of the novel, being driven out of the comfortable centre and sent to some peripheral area, which resembles Iceland.

Last but not least important, there is John, the son of Linda (a Beta). Linda was lost on a trip to the "New Mexican Reservation", got pregnant in the reservation, was forced to give birth to her son (John), remained with the "savages", took to hard drinking and grew old. John and Linda are discovered by Bernard and Lenina when they went for a holiday to the reservation. John, who was rejected by the savages because of his mother's immoral habits, used to take refuge in reading Shakespeare.

When Bernard suggests that they should return to civilization where they belong to (he even remembers his director mentioning that once, a travel companion – Linda – was lost in the Reservation), both Linda and John agree to that offer. John's answer comes quoting his favourite female Shakespearean character, Miranda: "O brave new world that has such people in it. Let's start at once".

Back to civilization, Linda becomes addicted to "soma" in order to forget her miserable past and soon she dies. On the other hand, John who considered that he entered Shakespeare's Brave New World, was so disillusioned by what he sees around him that he finally commits suicide.

For our needs as both logical perceivers and intuitive evaluators of such issues to satisfactorily meet, Lacan's "Construction of Ego" would offer specialized vocabulary and interpretative clues.

Lacan has identified "three registers of human reality" (61): "the imaginary", "the symbolic" and "the real". According to Lacan, the imaginary is related to "the spectacular register" (61), the symbolic implies that "most things around us possess meaning", while the real is commented upon as "what resists symbolization absolutely", or as "what is excluded from our reality, the margin of what is without meaning and which we fail to situate or explore" (6).

Each of these three registers will be closely analyzed in relation to Huxley's characters. So, most of the characters, be they Alphas or Epsilons, can be regarded as "falsifying egos" (26), that is egos in "the mirror phase" (26), which rather unconsciously stick to a false appearance of coherence and completeness.

Such a false appearance arises from their free and unconditioned acceptance of work division, of mechanical habits (for instance their daily ration of "soma" or their immorality).

The same Lacan claims that an identification of the ego with such "ideal" elements (soma, immoral habits, predestined sterility, ready-made sentences), necessarily leads to "alienation in the register of the image" (6).

According to structural anthropologists quoted by Miller, such "stagnatory images" (drugs, sterility, immorality), which are not consciously perceived, "can organize and govern the workings of a society and, indeed, the mind of the individual" (26). Such things happen because linguistic constructions such as those ready-made sentences that Huxley's characters are taught to take for granted generate meanings beyond the understanding of those who use them, entrapping them in a sort of mental "decomposition" they are not aware of.

BDD-A21835 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

The influence exerted by the French psychiatrist Joseph Capgras over Lacan can be recognized in Lacan's approach to doubling and the image. Such an issue can be commented upon focusing on an interesting association between two characters of the novel: Bernard and John.

Vianu claims that Bernard and John turn out to be one character, if put together (98). We can take a further step and regard John as a doubling of Bernard in terms of what would have become of Bernard if he had lived among the "savages", that is among ordinary people.

So, both Bernard and John, through their personal experiences have individually integrated those "stagnated images" into new linguistic networks, moving from the imaginative register to the symbolic one.

Before embarking upon such an analysis, we might wonder why the other characters could not experience a similar transition. Lacan claims that there is a "normal" resistance, a barrier as concerns the access from word to meaning - that is from "signifier" to "signified" (29). Lacan even speaks about a priority of the verbal element, namely the word, over the concept, because it is easier to access the materiality of the word compared to the abstract character of the concept.

So, when John comes to Central London Conditioning Centre, at Bernard's suggestion, he wonders whether the people living there read Shakespeare or not. (He used to read Shakespeare as an antidote to his discomfortable life among the savages). Helmholtz, Bernard's friend explains it to him: "the world is stable now. People are happy, they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get. They are well off; they are safe, they're never ill or afraid of death … And if anything should go wrong, there is soma".

Reading Shakespeare can be also interpreted resorting to Lacan as some sort of "symbolic identification with signifying elements", in our case with the meanings present in Shakespeare's works.

Consistent with Lacan's model, we assume that John as well as Bernard have left the world of the image (of empty, meaningless words) and have taken a place in the symbolic world.

On the other hand, for the other characters, language seems to have had "the role of blocking identity" because they find no place in a structure which is abstract and, as such, intrinsically alien to them. By way of consequence, they have resorted to "standardized sentences" and to slogans. It also follows that Huxley's characters experience a double form of alienation: one situated in the register of the image (the falsifying ego) and another situated in the register of language (in Lacan, 18).

Lacan also states that "speech is an act, generating meaning as it is spoken". Thus, the discussion between John and Bernard can be interpreted as a precious opportunity for both to acquire an identity and to integrate themselves into the new linguistic network - the symbolic register.

There is also a bleak articulation of the impossibility of such an ideal to come true for both John and Bernard. John feels a strong affection for Lenina, only to discover, from the Shakespearian perspective, that she is unworthy of his love. Miranda has vanished once and for good and, as a matter of fact, "man himself has disappeared" (Vianu, 15). Disappointed, John takes refuge in a lonely lighthouse. As concerns Bernard, John's arrival in the centre turned him into an Alpha-Plus once again. On the other hand, John's disappearance makes him recover his former individuality. He is soon severely punished for that. The Director of the Conditioning Centre accuses him of having defied the interests of the centre, the security of the respective community and, consequently, he is removed "from any important centre of population" and transferred to "Iceland".

The condemning speech is one of Huxley's linguistic artifices. It is actually uttered precisely when John enters the Centre and Linda, his mother, rushes to embrace the Director,

BDD-A21835 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)

his father. As Vianu notices, the content of the condemning speech equally applies to the end of the novel. The interval of time marqued by these two events is suggestively coloured by Bernard's recording John's reactions to civilized London. Bernard is extremely shocked by John's sincere attachment to his mother. Moreover, since she is old and ugly and the fact that John still loves her, has been commented by Bernard as an interesting example in which: "Early conditioning can be made to modify and run counter to natural impulses (in this case, the impulse to recoil from an unpleasant object)".

This quotation can be related to the "register of the real", to "what is excluded from our reality, the margin of what is without meaning and which we fail to situate or explore" (6).

Of course, such quotations sound bitter and ironical. And yet, the major source of irony in this novel is precisely our human condition and what can become of it if we lose our human characteristics such as ethical values, ordinary joys or feelings due to our concern with too much developing our scientifically-biased minds. His choice of describing an instance of mankind's dehumanization by too much well-being might sound as a warning for England, but not for previous communist countries which have experienced too little not too much well- being, in Vianu's opinion. Even the ironic names of Lenin and Marx are unconvincing because he "overlooked the evolution of communism" (Vianu, 17), which Orwell seems to have been in a closer contact with and, as such, he wrote his novel "1984" as a real and credible warning for the whole world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Hogarth Press Ltd., London, 2004

Vianu, Lidia, *The AfterMode. Significant Choices in Contemporary British Fiction*. Bucharest: Bucharest U.P, Print, 2010

BDD-A21835 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:21 UTC)