



H.G. Wells' Manufactured Monsters

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This column has so far been preoccupied with the act of looking back. Not only in terms of its purpose – to unearth lesser-known works of eighteenth and nineteenth century authors – but also with regard to the stories themselves, which habitually focus on the echoes of the past disrupting the present. Continuing from last month, looking forward and imagining the scenarios offered by scientific advancement provided potentially scarier material for writers at the time. Especially considering that scientific progress was occurring so rapidly. It is the horror, not of the supernatural or the unknown, but of the ambition of man, which arguably frightens us more than anything else.

Ambitious characters are not represented well in literature. Ambition – the drive to attain is often equated with a propensity to overreach oneself, to desire more than is allowed. Inevitably it results in the downfall of the protagonist and their story becomes a cautionary tale about the dangers of reaching too far. In the nineteenth century, developments in various

scientific fields would have given the impression that there was no limit to man's achievements. The popularity of science fiction towards the end of the nineteenth century confirms the general interest in these advancements. Known initially as 'scientific romance', many of the leading figures of this movement were scientists themselves, whose fictions served as ways to explain or forecast the direction of our future.

H.G. Wells' impact on the science fiction is profound. But Wells was also a celebrated horror writer and much of his work walks a fine line between the two genres, arguably drawing on a Gothic tradition more than anything else.

An apt example is *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, which is, among other things, an exploration of unchecked ambition. The story is told through the perspective of a shipwrecked survivor called Prendick who finds himself on an island populated by a host of strange hybrid creatures. Realising that Moreau's 'Beast Folk' are the product of some form of medical experimentation and remembering that Moreau was once a celebrated vivisectionist, he concludes that Moreau has been tampering with human beings, engaging in a process of imposed degeneration. As it turns out, Moreau has actually been doing the opposite, taking various animals as the starting point and through his surgical skill transforming them into men. The creatures don't just conform to an image of man, they have also learnt language and behavioural traits through hypnosis (another emerging though less credible science). Somehow to Prendick this seems like a more acceptable endeavour.

In the wake of Darwinian theory, it was possible to see humankind's lineage and connectedness to the beast. Moreau's 'man-making' is more tolerable to Prendick because it could be seen that he is merely fast-forwarding an evolutionary process of a kind. Considering evolutionary debates at the time, Wells' story is suitably pertinent. The greatest contention in the text though, concerns the nature of vivisection itself, a surgery carried out on living organisms often for experimental purposes. The horror of the story comes from the suffering of the animals, particularly a puma – Moreau's subject at the time of Prendick's arrival – whose tortured cries punctuate the text. Moreau explains his outlook on pain to Prendick by dramatically driving a blade into his leg muscle. He argues that pain is "needless", a mere warning mechanism. He believes that as we evolve our need for pain will be redundant because our intellect will protect and preserve us. To Moreau, pain and pleasure are base instincts, "the mark of the beast" upon us. Not possessing the ability to feel pain himself, he has no qualms about inflicting it on others, especially on the lower species in the pursuit of his goal. Strangely, in his attempt to humanise his creatures, pain becomes a method of control, a way to ensure the 'Beast Folk' don't disobey their master.

The parallels between man and beast are interesting in the story. When Prendick first arrives on the island he is placed in a locked room to prevent him knowing about Moreau's experimentations. Having been stranded at sea for so long, when he eats he drops down on "all-fours" relishing the meal with a kind of "animal comfort". In his desperation and beyond the society of men, Prendick reverts to a more primitive state of being. In contrast, the "Beast Folk" engage in an active process of being human. They chant a mantra to remind themselves about what makes them men (not going on all-fours, not clawing the bark of trees etc) and they adhere to this law under the threat of returning to Moreau's "House of Pain". But they also exhibit human qualities such as compassion, sharing their food and shelter with Prendick when he escapes. Despite their kindness, once Prendick discovers they are not derived from men, he seeks human company, though the only real men on the island (Moreau and his friend Montgomery) are despicable. In fact, the human characters in the text don't display

any redeemable qualities. In the face of such suffering, Prendick and Montgomery don't do anything to stop Moreau's cruelty. Wells seems to present a very pessimistic view of human nature, that in our regard for others, man is perhaps the most beastly creature of all.



Doctor Moreau's incentive in all this is to discover "the extreme limit of plasticity in a living shape". He is ambitious to see how far he can go, pushing boundaries because he can. He doesn't feel any sense of ethical or moral responsibility, only an opportunity to put his skills to the test. This seems as pertinent today considering modern scientific advancement, such as genetic engineering, cloning and debates about how far science *should* go. Moreau's decision to mould his creatures on the blueprint of man is for no other reason than it being a "pleasing model" though the fact he builds in his own image implies a sense of playing god. It also alludes to other texts, most notably Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which is also about a mad scientist obsessed with creating man from unnatural means. Both texts explore the idea of manufacturing man through the power of science, but they also explore the notion that these manufactured monsters will inevitably rebel against their father, attempting to kill their creator. Ironically, in a similar way the protagonists have attempted to replace god.

The Island of Doctor Moreau can be seen clearly as a reaction to popular ideas at the time and also as a warning about progress without control and restraint. However despite Moreau's endeavours his creatures do resort back to their bestial natures, inevitably the "stubborn beast flesh grows, day by day, back again". There is some consolation in this. Moreau's victims did not choose such a dramatic metamorphosis, but it also implies that despite science, innate characteristics and behaviour will always surface. As an allegory about human nature itself, Wells implies that we can never escape our baser instincts and that "the mark of the beast" is upon us all.

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