

2.7 How to approach an interpretation

One of the main starting points when trying to gain a better understanding of *Brave New World* are the numerous quotations from Shakespeare. They will be analyzed below and followed by quotes from renowned critics, which should be helpful in forming a complete picture of the writer and in reaching an interpretation of his works.

Quotations from Shakespeare as a starting point for interpreting the novel:

The second half of the novel, especially between chapters six and eighteen, abounds with quotations from Shakespeare's various works. At first glance, they appear to have been included at random, but – as is only to be expected of Huxley – their inclusion is in fact quite intentional and they do indeed serve a specific purpose. The main quotations have been taken from *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), *Hamlet* (1601), *Othello* (1604), *King Lear* (1605/6), *Macbeth* (1606) and *The Tempest* (1611).⁴⁵

The quotations cited by the visitor from the Savage Reservation are used to highlight the various points of conflict between the 'old' and the 'new' world and to show just how far apart these two worlds are. They also serve to illustrate the emotional and psychological state of mind that John finds himself in at a particular moment in time. I have selected eight of these quotations and will seek to explain them in their individual contexts.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The dates of publication vary in the literature edited.

⁴⁶ The quotes are based upon the English edition by Vintage Classics.

Chapter 8, p. 113

'Nay, but to live In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love Over the nasty sty ...'
(*Hamlet*: III, 4)

When John first reads through Shakespeare, he stumbles on this quotation from *Hamlet*. Hamlet is furious about his mother Gertrude's undignified behaviour. – John is disgusted by Linda and Popé's lack of restraint and, as the pangs of jealousy well up in him, he even tries to kill him. He turns to Shakespeare and becomes intoxicated by his beautiful words. Although John does not really understand their true meaning, he nevertheless senses himself becoming more and more consumed by them. It is through Shakespeare that he learns to appreciate values and to differentiate between them.

Chapter 8, p. 121:

'O brave new world (...) O brave new world that has such people in it.' (*The Tempest*: V, 1)

When Bernard offers to take him back to London with him, John is almost beside himself with joy. Having met the two representatives from the new world, John's opinion of its inhabitants is more than positive. With the innocence of the uninitiated, he utters these words, just like the young Miranda from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, who, having been exiled to an island with her father, Prospero, only sees people again for the first time after years have gone by. However, in John's case, it is Lenina with whom he secretly hopes to spend more time.

Chapter 9, p. 125:

'On the white wonder of dear Juliet's hand, may seize And steal immortal blessing from her lips, Who, even in pure and vestal

modesty, Still blush, as thinking their own kisses sin.' (*Romeo and Juliet*: III, 3)

John is captivated by Lenina's beauty. This quotation, which has been taken from Shakespeare's great love tragedy, highlights John's inner conflict between his desire for Lenina and his shyness. Following Tybalt's death, Romeo is no longer allowed to see Juliet and, in desperation, begs Friar Laurence for help. – John's words hint at the ambivalent feelings which will eventually lead to his deep despair. Romeo and Juliet's love remains unfulfilled because of their destiny and the social conventions of the time, John and Lenina's remains unfulfilled because they come from two different worlds.

Chapter 11, p. 139:

'O brave new world that has such people in it.' (*The Tempest*: V, 1)

The scales suddenly fall from John's eyes and he realizes that the beautiful new world is less than perfect. He finds worse atrocities there than those he has already experienced. He cites this key quotation, but uses an ironical undertone to express his emotional distance to his new environment.

Chapter 12, p. 161:

'Is there no pity sitting in the clouds, That sees into the bottom of my grief?' (*Romeo and Juliet*: III, 5)

Helmholtz' reaction (he roars with laughter) to this earnest quotation from *Romeo and Juliet* does not meet John's expectations. For John, Juliet's deep pain at her father's harsh words shows the intensity of her feelings, while Helmholtz sees these verses as glorious propaganda on the part of the poet (see p. 161). Father Capulet stands as insurmountably between Romeo and Juliet as

do the contradictions between John's world and that of the inhabitants of the brave new world. It is at this point of the novel that it becomes clear that, if not even the person with the most advanced linguistic skills is able to understand Shakespeare's words, then John's feelings for Lenina will never be understood or reciprocated. They do not live in Shakespeare's world, as the Resident World Controller unmistakably points out elsewhere in the novel, yet without any hint of anger or zeal.

Chapter 13, p. 171:

'O thou weed, who are so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet that the sense aches at thee.' (*Othello*: IV, 2)

Othello is one of the most powerful love tragedies in world literature. The hero, who is blinded by his own insecurities, does his loyal and submissive wife, Desdemona, a deep injustice. He stalks, distrusts, insults, beats and kills her out of feelings of jealousy over which he no longer has any control. – John, too, is nearly on the verge of abusing Lenina. He does her an injustice because she has not broken any rules by her standards. The boisterousness and innocence of youth which dominated *Romeo and Juliet* have now been replaced in *Othello* by a desperate bitterness. The romantic enchantment which John felt when he first met Lenina has gone. John shows first signs of being deeply disturbed.

Chapter 17, p. 207 f.:

'Thou hast spoken right; 'tis true. The wheel has come full circle; I am here.' (*King Lear*: V, 3)

The depth, but also the hopelessness of the conversation between John and the Resident World Controller, is summed up in this quotation from Shakespeare's tragedy, in which human er-