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Transgression and Subversion in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by H.G. Wells

This essay seeks to highlight aspects of H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Fig. 1) which cause the novel to be considered one of the first works of science fiction. In *The Island of Doctor Moreau* Wells goes beyond the usual form and content of the novel as genre, transgressing and even subverting them by placing them into the field of the fantastic.

Over the last couple of decades numerous critics have attempted to delimit fantastic literature as well as its subgenre science fiction. In her work on the fantastic, for instance, Lucie Armitt writes "where genre definitions tend to seal up texts, the fantastic opens them up to an ambivalence that must conspire against the formulaic" (33); hence it seems that the genre does not lend itself to definition. Despite the lack of consensus among critics in the field, the following features are most frequently associated with the fantastic: the uncanny, transgression, subversion, and characteristics of setting, style, atmosphere and plot.



Figure 1

According to Armitt, "there is an intrinsic connection between the fantastic and transgression" that allows the genre to resist all attempts to fix it to a definition which would assign it limits. This connection "must also manifest itself on the level of narrative content" (33). Transgression on the level of content usually means the "encounter with [and breaking] social taboos" (Armitt, 34). As Jackson writes, "Social and sexual transgression, the violent breaking of taboos [...] rejects limits imposed upon the 'human'" (79). The atmosphere shared by the texts of the genre is also in connection with transgression: "The very fact that the concerns of transgression lie with the liminal position and the threshold which is forced, implies in itself that our response to the free play of transgression may often be tentative, equivocal and perhaps even fearful" (Armitt, 35). While "transgression" implies the "breaking or violating of any law",¹ the meaning of the word "subversion" is even more severe. "To subvert" means to overturn, to ruin, to destroy, to undermine the principles of something.² This is why Jackson includes this word in the title of her book on the fantastic. For Jackson, "the literature of subversion" also contains a political dimension in its expression of the "pressure of dominant hierarchical systems". This manifests itself in its presentation of "a natural world inverted into something

¹ According to the *New Webster's Dictionary*, 1636.

² Op. cit., 1530.

strange, something ‘other’” (17). These texts show “fantasy’s attempt to ‘turn over’ ‘normal’ perceptions and to undermine ‘realistic’ ways of seeing” (Jackson, 49).³

Jackson writes further, the “literature of the fantastic has been claimed as ‘transcending’ reality, ‘escaping’ the human condition and constructing superior alternate, ‘secondary’ worlds” (12). For Jackson, the fantastic is a “literary mode”, “from which a number of related genres emerge” (7), science fiction being one of these. Just as in other genres of “the literature of subversion”, in science fiction the “elements” of reality are inverted, “re-combining constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different” (Jackson, 8). Thus science-fiction writers do not *invent* new worlds, but *invert* their own into something seemingly new. This “subversive function” of science fiction is a means of transgression, which in Jackson’s definition means the overturning of the “rules and conventions taken to be normative” (14). Science fiction is preoccupied with issues of time and space, “as well as fictionalizing a new vision of spatial relations”, it is also “generically concerned with the interpretation of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others” (Armitt, 72, 73).

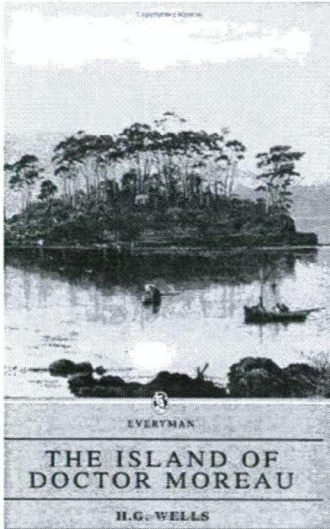


Figure 2

Fantastic novels are usually set far away from England in southern Europe, or some exotic island; science fiction novels are set similarly far away from the known or familiar, or in distant past. This feature in the fantastic and science fiction can be traced to the escapism of the Romantic era. Wells may also have intended to serve the inclinations of escapism, but he also tried to meet traditions of the English novel. By choosing the island as the setting of his novel, he follows writers like Defoe (though the theme of the island and shipwreck is as old as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which is also often discussed as a forerunner of science fiction).⁴ The symbolism behind the image of the island is worth examining. (Fig. 2)

It usually suggests a closed-in space surrounded by water, but at the same time it also implies an endless openness, surrounded by a boundless ocean and a horizon *without limits*. The ocean evokes positive feelings of calmness and inner peace. Unlike this image, however, Doctor Moreau’s island evokes only uncertainty and a sense of the uncanny from the beginning of the novel.

³ In Jackson the phrases “fantasy” and “fantastic” mean the same.

⁴ Wells adopts a method used by Defoe, suggesting in the introduction that the story told is true and that the events were noticed by the hero of the novel, though the “publisher” – who is the hero’s nephew – does not know whether his uncle had any intention of publishing it. He gives exact geographical data for the island, further underlining his claim that the story is true. In his novels Defoe gave a short preface or introduction written by the “editor” or “publisher” about the travels of the hero, in order to try to make the reader believe that this is a true story, a true account of the hero (written in first person singular) sometimes even claiming that the novel now being read is based on the travel descriptions of the hero himself. Similar islands appear in William Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies*, or in Robert Merle’s *The Island*. Other similarities are that all the three novels are about shipwrecks – or a plane-crash in the case of Golding – and about the survival of a group of people in hostile surroundings and circumstances, not to mention the questions of social problems discussed in all three novels, including *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, where the island is a place of isolation and brutality.

The feeling of closure is a feature which is another characteristic shared by fantastic texts. According to Jackson, the "limited nature of space" gives "an additional dimension" to the landscapes of the fantastic texts, "where [...] transformation [...] can be effected. This additional space is frequently narrowed down into a place, or *enclosure*, where the fantastic has become the norm" (49). Such an enclosure can be found on the island of Doctor Moreau, where the operations, or transformations, take place. This "Gothic enclosure" has the function in these texts of "a space of maximum transformation and terror" (Jackson, 47).

As Prendick, the protagonist of the novel, approaches the island on a boat after being shipwrecked and then rescued by a strange ship, he begins to experience unease in connection with the island, and its inhabitants, which enhances his growing feeling of the uncanny. The reader's uncertainty is augmented by the protagonist's admitted delirium and mental weakness. As the narrator-protagonist is alone and unconscious in the boat after his ship had sunk, his credibility comes into question. His delirium may represent a mental breakdown, and the entire episode may only be the result of a troubled mind. Moreover, the fact that the narrator-protagonist falls asleep at the end of most chapters (which begin with his awakening) may also imply that the story is only a dream or a hallucination. This undermining of the narrator's credibility calls to mind such gothic works as *Frankenstein* or Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, where Lockwood's reliability is questioned through similar devices. On the other hand, however, Prendick's credibility is strengthened by his abstinence from alcohol. On the ship which he is taken aboard, the doctor (Montgomery, as the reader later finds out) looks after him. When Montgomery and his strange companion, *M'ling*, are taken ashore along with the animals which had been transported in cages aboard the ship, the habitually drunken captain insists that Prendick must also leave the ship. On the island Prendick meets Doctor Moreau and is offered a room inside the enclosure, where he hears terrifying cries at night. He runs into the forest where he encounters beasts which he is unable to identify. He is taken back to the enclosure by Montgomery, where he is informed at last about the doctor's experiments on the animals. Later in the wood Prendick meets the beasts and their 'priest', the Sayer of the Law. He figures out that these strange beings are the outcome of Moreau's experiments, through which he tries to create humans out of animals. Becoming better acquainted with the animals, he sympathises with the beasts increasingly and tries to save them from further experiments, but in the end he realises that they cannot be rescued; neither can Montgomery nor the doctor.

The novel is also suffused with Biblical analogies. The God-figure of the text, as well as the Christ-figure, is a mere mockery of God, just as the beasts are mockeries of human beings, as Prendick observes. Moreau is not powerful enough to create a human being; his creations lack body parts, some of which are distorted or useless (e.g. human fingers which are unusable). They try desperately to walk upright in the human fashion, but ashamed of themselves, they return repeatedly to walking on all fours. As a Christ-figure Montgomery has messianic tendencies; he wants to save the beasts, but he fails. (His addiction to alcohol shows his weakness. In addition to his inability to act, he does not even consider what happens outside of the enclosure. He feels safe in it and thinks everything will right itself on its own). The island itself may be seen as an inverted Eden. Where God has disappeared, Jackson asserts, an empty space remains, which must be filled. Into this vacancy, in the place of God, another realm appears "which is neither identical with God's sphere of being, nor with that of man", something in between these two. This is the region of the uncanny, an "empty space produced by a loss of faith in divine images" (63). In the story Moreau steps into God's place, creating his own beings, his own world. His world and his people need him; they need his laws and taboos too, and it is these limitations which stimulate the events and against which the beasts rebel. These mock-Biblical

elements are the embodiments of some desire for a transcendental power, but as in most modern fantastic texts, the ends of this desire in the novel are no longer known: "breaking finite, human limits, becomes its only (im)possibility" (Jackson, 79). "Transgression takes limit to the edge of its being, to the point where it virtually disappears, in a movement of pure violence" (Jackson, 79), which is represented by the murder of Moreau and Montgomery by the beasts.

Subversion occurs in the depiction of English society in the text. This is not the only novel in which Wells portrays English society. He did the same in *The Time Machine*, his first novel, where two kinds of future humans represent the two classes of Victorian society: the working class and the upper class. The picture given in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is similar: the Beast Folk represent the exploited underclass and the group of humans the upper class. The sailors and the captain on the *Ipecachuana* are alcoholics who lack moral principles, thereby illustrating the "experience of liminality". They treat M'ling and the caged animals in a bestial manner. Moreau, the mock-God and Montgomery, the mock-Christ are the only examples of humans in the text apart from Prendick, who remains true to his beliefs but is as weak as the others. At the point when he thinks suicide is the only solution (after the other two are already dead and he remains the only human being among the half-animals), he proves as too cowardly to kill himself. Montgomery is also an alcoholic but, as Doctor Moreau's partner, he gains insight into what is happening on the island and treats the beasts in a more friendly way than Moreau, who only sees them as his creatures.

In connection with Montgomery's addiction to alcohol, it is interesting to note Prendick's abstinence. As opposed to Montgomery's weakness, he reveals mental strength and resolve. The first occasion occurs on the boat when he had no other choice, as he was unconscious. The second time he accepts alcohol when the situation on the boat worsens. He notes that what Montgomery gives him tastes like blood. This scene also allows for a Biblical interpretation: if Dr Moreau is the God-figure and the beasts worship him, Montgomery may serve as a Christ-figure. He provides a connection between humans and animals, or between God (Moreau) and the 'congregation' (the Beast Folk). As a Christ-figure, Montgomery gives his 'blood' (alcohol) to Prendick, whom he later tries to 'convert' (to convince him that what he and Moreau do on the island is right).

Even the portrait of the people in England, where he returns, is not a positive one: the English remind him of the beasts he met on the island; he sees the same faces, the same eyes, the same facial expressions. Maybe his fancy is playing tricks on him, but the people around him may really be beasts. If the latter is the case, the description of the society on the island is really a portrayal of English society in a harsh satire that confuses the English with the society of the Beast Folk.

According to Todorov, the fantastic "lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character" (175). Watching the "evil-looking boatmen" and knowing that something is definitely wrong, Prendick certainly experiences hesitation. He feels suspense, knowing nothing for sure. Suspense appears as early as in the first chapter, where the behaviour of the others and the presence of the animals on the boat remain unexplained. Prendick finds it all a mystery – including Montgomery and the doctor – until he learns the background story – though not all of it – from Montgomery and from Moreau himself. Prendick manages to recall data and events, like the facts he remembers about Moreau. In his work on the uncanny Nicolas Royle claims that "[t]he uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced" (1). This feeling of uncertainty – and experience of the uncanny – begins to grow in Prendick, when he hears the crying of the puma, which he *believes to be* the cry of a human being tortured: he interprets the signs the wrong way.

Having the impression that Dr Moreau is performing vivisection on humans, and for fear that he could be next, Prendick flees from the enclosure and experiences “something in the forest”. This is the point where the feeling of the uncanny reaches its peak: “The thicket about me became altered to my imagination”, Prendick recounts. “Every shadow became something more than a shadow, became an ambush, every rustle became threat. Invisible things seemed watching me” (Wells, 173).

As the story is told by the protagonist in retrospect, he also sees that he only imagined the things that frightened him. Prendick is not omniscient, which means that the narrator knows as little as the reader. The narrator experiences the same uncanniness and uncertainty as the reader. Later in the same chapter the narrator says: “I turned and stood facing the dark trees. I could see nothing – or else I could see too much. Every dark form in the dimness had its ominous quality, its peculiar suggestion of alert watchfulness” (Wells, 179). Familiar by daylight, the wood becomes strange and alienated at night. The alienation of the known is another feature of the uncanny. The uncanny feeling, Royle states, “comes above all, perhaps, in the uncertainties of silence, solitude and darkness” (2).

The wood is also the home of the Beast Folk. The creatures feel safe in the wood and unsafe outside of it: for them the “enclosure” is the uncanny, along with the “House of Pain”, the cries and the memories they may have about the operations. The wilderness is the home not only of the Beast Folk but also of Prendick, when he runs away from the enclosure. He finds himself among the beasts, who think he is a newcomer, one of them, and let him sleep in their cave and even take care of him. This way, the wood soon turns into a familiar place for Prendick, where he can run away and hide.

On a psychoanalytical level the wood signifies the *other* side of humans; that is it is the realm of the subconscious, where supernatural (super size) beasts, half-animal, half-human live like satyrs. These hybrids represent the suppressed thoughts, feelings and desires of the ego. Wells blurs the dividing line between *beast* and *human*. The human characters have animalistic features, the animals have human traits. The Beast People behave in ways similar to human beings: they have their own morals, which may be different from those of men, but they definitely have more morals than Dr Moreau, who remains indifferent to the suffering of the animals on which he experiments.⁵ They also have their own language. (However, language is the first trait they will lose in the course of devolution). They receive a legal framework, which is also a characteristic of being human, at least according to Moreau, who makes the Law. They get religion, which is also devised by Moreau and in close relation to his Law. Moreau himself becomes their God, and they have their priest, the Sayer of the Law, and their rituals whereby they recite the sentences of the Law, kneeling and moving their body to and fro, as if singing a psalm of praise.

Montgomery is more sympathetic to the beasts than Moreau (or Prendick, who needs time to digest what he witnesses). He is an intermediary between the creatures and the humans. He is not without animalistic features either. He is unable to resist the temptation of alcohol, which releases his feelings and suppresses his reason. Prendick knows that Montgomery is rushing towards his death at the end, when he gives alcohol to the beasts, which has the same effects on them, freeing their animal drives and survival instincts, and seeming to accelerate their regression.

When Moreau and Montgomery break their own law about not eating meat, their transgression spreads through the whole community of beasts, thus causing their death. According to Bataille (80–85), as religion (being a set of laws) is built upon a feeling of fear (of God and/or

⁵ See Ricardo Garijo’s illustrations to Wells’ best-known novels. Fig. 1.

of punishment), it leads to transgressions to dispose of fear, and transgression always accompanies violence and brutality. The Beast Folk are aware of the fact that they can only get rid of the laws if they free themselves of Moreau, the Father or God, who made them. Besides fear, people are always tempted to break laws. Transgression, or the dissolution of order, always ends in death: the death of God, in this case the death of the doctor. Transgression leads beyond the limits, but keeps the existing limits until the advent of death. With the death of God, laws and limits cease to exist and can therefore no longer be trespassed against, hence prompting the return of order – according to Bataille. But does order really return?

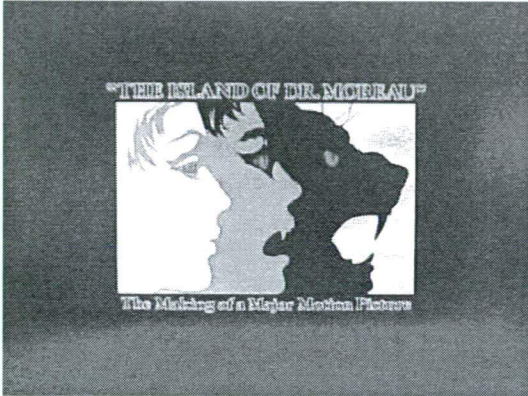


Figure 3

The beasts show the link between the animal and the human, the (missing) link in evolution. (Fig. 3) Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and around the time when the novel was written, vivisection, blood-transfusion and transplantation were important themes in scientific debates, as was the crossing of different species.⁶ This is a further theme in the novel: in addition to moral limits, the dangers of scientific progress and the responsibility of the scientist are also implied.

The border between the species is violently transgressed by the mixture of animals, just like the border between human and animal, on which a new element appears: the Beast Folk. They embody the themes of fantasy literature listed by Jackson (16): disunities (mainly in the beasts, whose appearance and movements make one feel as if they were put together by chance), heterogeneity, and the theme of the 'Other'. For Prendick, the Beast People are the Other at the beginning of the novel, but later, when he returns to England, everyone else becomes an Other. Reality becomes for him an area of non-meaning, of non-human (and non-animalistic), an area of in-between.



Figure 4

In a psychoanalytical interpretation the Other would be the beasts in the wood, who are other than human, other than animal. The transformation of the beasts, which is a transgression in itself, is only started by Moreau, but not finished, and the regression of the beasts cannot be stopped. The hesitation that never left the reader grows stronger towards the end of the novel. Prendick leaves the island seeing the animals assuming their 'original forms'. (Fig. 4) Since they are artificially made from the parts of different animals (just like Frankenstein's creature is made from the body parts of different corpses), however, they have no original form to which they can return. Once the transgression has taken place, it is impossible to return to a state of order. At the end of the novel, the fate of the beasts remains unknown. The reader only knows that the transformation has not stopped. There is "a resistance to stat-

⁶ See the *Scientific American*, June, 1896.

ic, discrete units” in the figure of the beasts; just as in Prendick’s eyes the people in England are a “juxtaposition of incompatible elements”. They have a “resistance to fixity”, as has the fantastic itself (Jackson, 19). Thus, the Beast Folk work as a metaphor for the fantastic.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Ricardo Garijo’s drawing. Source: <www.monsterwax.com>

Fig. 2. The cover of an Everyman edition of the novel, on which the island has the central role. Source: <www.rageboy.com/mbimages/cover_clip2_wells_moreau>.

Fig. 3. The process of the ‘making’: from animal into human – and vice versa? Source: <www.qwipster.net/doctor_moreau_77.jpg>. Artist unknown.

Fig. 4. A pig-man (from the film adaptation of 1996). *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Dir. John Frankenheimer. Screenplay by Richard Stanley and Ron Hutchinson. Source: <www.projo.com>.