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Annie Ouyang
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Links between Human Rationality and Animal Savagery in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*

In the mid 1800s, Charles Darwin's new publication, *The Origin of Species*¹, rocked the scientific community and changed perspectives on humans and other forms of life. The strange notion that men were distantly related to apes and even more distantly related to bananas forced many people to reconsider the role of humans in the world. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*², written by H.G. Wells, is partially a response to the new ideas proposed by Darwin. Although Dr. Moreau neither practices artificial selection nor acts as an allegorical figure representing natural selection, his experiments nevertheless shape the lives and outward forms of the creatures on his island. Through Moreau's work, the novel explores the differences separating humans from lower, savage animals, and, in a chilling conclusion, finds that, when stripped of all illusion, there really are none.

In a way, Moreau uses artificial selection by changing the appearance of animals for his own purposes. However, his methods are more sophisticated than those of, for example, dog breeders or rose cultivators. He tells Prendick, "It's not simply the outward form of an animal I can change. The physiology, the chemical rhythm of the creature, may also be made to undergo an enduring modification..." (Wells 110). Instead of selecting organisms with desirable traits to breed in the hope of propagating those traits, Moreau takes a more active approach. He attempts to "change [animal] in its most intimate structure," altering "chemical reactions and methods of growth" through procedures such as blood transfusions (Wells 110). Darwin defines artificial selection as man "adapt[ing] organic beings to his own uses, through the

¹ Darwin, Charles. Excerpts from First and Sixth Ed. of *The origin of Species by means of Natural Selection*. 1859.

² Wells, H.G. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. New York: Signet Classics, 2005.

accumulation of slight but useful variations, given to him by the hand of Nature” (1). This does not completely describe Moreau’s work because Moreau gives animals major variations (like voice boxes or differently shaped limbs) instead of using small, natural variations. Darwin also writes, “Man can act only on external and visible characters” (8), which is untrue in Moreau’s case because he attempts to alter the animals’ body chemistry (Wells 110). Therefore, Moreau’s work may be portrayed as even more artificial than artificial selection.

On the other hand, Moreau’s role on his island is not that of natural selection either. Although the scientist drastically changes organisms and their roles in the environment, he is not an allegorical figure for natural selection, but rather a human being attempting to imitate the phenomenon and failing on several counts. For example, natural selection “generally act[s] with extreme slowness” (Darwin 17), while Moreau’s drastic operations are comparatively very sudden. More importantly, the changes created by Moreau are not inherited, thus violating one of the underlying principles of natural selection, the inheritance of variations. Natural selection must have “inherited modification, each profitable to the preserved being” to accumulate improvements over long periods of time (Darwin 14). However, Prendick learns that the Beast Folk “actually bore offspring, but that these generally died. There was no evidence of the inheritance of the acquired human characteristics” (Wells 127). Clearly, Moreau’s work does not affect the next generation (in fact, there is no next generation), so his influence on various species is far less than that of natural selection. Moreau himself says, “After all, what is ten years? Man has been a hundred thousand in the making” (Wells 120). In this quote, the scientist references natural selection to show that his own work, which is in a much shorter time span and in a smaller scope, can never match up to natural selection’s dramatic and pervasive results.

In addition, Moreau fails as an allegorical figure representing natural selection because his creatures are not happier, nor are they better suited for their environment. According to Darwin, natural selection “leads to the improvement of each creature in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life; and consequently, in most cases, to what must be regarded as an advance in organisation” (24). However, Prendick describes the Beast Folk’s “mock-human existence” as “one long internal struggle” (Wells 150). By altering his “poor victims,” Moreau has done the Beast Folk a disservice because “Before they had been beasts, their instincts fitly adapted to their surroundings, and happy as living things may be. Now they stumbled in the shackles of humanity, lived in a fear that never died, fretted by a law they could not understand” (Wells 150). Before their transformations, the Beast Folk were already “fitly adapted” due to natural selection on the island. Afterwards, they must deal with the “shackles of humanity,” suggesting an oppressive feeling of imprisonment. They also live in fear of going back to Moreau’s laboratory, so they definitely do not enjoy improved conditions of life.

The many difficulties faced by Moreau throughout his quest and his ultimate failure to form a “rational creature of my own” seem to suggest a fundamental, intangible difference between humans and other animals (Wells 120). When Prendick is first learning about the Beast Folk, he observes, “Each of these creatures, despite its human form...had woven into it, into its movements, into the expression of its countenance, into its whole presence, some now irresistible suggestion of a hog, a swinish taint, the unmistakable mark of the beast” (Wells 65). When he looks at various members of the Beast Folk, he can tell which animals they used to be because they retain some of their old physical features, mannerisms, or just vague auras. Moreau admits that the Beast Folk are not fully human: “somehow the things drift back again, the stubborn beast flesh grows, day by day, back again” (Wells 118). Although he has

drastically changed their physical and biochemical attributes, he is yet unable to find a scientific way to “burn out the animal” in the creatures’ souls (Wells 120).

After learning about the true nature of Dr. Moreau’s experiments, Prendick observes that the scientist has “stamped the human form upon [the Beast Folk]” (Wells 127). The word “stamped” is significant because it illustrates that Moreau must force the animals to be human — humanity is not a natural state for them. This idea of an unstable system is further illustrated in Prendick’s reflection that the Beast Folk are in “shackles of humanity” and “fretted by a law they could not understand” (Wells 150). The creatures’ animal natures are imprisoned inside their human forms, and these natures are controlled by a mysterious Law, which forbids many small but important physical actions that would make the creatures less human. The Law says “Not to go on all Fours,” “Not to suck up Drink,” “Not to eat Flesh nor Fish,” “Not to claw Bark of Trees,” and “Not to chase other Men” (Wells 91). These specific actions are carefully chosen to prevent the animals from following their bestial instincts, as well as to protect Moreau and Montgomery. The Law helps the Beast Folk to act human—later in the story, their failure to obey rules such as walking on two legs indicates their reversion to animals (Wells 193). Nevertheless, even when the Law is obeyed, it does not necessarily control the creatures’ thoughts or inner urges, so at best it is an outward mold that keeps them in a human shape for as long as possible.

This peculiar Law and its subsequent failure raise this question: what is the fundamental difference, if any, between humans and animals? In his *Descent of Man*³, Charles Darwin puts forth the idea that human intelligence may be simply a product of natural selection, but that other traits of “rational” creatures, such as the ability to sympathize or a sense of morality, are

³ Darwin, Charles. Excerpts from *Descent of Man*. 1871.

more complicated (1). He thinks the “development of the moral qualities” may evolve from “social instincts” like “family ties,” which some lower animals have (1). Morality may be strengthened by social reinforcement: “The motive to give aid is likewise much modified in man: it no longer consists solely of a blind instinctive impulse, but is much influenced by the praise or blame of his fellows” (Darwin 2). In fact, for Darwin, a higher morality characterizes the difference between men and other animals. By definition, a moral being must reflect on past actions and motives, and “the fact that man is the one being who certainly deserves this designation, is the greatest of all distinctions between him and the lower animals” (Darwin 1).

For Wells, the answer to this question has many facets. On one level, the Beast Folk appear to be human because they engage in normal human activities: “They build themselves their dens, gather fruit and pull herbs—marry even” (Wells 121). However, Moreau realizes that underneath their domestic diligence, the Beast Folk still retain “the souls of beasts, beasts that perish—anger, and the lusts to live and gratify themselves” (Wells 121). Therefore, outward appearances and actions alone are not enough to prove an organism’s humanity. Moreau realizes that he also must change brain processes, “replacing old inherent instincts by new suggestions, grafting upon or replacing the inherited fixed ideas” (Wells 111). Like Darwin, he believes that humans have higher morality than beasts, and that part of this morality is shaped by their daily interactions. He tells Prendick, “Very much, indeed, of what we call moral education is such an artificial modification and perversion of instinct; pugnacity is trained into courageous self-sacrifice, and suppressed sexuality into religious emotion” (Wells 112). Moreau believes that he can train the Beast Folk to have human morality. After this, “the great difference between man and monkey is in the larynx,” a purely physical feature (Wells

112). Unfortunately, as illustrated in previous paragraphs, Moreau does not succeed in his endeavor, and the Beast Folk continue to exhibit immoral animal urges.

Throughout the novel, Prendick and other characters stress this careful distinction between animals and humans. Prendick long to return to the real world, where people are “perfectly reasonable creatures, full of human desires and tender solicitude, emancipated from instinct, and the slaves of no fantastic Law...” (Wells 204). However, after he is rescued, he finds that the line between humans and beasts is not so clear after all. Walking on the streets, he says, “I could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast People, animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls, and that they would presently begin to revert” (Wells 203-4). Prendick begins to see signs of immoral, animal souls in strangers on the street: “Prowling women would mew after me, furtive craving men glance jealously at me, weary pale workers go coughing by me, with tired eyes and eager paces like wounded deer dripping blood...” (Wells 205). He associates passersby with different types of beasts, instinctively sensing hidden lusts and hatreds that are considered inappropriate in human society. When he enters a chapel, seeking solace in religion, he finds that “the preacher gibbered Big Things even as the Ape Man had done” (Wells 205). Darwin claims that “the belief in God has often been advanced as not only the greatest, but the most complete of all the distinctions between man and the lower animals” (2), but after watching the Beast Folk mindlessly recite the Law, Prendick can no longer view religion as a hallmark of civilization. Finally, Prendick even starts to doubt his own humanity: “And even it seemed that I, too, was not a reasonable creature, but only an animal tormented with some strange disorder in its brain, that sent it to wander alone” (Wells 205). He is a man of science, trained to think rationally, so when he experiences many seemingly unfounded fears, a “strange

enhancement of the uncertainty and dread,” he wonders whether he, too, has an inherently irrational, animal soul.

This startling conclusion to the novel completely changes the rest of the story. Before, readers could sail complacently through the chapters, believing the Beast Folk to be the strange apparitions of a classic horror story, safely confined to their own island. However, after Wells’s final chapter, it becomes clear that the savage instincts of the Beast Folk can be found everywhere, even in the most civilized areas of human society. Though humans are able to hide their unpleasant feelings and urges from outward observation, their souls may be just as polluted and grotesque as the outward forms of the half-human Beast Folk. The ostensible aim of Moreau’s research is “to find out the extreme limit of plasticity in a living shape” (Wells 115), but his work also investigates the boundary between humans and animals and his true, darker discovery reveals that this line does not really exist. Moreau dedicates his life’s work to making animals resemble humans in appearance, but it turns out that in matters of the soul, the two have never really differed.