Transforming Monsters into Humans: H.G. Wells’ s The Island of Doctor Moreau.

In Wells’s 1896 work The Island of Doctor Moreau, the Beast People are explicitly defined by the narrator Prendick as “monsters manufactured” (Island Ch. 14. 69) and “Beast Monsters” (Island Ch. 22. 127). In effect, every time he does not specify the kind of animal the creature is made of, the narrator resorts to the term “monster” (Island Ch. 17. 96, Ch. 18. 101). This occurs despite the fact that the narrator himself seems to notice the humanity that Moreau’s creatures actually impersonate when, for example, interpreting the behaviour of the Beast community by saying: “I had here before me the whole balance of human life in miniature, the whole interplay of instinct, reason, and fate, in its simplest form” (Island Ch. 16. 93). The beasts’ behaviour can therefore be clearly read as a sort of parody, of travesty of that of the human community, as representing “the idea of humanness” itself (De Paolo 12). They can be considered as human also if we refer to the Law they continually repeat and attempt to follow. “Are we not Men?” (Island Ch. 12. 57) is the question concluding every commandment that they quote. We could say that Moreau convinced them that they are human, and then chased them. The doctor is the first to break the law by inflicting pain onto other individuals. He has initially forbidden them to kill other human beings, but, by killing them, he himself is breaking the Law. Though the Beast Folk are explicitly compared to human beings on some occasions, Prendick as well as Moreau and Montgomery often refuse any comparison with them.

This is true if we think that, in the novel, the real humans are depicted almost as divine beings presiding over the Beast People as well as judging their actions, wills and thoughts. As Margaret Atwood has pointed out (xxi), in fact, Dr. Moreau is represented as a God, the creator and controller of the micro universe which is the
island. His face is described as “white and terrible” (Island Ch. 10. 48). The first time he is seen by Prendick, he is “bawling orders” (Island Ch. 5. 26). This is the first action performed by Dr. Moreau that is witnessed by the reader too. He is depicted as a God who imparts order to those surrounding and inferior to him.

Atwood has also argued that Montgomery represents Christ and M’Ling is a figure for the Holy Ghost (xxii). I would dispute this by arguing that it is Prendick who is represented as the Holy Ghost in that, by repeating Moreau’s commandments to the Beast Folk and by attempting to convince them of the continuity of Moreau’s presence after the scientist’s death, he is announcing the creator’s words among his possible followers. When trying to convince them that Moreau is not dead, but has merely “changed his shape” and is now residing in the skies “where he can watch you. You can’t see him. But he can see you” (Island Ch. 18. 101), Prendick is definitely introducing the scientist as a God. He is announcing God’s will by mediating between Moreau and the human world represented by the Beast People and their continual fight between faith and evidence, between reason and instincts.

Besides, the Beast People can be seen as human because the real human beings are depicted as monstrous and cruel individuals. They often behave in an unethical way: they are prone to violence and they lack care for the good of the other individuals or for the animals. The captain of the Ipercacuanha is said to be “three-parts drunk in his cabin” (Island Ch. 2. 10) for almost all of the journey and is shown as utterly unkind towards Prendick as well as delivering “so much vile language [. . .] in a continuous stream” (Island Ch. 3. 13). Montgomery is said to “ill-treat [M’Ling], especially after he had been at the whisky, kicking it, beating it, pelting it with stones or lighted fuses” (Island Ch. 15. 82). This is definitely not a consonant behaviour for a human being, especially if we consider that, earlier in the novel, Montgomery is said to be a
learned man who practiced medicine in London. On the island he is depicted, instead,
as Cyndy Hendeshot has suggested (8), as a degenerate. Is this the proper attitude of
an individual? The same unethical behaviour is exhibited by Prendick himself. Indeed,
he who should have been grateful to Montgomery for saving his life and to Moreau
for allowing him on the island, often demonstrates to be utterly ungrateful, as Michael
Draper has noted (46). After being given hospitality, food and help in his recovery,
Prendick demands immediate answers about Moreau’s doings on the island and is
disappointed about the lack of explanations furnished by Montgomery. He therefore
says: “I was persuaded from his manner that this ignorance was a pretence. Still I
could hardly tell the man I thought him a liar” (Island Ch. 8. 35). Is defining
Montgomery a liar all the gratitude Prendick feels and demonstrates? If we also think
of doctor Moreau as a sadistic scientist intent on inflicting pain only for the sake of
his own studies, fame and carrier, we could then argue that all of the real human
beings depicted in Wells’s work are inhuman in their behaviour towards each other
and towards the Beast People. On the contrary, this affirmation cannot be fully
applied to Moreau’s creations. In fact, they are shown as carrying out their daily
habits without inflicting any cruelty or pain to each other. They seem to be intent only
on listing the commandments of the Law and trying to follow them. Their behaviour
seems, in this way, much more human than that enacted by Moreau, Montgomery and
Prendick.

However, an identification between Prendick and the Beast People could be
established in many ways in the novel. I believe that the similarities between the
narrator and Moreau’s creations are firstly realized on a physical level by means of
the description of their eyes made throughout the novel. When lingering in the
lifeboat, Prendick says: “After the first day we [. . .] lay in our places in the boat and
stared at the horizon, or watched, with eyes that grew larger and more haggard every day, the misery and weakness gaining upon our companions” (Island Ch. 1. 6). The only action performed by the three starving men is actuated through the glances they give to each other. A few lines after, the narrator adds: “The water ended on the fourth day, and we were already thinking strange things and saying them with our eyes” (Island Ch. 1. 6). He is saying that the only way for him to express the idea of cannibalism is by staring at the others and communicating it with the eyes. It is my opinion that the description of the eyes as well as of the way an individual looks at others is what characterizes the Beast People too. When encountering the Leopard Man in the forest, the narrator says: “he looked up guiltily, and his eyes met mine” (Island Ch. 9. 38). The two characters simply look at each other. This is all the action they perform, just as in the case of the three men on the gunwale. Prendick attributes guilt to the glance of the Leopard Man because he suspects that it has eaten flesh and could then commit cannibalism. In Wells’s novel, the occasions in which two or more characters stare at each other without moving or talking are linked to the thought of cannibalism.

Another particular which has not been noted by previous critics and which, according to me, constitutes a central point in the narrative is made by the continuous and detailed references of the narrator to his need and consumption of food. All of Prendick’s main meals are mentioned during the tale, even when it does not seem necessary. He describes in detail his first meal in Moreau’s compound by saying that he is offered: “a tray bearing bread, some herbs, and other eatables, a flask of whisky, a jug of water, and three glasses and knives” (Island Ch. 8. 34). Is this really necessary and useful in regard to the tale of his experience on the island? Besides, food is also the subject of many conversations Prendick has with the other characters
of the tale. The very second time he addresses Montgomery on the Ipercacuanha, he asks: “Am I eligible for solid food?” (Island Ch. 2. 9). This question is repeated when he addresses the Beast People after Montgomery’s death. It is the need for food which drives Prendick to join the company of the Beast People. This is said in a context in which a sort of identity is established between the narrator himself and the Beast Folk. He specifies, indeed: “I lost the opportunity [of ruling over the Beast People], and sank to the position of a mere leader among my fellows” (Island Ch. 20. 115). Thus, Moreau’s creatures are seen by the narrator himself as his fellows. He now considers himself as their equal. A few lines later he describes his encounter with them with the following words: “I want food,” said I, almost apologetically, and drawing near” (Island Ch. 20. 115). I would argue, then, that it is the very need for food which forces him to consider himself as their equal. This is confirmed when, at the beginning of the following chapter, he states: “in this way I became one among the Beast People in the Island of Doctor Moreau” (Island Ch. 21. 116).

Another way of affirming that the Beast People could be seen as human beings in respect to the monstrosity exhibited by the human characters of the novel is by realizing that Prendick’s narrative could be interpreted as unreliable. In this way, his description of the Beast People as monsters would not be valid. Firstly, he himself admits his own doubts regarding his own perception of reality. When being chased by the Leopard Man, he specifies that “at times I would turn and listen, and presently I half-persuaded myself that my pursuer had abandoned the chase, or was a mere creation of my disordered imagination” (Island Ch. 9. 43). This seems to be an admission of unreliability on the narrator’s part. He doubts his own mind by thinking that the Leopard Man is merely an illusion, a creation of his own brain. He also addresses Moreau, when asking for explanations on the creatures he saw on the island,
in “a state bordering on hysteric” (Island Ch. 10. 46). Is a narrator who falls into a hysteric state of mind really reliable and trustworthy for the reader? Secondly, Prendick is not completely stable as well as prone to quick judgements about the surrounding reality. After some assumptions about the nature of Moreau’s experiments on the island, he becomes very confident about his own explanation by declaring: “I was convinced now, absolutely assured, that Moreau had been vivisecting a human being” (Island Ch. 11. 50). Is he so absolutely assured? As we can see in the rest of the narrative, such a thesis is not right at all. Thus, how could he be so sure? He formulates such a hypothesis without confirmation or any proof. This contradicts the very scientific spirit and method he should have learned when he was a student of Thomas Henry Huxley, as he affirms during the tale (Island Ch. 6. 27). It is then legitimate to wonder whether he is a reliable narrator, since he formulates such judgements without proofs. Thirdly, and most importantly, the introduction to the narrative offered by Prendick’s nephew definitely establishes his tale as a fictional narrative. Charles Edward Prendick’s words discredit his uncle’s veracity. At the beginning of the introduction, Charles argues that his uncle “gave such a strange account of himself that he was supposed demented” (Island Introduction. 3). The reliability of Prendick as a truthful narrator is thus placed on an uncertain status. This is further emphasized by the fact that, as Charles largely explains, Noble’s island, which actually corresponds to the place described by his uncle, has been definitely charted as uninhabited. The tale about Moreau and his creatures cannot be substantiated by any empirical evidence. In the same respect, the fact that the Ipercacuanha is said to have shipped in that area of the ocean certainly establishes the truth of Prendick’s presence on Noble’s island. However, this is the only truth that can be established with certainty in the end. Prendick has definitely been on Noble Island,
but, since there was no sign of Moreau’s creations in a subsequent patrol, we are entitled to affirm that all the facts corroborate the evidence for the mental creation of the monsters. Why has he created the illusion of these monsters and elaborated a narrative about them?

My suggestion is that Prendick actually imagines the Beast Folk, that he creates them in his mind, because of his own traumatic experience of cannibalism. He fancies the Beast People as potentially cannibalistic in that he himself has been a cannibal on the lifeboat and refuses to admit such a truth to the crew of the Ipercacuanha as well as to the people of England he returns to at the end of the tale and to the reader. The argument that Prendick’s narrative is a hysterical hallucination caused by his practice of cannibalism on the gunwale has been sustained by critics such as John Glendening (576-77) and Elaine Showalter (81-82). These critics, however, do not specify many details about the tale’s references to cannibalism. Instead, I will argue that, along with the constant references the narrator makes to food, the very way he behaves when alone on the island often parallels his behaviour aboard the lifeboat. For example, after Montgomery’s death, he describes his following actions: “And there I sat, chin on knees, the sun beating down upon my head, and a growing dread in my mind, plotting how I could live on against the hour of my rescue (if ever rescue came)” (Island Ch. 20. 113). As in the case of the lifeboat, he is facing a cruel fate, with the sun beating over his head, and waiting to be rescued. He is desperate about his fate, with a specific dread in his mind in both occasions. On the lifeboat, it was the explicit dread of practising cannibalism over another human being. In this case, it is the dread of being cannibalised himself. In many passages of his brief narrative about the experience of loneliness and his eleven-month life with the Beast People, it is difficult for the reader to distinguish whether Prendick is actually talking about his experience
with Moreau’s creatures or about the experience with the two men on the gunwale. We could refer the sentence “the change was slow and inevitable. For them and for me it came without any definitive shock” (Island Ch. 21. 121) to the beginning of the narrative as well. This would be confirmed by the fact that Prendick chooses not to recount his experience with Moreau and his creations after being rescued (Island Ch. 22. 127). The reader is entitled to think that Prendick is refraining from telling about his alleged practice of cannibalism too. This is confirmed by the fact that he is very aware of such a practice. Cannibalism is indeed referred to in the text on some occasions. On the one hand, Montgomery reminds Prendick that “there were spots of blood on the gunwale” (Island Ch. 2. 8). We are not told how blood comes to be on the gunwale. Is it because of the fight between the two other survivors, or actually because Prendick fed with their bodies? Montgomery is uttering these accusatory words just after he has been staring at Prendick. As we saw before, cannibalism is expressed through a person’s glances at his fellows: it is never explicitly mentioned by the narrator, but only alluded to. In this case, it is Montgomery who is making such an allusion to Prendick, allusion which is allegedly validated by the physical evidence of blood. On the other hand, Prendick even mentions other cases of cannibalism when referring to the widely discussed Medusa case (Island Ch. 1. 5).

The argument that the Beast People are cannibals created by the hysterical mind of a person who actually practiced survival cannibalism could parallel the studies conducted on the subject of cannibalism in the past thirty years, and particularly William Arens’s 1979 assertion that there exists no substantial evidence documenting the existence of anthropophagy among indigenous tribes all over the world (21). This controversial argument, which has produced a long series of responses from the academic community, has been agreed upon by many other critics, who believe that
all narratives of cannibalism are actually a projection of violence onto colonized people (especially people living in the Pacific ocean) on the part of Western colonizers (Root 9; Pickering 54; Obeyesekere “Narratives” 55). According to these critics, this has been done in order to justify the real massacres and evil acts accomplished throughout the centuries by the colonizers themselves. In this sense, we could apply to Prendick’s actions H. L. Malchow’s affirmation that “accusations of cannibalism establish the community of the virtuous by projecting onto others evils feared within” (43). His fear of being eaten alive by the Beast Folk exactly represents the evil he has probably committed after the shipwreck of the Lady Vain. Prendick is, after all, a Western white male visiting a Pacific island—actually charting it with his explorations and wanderings—and making contact with the local population, though judging them through his own prejudices. He attributes cannibalism to the indigenous tribe of the place--the Beast People--just as many colonizers did during the modern age and especially during the expansion of the British Empire.

The Beast People can therefore be interpreted as a representation of human beings in that the real humans are depicted as unethical and inhuman. The real monster present in Wells’s book is the narrator himself. Prendick transfers onto his imaginative creation of the Beast People the monstrosity he has committed and is trying to repress. He has elaborated a tale of monsters in order to hide the fact that he himself has been a monster. This is the reason why, though not admitting any effective identity with the Beast Folk, he can be compared to them through the description of his eyes as well as of his actions and, most importantly, through the frequent references to his need and consumption of food.
Works Cited


