

## **Aldous Huxley and Winston Churchill: Thinking About the 1930s**

*Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932)  
*Fifty Years Hence* (1931) and *Mass Effects in Modern Life* (1925), essays by  
Winston S. Churchill  
(40-50 minutes)

### **Introduction:**

“Imaginative engagement with science was one of Churchill’s fundamental traits.”<sup>1</sup> His thoughts on the prospects of military aviation, tank design, radar, atomic power, robotics and even genetic engineering were the products of a keen and energetic intelligence coupled with an educated and active imagination.

Churchill was also an avid reader of science fiction, including works by Jules Verne, Olaf Stapledon, Karel Capek and H. G. Wells with whom he often corresponded despite their conflicting political views.

Embedded in much of Churchill’s historical writings are alternative histories where he envisions a new ending, one that might have been, if only the principle actors had made different decisions. Paul Alkon writes

In *The World Crisis* there is much speculation on how World War I might have ended more quickly with far fewer casualties had the Gallipoli campaign been fought more aggressively by admirals and generals on the spot, and had tanks been deployed initially en masse rather than dribbled onto the battlefield in quantities too small to be decisive. In Churchill’s hands, as in much science fiction, alternative pasts are sometimes used not only to identify what he calls in *The Aftermath* “turning points” or (in a more classical mode) “hinges of Fate” and to suggest what depended on them, but also as invitations to think about utopian or dystopian futures.<sup>2</sup>

Students will compare and contrast Churchill’s ideas in one or both of his essays, “Fifty Years Hence,” and “Mass Effects in Modern Life,” with the themes of Aldous Huxley’s classic dystopian novel *Brave New World*.

Churchill's essay "Fifty Years Hence" appeared first in the December 1931 *Strand Magazine*, shortly before *Brave New World* was published in early 1932. Apparently, then, he came to some ideas similar to Huxley's on his own. In what Paul Alkon terms a "sobering exercise of future history" Churchill saw a "moral for the present."<sup>3</sup>

Students will examine the 1930s fear that modernization, industrialization and technology were challenging the notion of individualism and the threat that totalitarian governments could conceivably manipulate the minds and even the biological nature of their enslaved citizens. Students should also consider whether people in many countries were (despite WWI) far more optimistic than pessimistic about the promise of technology. Future developments proved that Russia, Italy & Germany, as well as Japan, were quite happy to submerge themselves into pursuit of collective enterprises that turned people into cheerful and mostly indistinguishable followers of various generals, emperors, and fuhrers. (Not much individualism evident in Nuremburg rallies . . .)

The activities used will consist of readings, worksheets, class discussions, and follow-up writing assignments.

**Guiding Question:** What similarities and differences exist between Churchill's non-fiction essays and Huxley's work of fiction?

**Learning Objectives:** Students will read *Brave New World* and one or both of Churchill's essays for information and understanding; students will understand the prevailing fears of the 1930s through fiction and nonfiction writings.

In ascertaining prevailing attitudes, students must consider that if everybody had seen the dangers there would have been no need for Huxley's novel, Churchill's essays, or Orwell's 1984 later.

**Background Information:** The students will have completed the reading of Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World*. Students will then read one or both of Winston Churchill's essays, "*Fifty Years Hence*" and "*Mass Effects in Modern Life*" for homework prior to this classroom lesson.

**Preparation:** The following texts will be used in this lesson:

*Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley

[“Mass Effects in Modern Life”](#) by Winston Churchill, 1925

[“Fifty Years Hence”](#) by Winston Churchill, 1932

Note: these essays are copyrighted by Mr. Winston Churchill and maybe be used for educational purposes only.

A wonderful collection of Churchill’s essays, *Thoughts and Adventures*, including the two essays in this lesson, was newly re-published in 2009 and available in paperback.

As further background, teachers may benefit from a related essay [“Can There Be Another Winston Churchill?”](#) by Harry V. Jaffa .

Venn Diagram 1 or 2 “Effects of Modernization”

Also: a chalkboard, easel pad, or overhead projector.

**Activities:** Students will compare and contrast the Churchill essay(s) with the themes of *Brave New World* to understand how modernization, industrialization, science and technology affected in society in the 1930s.

Having completed *Brave New World*, students will be assigned to read the Churchill essay(s) for homework prior to this lesson. This will prepare the students to engage both texts during the class period.

In small groups of three or four, have the students use Venn diagram 1 (using one essay) or 2 (using both essays) to compare and contrast the Churchill essay(s) with specific events and quotes from *BNW*.

One third (or quarter) of the Venn diagram should be devoted to unique examples from *BNW*, one third (or two quarters) to unique examples from “Mass Effects” (and “Fifty Years Hence”)and the last third (or quarter) to similarities between the two texts.

After twenty to thirty minutes of class time, bring the class back together as a whole and allow the groups to share their discoveries as a group. For this you may want to use a large butcher pad, a chalkboard, overhead slide, or projector to create one class Venn diagram.

Once the diagram is filled in, allow the students to answer the following question individually: What are the attitudes of Churchill and Huxley towards science, technology and industrialization? What do you think they wanted to accomplish by their writings?

To further develop this idea, you may want to have students write an essay in which they defend their opinions with examples.

**Assessment:** If student groups found several similarities between Churchill's and Huxley's ideas (namely that efficiency and technology may cause a decline in individualism), and are able to provide specific examples in support of their ideas; if each student in class had a chance to offer ideas in the small group or large group discussions, and if students understand the 1930s attitudes towards industrialization and technology, then this lesson has been a success.

**Extending the lesson:** This lesson could be extended into a full-length essay assignment that explores the connections between *BNW* and Churchill's essay(s). It may also be beneficial to include other dystopian literary works, such as George Orwell's *1984*.

Credits:

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<sup>1</sup> Paul K. Alkon in his book *Winston Churchill's Imagination* devotes a chapter to 'Imagining Science: Churchill and Science Fiction.' Alkon adds, "It is perhaps the feature of his mind and writing that best allows us to understand his remarkable flexibility in dealing with the staggering changes that he confronted in moving to the atomic age from his origins as a Victorian cavalry officer who rode in the charge of the 21<sup>st</sup> Lancers at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898..."

<sup>2</sup> Paul Alkon, *Winston Churchill's Imagination* p 159

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p 163