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| **About you** | **[Salutation]** | Jake | [Middle name] | Poller |
| Jake Poller, BA MA PhD (London), wrote his doctoral thesis on the place of mysticism in work of Aldous Huxley. His articles have appeared in the Aldous Huxley Annual, the D.H. Lawrence Review, Literature and Theology and Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism. His research interests include: mysticism; Western esotericism in the *fin de siècle* and twentieth century; psychical research and psychoanalysis. | | | |
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| **Your article** |
| Huxley, Aldous (1894-1963) |
| Huxley, Leonard Aldous |
| Aldous Huxley is an English writer who is best known for his dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932) and his disquisition on psychedelic substances, *The Doors of Perception* (1954). In the inter-war years, Huxley commanded a formidable reputation, and his work was considered alongside the leading modernists. He was impressively prolific and wrote in a variety of genres, producing poetry, short stories, essays, novels, plays, biography and travel writing. His work appeared in many of the modernist Little Magazines, such as *Coterie*, *The Egoist* and *Wheels*. Huxley was a zealous individualist: while he socialised with Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry and Clive Bell (among others), he was never part of the Bloomsbury Group; likewise, though a regular guest at Garsington Manor, the home of society hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell, he was not regarded as a member of her pacifist coterie that included Lytton Strachey and Bertrand Russell. After moving to America, Huxley became increasingly concerned with mysticism, and his reputation declined; however, the work he produced during this period was championed by key figures in the New Age and counter-culture movements, and he played a vital part in popularising Eastern religions in the West, such as Buddhism, Tantra and Advaita Vedanta. |
| Aldous Leonard Huxley was born on 26 July 1894, near Godalming in Surrey. He came from a distinguished intellectual lineage: his grandfather was T. H. Huxley, who was nicknamed 'Darwin's bulldog' for his advocacy of evolutionary theory; his great-uncle was the poet and critic Matthew Arnold. His childhood was marked by three traumatic episodes that helped shape him as a writer: in 1908, his mother Julia died of cancer; three years later, at the age of sixteen, he contracted an eye infection (*keratitis punctata*) that permanently impaired his eyesight; and in 1914, his brother Trevenen committed suicide.  After attending Eton, Huxley read English at Balliol College, Oxford. He attempted to enlist during World War I, but was rejected due to his poor eyesight. Through the hospitality of Ottoline Morrell and her husband Philip, Huxley met many eminent artists and intellectuals, including T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and W.B. Yeats, as well as the Belgian refugee Maria Nys (1898-1955), whom he married in 1919.  His first published book was a volume of poetry, *The Burning Wheel* (1916). Despite the modernist experimentation of contemporary poets such as Ezra Pound, Huxley's poetry was fairly conventional and favoured traditional forms (most of the poems in the collection are sonnets). Huxley's first novel, *Crome Yellow* (1921), similarly eschewed the formal experimentation of his modernist peers and drew comparisons with the work of the satirist Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866). On the other hand, Huxley's London-based novels of the 1920s, *Antic Hay* (1923) and *Point Counter Point* (1928), vividly captured the post-war mood of anomie, amorality and empty hedonism. In addition, some of his early work has an avant-garde edge (for example the prose poems ‘Back Streets’ and ‘Beauty’ and his experimental play ‘Happy Families’), and was published in the modernist Little Magazines alongside the work of T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Katherine Mansfield, Jacob Epstein, Pablo Picasso and Ezra Pound. Above all, Huxley was a novelist of ideas whose work was a barometer of the intellectual atmosphere of his era. For instance, in the 1920s and 30s he satirised psychoanalysis, examined the impact of quantum physics, deplored the standardisation that was occurring in art as well as industry, explored mysticism, advocated eugenics, and propounded a philosophy loosely based on the *Weltanschauung* of his friend D. H. Lawrence.  Huxley's classic novel *Brave New World* (1932) was a baleful vision of what the world would look like if the mechanistic ideas of J. B. Watson, Sigmund Freud, Henry Ford and H. G. Wells were given free reign. Watson’s behaviourism can be found in the ‘neo-Pavlovian conditioning’ the children of the World State undergo as part of their caste indoctrination; the perils of the Oedipus complex are avoided by the eradication of the family, and all curbs on the pleasure principle are removed in a society that encourages sexual promiscuity and recreational drugs (in the form of *soma*) and proscribes religion; Ford’s rationalisation of industry is taken to its *reductio ad absurdum*, in that the citizens of the World State are genetically engineered in order to fit their job and factory; and the novel as a whole can be read as a satirical response to the utopian fictions of Wells, such as *A Modern Utopia* (1905), in which a hierarchical World State, ruled by an intellectual elite, has eliminated the problems besetting mankind through the application of science and technology.  In 1934-35, Huxley suffered from insomnia and depression and made some decisive changes to his life as a result. Encouraged by his friend and fellow polymath Gerald Heard, Huxley began to meditate and joined what would become the Peace Pledge Union. Having been alternately attracted and repelled by mysticism in the 1920s, Huxley began to espouse a mystical philosophy, both in his work with the Peace Pledge Union (under whose auspices he wrote the 1936 pamphlet *What Are You Going to Do About It? The Case for Constructive Peace*) and in his fiction. He drew on many of these experiences in his novel *Eyeless In Gaza* (1936), which charts the spiritual journey of Anthony Beavis, who grows disillusioned with his cynical life of loveless affairs and ivy-tower elitism, and becomes an exponent of mysticism and pacifism.  Huxley undertook a lecture tour of America in 1937 and ended up settling in California. His wife Maria had been anxious to find an American university for their son Matthew (1920-2005), so he would be sheltered from the looming European conflict, and Huxley was attracted by the potential to make money in Hollywood, though in practice he found the work uncongenial and only three of his screenplays went into production. Huxley felt incredibly guilty about sitting out World War II in Los Angeles and received stinging criticism in the British press for mystic naval gazing, despite the fact that in 1939 he was 45 years old and was virtually blind in one eye. Rather than being swayed by such criticism, though, Huxley became more than ever convinced that mysticism was the key to forestalling further conflict. He consolidated his knowledge of Eastern mysticism through his association with Swami Prabhavananda, the head of the Vedanta Society for Southern California, and the Indian sage and former messiah of the Theosophical Society Jiddu Krishnamurti. He also visited Heard’s spiritual community, Trabuco College, and co-authored its prospectus. His fiction became a vehicle for his mystical insights, most notably *After Many a Summer* (1939), *Time Must Have a Stop* (1944) and *The Genius and the Goddess* (1955). He also wrote a biography of the Catholic mystic Father Joseph, *Grey Eminence* (1941), and a book about the demonization of the seventeenth-century priest Urbain Grandier, *The Devils of Loudon* (1952), which was subsequently made into a film by the director Ken Russell.  In 1945, Huxley published an anthology of mystical writings, *The Perennial Philosophy*, in which he argued that while mystics from the Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Sufi traditions conceived of God differently, their experiences of union with the godhead, or what Huxley termed the Divine Ground, and the insights they derived from this, were essentially the same. For Huxley, this constituted empirical evidence that there was a unified metaphysical realm beyond the phenomenal world of diversity. In *The Perennial Philosophy*, Huxley argues that man’s ‘final end’ is to achieve ‘unitive knowledge of the Godhead’. The experience of mystical union, however, is only possible for a tiny portion of the population, and Huxley was frustrated by his failure to achieve this through the conventional techniques of meditation and asceticism. As a result of his experiments with mescaline and LSD, Huxley was finally able to apprehend the metaphysical dimension of reality. The books *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and *Heaven and Hell* (1956) record his psychedelic experiences and the conclusions he drew from them. They catalysed considerable counterculture interest in Hindu philosophies such as Tantra and Zen Buddhism and exerted a great influence on the psychologist Timothy Leary, who corresponded with Huxley and refused to heed his prophetic warning that widespread use of psychedelic substances among the general public would lead to their prohibition.  Maria Huxley died of breast cancer in 1955, and the following year Huxley married the former violinist and psychotherapist Laura Archera (1911-2007), whose memoir of her life with Huxley, *This Timeless Moment*, was published in 1968. In the aftermath of Maria’s death, Huxley allegedly received two messages from her through Eileen Garrett, a friend and spirit medium who had established the Parapsychology Foundation in 1951. Huxley had long been interested in the paranormal and treated the subject of spiritualism in his play *The World of Light* (1931). He also wrote essays extolling the work of the American parapsychologist Joseph Banks Rhine, and in 1956 he became a member of the Society for Psychical Research.  Despite Huxley's commitment to mysticism, and his open-minded attitude to the paranormal, he never abandoned his faith in science, and in his later work, such as *Island* (1962) and *Literature and Science* (1963), he argued that if we want to maximise our 'human potentialities' we need to embrace both. Indeed, *Island* is often read as a Tantric utopia to the technological dystopia of *Brave New World*, and the population of Pala embody a harmonious balance of mind and body, Western science and Eastern philosophy, modern medicine and the ‘*moksha*-medicine’ (psilocybin mushrooms).  Huxley died of throat cancer on the day of John F. Kennedy's assassination, 22 November 1963. His essays have been collected in the *Complete Essays* (6 vols., 2000-02), edited by James Sexton and Robert S. Baker; and two separate volumes of his correspondence have been published, edited by Grover Smith (1969) and James Sexton (2007) respectively. List of WorksNovels *Crome Yellow* (1921)  *Antic Hay* (1923)  *Those Barren Leaves* (1925)  *Point Counter Point* (1928)  *Brave New World* (1932)  *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936)  *After Many a Summer* (1939)  *Time Must Have a Stop* (1944)  *Ape and Essence* (1948)  *The Genius and the Goddess* (1955)  *Island* (1962) Short Story Collections *Limbo* (1920)  *Mortal Coils* (1922)  *Little Mexican* (1924)  *Two or Three Graces* (1926)  *Brief Candles* (1930) Poetry *The Burning Wheel* (1916)  *Jonah* (1917)  *The Defeat of Youth* (1918)  *Leda* (1920)  *Arabia Infelix* (1929)  *The Cicadas* (1931) Biography *Grey Eminence* (1941)  *The Devils of Loudon* (1952) Travel Writing *Along the Road* (1925)  *Jesting Pilate* (1926)  *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (1934) Anthologies *Texts and Pretexts* (1932)  *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) Essays *On the Margin* (1923)  *Proper Studies* (1927)  *Do What You Will* (1929)  *Music at Night* (1931)  *The Olive Tree* (1936)  *Themes and Variations* (1950)  *Adonis and the Alphabet* (1956)  *Brave New World Revisited* (1958) Non-Fiction Books *Ends and Means* (1937)  *The Art of Seeing* (1942)  *The Doors of Perception* (1954)  *Heaven and Hell* (1956)  *Literature and Science* (1963) Drama *The World of Light* (1931) Posthumous Books *Letters of Aldous Huxley* (1969)  *The Human Situation* (1978)  *Aldous Huxley's Hearst Essays* (1994)  *The Hidden Huxley: Contempt and Compassion for the Masses* 1920-36 (1994)  *Jacob’s Hands* (1998)  *Now More than Ever* (2000)  *Aldous Huxley: Complete Essays, 6 Vols*. (2000-02)  *Selected Letters of Aldous Huxley* (2007) |
| Further reading:  (Bedford)  (Dunaway)  (Murray)  (Sawyer) |