

“As remorseless as Nature”: Victorian sublime in Dr Moreau’s *fin de siècle*-manifestation of the ‘mad scientist’

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Abstract

This dissertation discusses H. G. Wells' *Island of Doctor Moreau* from a Romantic perspective, arguing that the novel's antagonist Doctor Moreau fails in transforming animals into human beings through the practice of vivisection due to the impossibility of overpowering the sublime nature. Following Burke's notion of 'the sublime' as a terrifying, omnipotent entity which instils fear and awe in equal measure, the sublime power of nature is represented in this novel by the force of evolution, which changed the Victorian society's anthropocentric understanding of the world in the aftermath of Darwin's theory of evolution. By analysing Moreau's character in juxtaposition to Victor Frankenstein's and Dr Jekyll's incarnations of the 'mad scientist' trope, this work supports the view that Moreau's adherence to the aforementioned stereotype has evolved from previous Romantic manifestations to one that depicts the *fin de siècle* pessimism in which the novel was written, and that reflects Victorian anxieties towards disquieting theories of degeneration, the regressive process whereby complex organisms revert to humbler beings. This analysis shows that Moreau's version of the 'mad scientist', rather than solely pursuing scientific knowledge beyond the laws of nature as attempted by his literary predecessors, also involves a desire for imitating the sublime power of nature by *becoming* evolution, thus, resulting in a deification of the scientist himself. The impossibility of overpowering nature, however, is portrayed by Wells as inevitable and illustrated not only through Moreau's atrophy of morality, since the scientist's empathetic connections towards his experiments are dissolved and transformed into cruel indifference, but also through the Beast Folk's atrophy of the body, that is, through their impending degeneration to their original animal state. In this, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* seems to follow a rather Romantic conception of the sublime nature, whose power proves impossible to undermine even for the ruthless *fin de siècle* version of the 'mad scientist' found in Moreau.

Keywords: *The Island of Doctor Moreau*; H. G. Wells; the sublime; mad scientist; *fin de siècle*.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Scientific context: Victorian evolutionism	2
3. <i>Moreau</i> and the <i>fin de siècle</i> version of the ‘mad scientist’	6
3.1. <i>Moreau</i> and the 19 th century sublime	6
3.2. Doctor <i>Moreau</i> and the ‘mad scientist’ in the Gothic tradition	9
3.3. Degeneration: the atrophy of morality and the atrophy of the body	14
4. Conclusion	18
Works cited	20

1. Introduction

The Island of Doctor Moreau, written by H. G. Wells in 1896, narrates the story of a shipwrecked Edward Prendick, who, upon his arrival to a mostly uninhabited island, is faced with the half human, half animal beings which the formidable scientist Doctor Moreau has created through vivisection in an attempt to transform them into humans. His experiments, however, always go awry and the vivisected animals, the Beast Folk, revert to their initial primal state. In spite of Moreau's relatively brief appearance in the novel as opposed to Prendick's predominance, his relentless and enigmatic character has nonetheless sparked great interest among Wells' readers for many decades.

Since *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is one of Wells' most famous scientific romances, alongside *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and owing to the vast array of themes discussed in the novel, many scholars have approached it from different perspectives over the years. McNabb, for instance, has analysed the novel from a historicist perspective, in terms of its connection to the scientific discoveries which influenced Wells' writing during the 1890s. Scholars such as Taneja and Generani, on the other hand, rejecting conventional Gothic interpretations of *Moreau*, have instead effected rather political readings, focusing on the novel's denunciation of Darwinian theories as justification for the expansion of the British Empire. Moreover, in recent years, literature has emerged that relates the novel to current biological studies, such as Danta's "The future will have been animal," addressing the ethics of the creation of hybrid creatures discussed in *Moreau* which are relevant to contemporary genetics.

I would contend, however, that there seems to be a scarce amount of readings of *Moreau* derived from a Romantic perspective, in spite of its allusions to Burke's 'sublime' which I will further discuss in section 3.1.: while previous studies have in fact analysed certain quintessential Romantic characteristics in relation to the novel, their relevance within the research, nonetheless, appears to have been relegated to a rather secondary position. As a matter of fact, the idea for this project was conceived during my time studying British Romanticism, which is why, being already acquainted with *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine*, I identified in Wells' oeuvre a connection between *fin de siècle* pessimism and prevalent theories of evolutionary power of degeneration, on the one hand, and the Romantic notion of 'the sublime', on the other.

Therefore, in the interest of filling the aforementioned gap of research, this dissertation seeks to defend the view that Doctor Moreau's failure in creating human beings through vivisected animals implicitly follows the Romantic notion of sublime nature, filtered through *fin de siècle* pessimism and evolutionary theories concerning degeneration. By offering such an interpretation of the novel, I argue that nature's powers, here portrayed as the process of both upwards and downwards evolution, cannot be surpassed by the overambitious scientist. In acting against the Romantic principle of the sublime, since Moreau attempts to emulate nature by *becoming* evolution himself, his pursuits are inevitably doomed as nature degenerates his vivisected experiments back to their original animal form.

This work will be organised according to the following structure: firstly, I will provide an overview of the main scientific discoveries of the Victorian period in relation to their influence on Wells, namely, the leading theories of evolution defended by Darwin and Lamarck and relevant research in the newly flourishing field of psychology. Then, I will introduce section 3 by defining key Romantic concepts vital for the dissertation's understanding in 3.1., as well as remarking the importance of certain Gothic elements in the portrayal of Moreau and his Beast Folk. This will be followed by two main topics of analysis in order to explain why Moreau's experiments are doomed from the beginning: on the one hand, in section 3.2. I will establish a comparison between Moreau and two of his predecessors, Frankenstein and Jekyll, insofar as they represent the stereotypical image of the overambitious 'mad scientist' who attempts to gain power beyond natural limitations, arguing that Moreau epitomises this trope while also reflecting a *fin de siècle* pessimism which is not present in the same way in his literary predecessors. On the other hand, section 3.3. will give further evidence of the sublimity of nature's degeneration and its moral and physical repercussions on Moreau and his failed experiments, respectively. Lastly, this will be followed by some conclusions derived from the study. MLA style (8th edition) will be used for referencing sources throughout.

2. Scientific context: Victorian evolutionism

"If, for millions of years, our globe has taken the upward road, yet, some time, the summit will be reached and the downward route will be commenced" (Huxley 85). With these words the renowned biologist T. H. Huxley summarised some of the main anxieties

which tormented the Victorian society in the wake of Darwinian evolutionary theory. Indeed, in order to comprehend the numerous implications of *Moreau*, it is imperative that the scientific context in which the novel was written be examined beforehand, as *Moreau* reflects many of these anxieties and references several theories by which Wells was influenced. Written in 1896, *Moreau* belongs to the Victorian *fin de siècle*, a period marked by a deep sense of philosophical pessimism. As explained by Shrimpton, partly arising as a reaction against the optimistic “Romantic enthusiasm for the natural” (57) and being the culmination of waves of pessimism dating back to the 18th century (49), *fin de siècle* pessimism was influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy and maintained that existence in this world only brings about extreme agony, an idea manifested in literature through an “aesthetic and decadent turn against nature,” which was now perceived as cruel and relentless (57). This view was endorsed by certain scientific discoveries which challenged religious dogma, such as Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833), which scientifically proved the Earth’s age, and Darwin’s theory of evolution in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), which traced humanity’s origins back to our ape ancestors; consequently, there was a change in the established Victorian understanding of the world which gave rise to many anxieties, social as well as religious (Ruddick 190; Hurley, *The Gothic Body* 56).

Being a man of science himself, Wells avidly partook in scientific discussions with fellow scholars, engaging in numerous debates over articles which discussed the latest discoveries regarding the leading evolutionary theories of his time, namely, Darwinism and Lamarckism (Glendening 580). In his overview of Wells’ articles, McNabb states that some of those articles offer a critique of certain Victorian attitudes towards evolution, such as the widespread perception of this process as a unidirectional linear progress, since, according to Wells, this view’s “fallacy . . . was shown by evolution sometimes reversing direction” (389). In other words, Wells’ “Zoological Retrogression,” published in the September 1891 issue of *Gentleman’s Magazine* and fundamental for the comprehension of *Moreau*, confirms that he rejected the idea of humanity having already reached or being on its way of reaching the summit of the evolutionary process due to examples of species reverting to less developed organisms, i.e. due to occurrences of “devolution” or degeneration. Having studied under Huxley’s tutelage during his time at the Normal School of Science, Wells’ views on evolution were profoundly influenced by his teachings and, consequently, by Darwinism, as Huxley was a fervent defender of his

theory. With regards to this, Huxley includes the previously mentioned process of *degeneration* in his definition of evolution, as stated in the prolegomena to his *Evolution and Ethics*:

Taken in its popular signification [evolution] means progressive development, that is, gradual change from a condition of relative uniformity to one of relative complexity; but its connotation has been widened to include the phenomena of retrogressive metamorphosis, that is, of progress from a condition of relative complexity to one of relative uniformity. (6)

Therefore, according to Huxley's take on Darwinism, the 'fittest' specimen, survivor of the struggle for existence, could possibly be a humbler form of living which has better adapted to the changes in its environment through degeneration (80-81). Darwinian tenets also posit that "if one part of an organism [is] adapted under natural selection, there would be knock-on effects on others parts, but they would not necessarily be . . . of benefit to the organism" (McNabb 394), which is further proved by biologist Ron Edwards, who defines evolutionary adaptations not as necessity per se but as "a case-by-case phenomenon depending on local variables" (98), thus, underlining the randomness of natural selection and invalidating the Victorian view that evolution inherently aims towards a betterment of humanity as a species. As a result, the process referred to by Huxley and Wells as "retrogressive metamorphosis" and "zoological retrogression," respectively, seems to have evoked among the Victorians in the last decades of the 19th century a fear that humanity too could "devolve or otherwise metamorphose into some repulsive . . . form" (Hurley, "British Gothic Fiction" 195). In the interest of maintaining clarity, I will henceforth refer to this regressive process as "degeneration."

On the other hand, although the influence of Darwinian natural selection upon Wells' views on evolution is indisputable, it should be noted that theories such as Lamarckism also appeared to be of relevance in the writing of *Moreau*. Increasingly supported by the scientific community during the *fin de siècle*, Lamarck's theory suggests that human beings inherently aspire towards evolutionary progress and that, insofar as evolution is an "intelligence-driven process," new traits acquired through education could be inherited by the following generations (Glendening 579), as opposed to Darwin's more gradual and arbitrary natural selection. In addition, as stated by Stiles, Lamarckian principles postulate that the overuse of any organ must be compensated by the

degeneration or even elimination of other body parts (328). Even though McNabb speculates that Wells had already rejected Lamarckism in favour of Darwinism while working on the first draft of *Moreau* (394), other scholars suggest that certain passages in the novel contradict this view, as Doctor Moreau's attempt to humanise the Beast Folk through language and education seems to allude to certain Lamarckian tenets, which will be further discussed in section 3.3., page 16.

With regard to leading psychological studies during the late 19th century, many scholars at the time defended the view that humanity had developed “larger brains at the expense of muscular strength, reproductive capacity, and moral sensibility” (Stiles 319), which would agree with the aforementioned Lamarckian principle of the deterioration of bodily functions as a result of the enlargement of an organ. Furthermore, Stiles surmises that due to the Victorians' glorification of the standard mediocre man, deviations from this ideal, such as increased mental ability, were usually pathologised (321-322) to the extent of ‘genius’ being regarded as “a true degenerative psychosis belonging to the group of moral insanity” (Lombroso qtd. in Stiles 325)¹. This particular notion of ‘moral insanity’, lengthily discussed in psychological and criminological studies during the second half of the 19th century (Ganz 364), was coined by James Cowles Prichard and described as “a disorder which affects only the feelings and affections, or what are termed the moral powers of the mind, in contradistinction to the powers of the understanding or intellect” (qtd. in Ganz 370). As a consequence, there was a shared association of highly intellectual people diagnosed with mental illness, which came to prominence in the nineteenth century and influenced Wells' writings.

Lastly, it is also worth noting that vivisection, practiced by Doctor Moreau in the novel, was a controversial matter and topic of a myriad of medical discussions during the Victorian period. As defined by Braun, this procedure “entails systematic cutting and manipulation of a living animal [and] assumes [that] bodily structures can only be properly understood when life processes are ongoing” (503). The increase in animal experimentation during the 1860s and the confrontation between pro-vivisectionists and anti-vivisectionists resulted in the British government passing the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1876, which regulated vivisection to an extent, albeit not prohibiting its practice

¹ It is worth mentioning that this belief was so widespread that John Stuart Mill was prompted to articulate a protest against it when he championed the individual genius as a prerogative for progress in his philosophical essay *On Liberty* (1859).

altogether (Edwards 53-54). According to Braun, the disagreement between scientists on the matter seems to have been partly caused by the previously mentioned Darwinian discoveries: on the one hand, his theory of evolution appeared to condone vivisection since the physiological resemblance between humans and animals seemingly justified the experimentation; on the other hand, the very same link ethically condemned the practice due to the animal ancestry of humanity (503). Although most scholars agree that Wells' own views on the controversy are unclear, it is nevertheless important to mention that these opposing viewpoints regarding vivisection are illustrated in *Moreau*, surely alluding to the contemporary relevance of the topic (Edwards 55).

3. *Moreau* and the *fin de siècle* version of the 'mad scientist'

3.1. *Moreau* and the 19th century sublime

Before proceeding to analyse *Moreau*, it is of utmost importance to explain certain key concepts hovering around the (originally) Romantic notion of the sublime, in order to comprehend the role of Doctor Moreau in the context of the preceding literary renderings of the mad scientist.

The Romantic concept of the sublime is commonly believed to have originated in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), which unified the previously differing interpretations of this notion. In his work, Burke separates the meaning of the beautiful from the sublime, defining the former as something perceived to be aesthetically pleasing whereas the source of the latter "excite[s] the ideas of pain, and danger, . . . whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror" (qtd. in Weiskel 87). Burke's conception of terror is that of "fear of injury, pain, and ultimately death" and, in turn, the sublime "either . . . directly suggests the idea of danger, . . . produces a similar effect physiologically, or . . . is some modification of power," given that he equates power with the ability to cause pain (Weiskel 92). Furthermore, Burke identifies the sensation of astonishment as the effect of natural sublime upon its perceiver, a paralysing "state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended" (qtd. in Landow 1).

Throughout the following years, Burke's emphasis on the ecstasy and terror derived from the sublime was expanded beyond the boundaries of aestheticism by the First Generation of Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, who believed in the possibility of "transcendence into the realm of God and the religious world" through the sublime manifested in nature (D. Stevenson 7).² Moreover, among the Second Generation of Romantics, poets like Percy Shelley once again returned to Burke's emphasis on the sublime's superior and threatening being, claiming that "nature is at once splendid and deadly, a dynamic force that cannot be tamed by man" (Drummond 3), thus, departing from Enlightenment tendencies towards structuring nature according to human constructions. Therefore, the notion of the sublime nature is rooted in Romantic precepts and relevant to literature in the following decades.

Widely referred to as "the father of science fiction," albeit sharing said title with contemporary French writer Jules Verne, H. G. Wells is believed to have been one of its main promoters during the *fin de siècle* and his predominance within the genre remains unequivocal to this day. Hence, Wells' *Moreau* is located within the early stages of science fiction, the beginning of which is commonly agreed to be marked by Mary Shelley's influential Romantic novel *Frankenstein* (Hao 332). One could characterise this genre as being a realist version of the fantastic, that is, a mixture or blurring of realism and fantasy, insofar as the seemingly impossible and fantastic events narrated in science fiction are nevertheless supported by arguments rooted in science and technological discovery (Glendening 583). In fact, Wells himself states that the science found in his scientific romances attempts to substitute the role fulfilled by magic in fantastic fiction; thus, since magical justifications do not quite correspond to the pessimistic tone of the *fin de siècle*, Wells provides the events in his narratives with scientific plausibility by making the explanations as close to current theories as possible (Danta 689). However, given that science fiction would not establish itself as a fully-fledged genre until well after the writing of *Moreau*, it is important to note the cultural significance of the preceding literary

² Such thoughts are representative of Natural Theology, a set of beliefs according to which God could be made manifest "in the ultimately just and divine order of nature" (Drummond 7), a viewpoint adopted by Wordsworth and Coleridge. For the former, nature, symbolising God's benevolence, is a "gentle, nurturing force who teaches and soothes humanity" (Warren 2) and acts as the guide for human morality and social conduct, an idea clearly expressed in the following lines of his poem "The Tables Turned": "One impulse from a vernal wood / May teach you more of man, / Of moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can" (21-24). As for Coleridge, the divinity of natural elements is referenced, for instance, in "Frost at Midnight," where the poet wishes to raise his son in the countryside, in communion with nature, so that he can learn the natural landscape's "eternal language, which thy God / Utters, who from eternity doth teach Himself in all, and all things in himself. / Great universal Teacher!" (60-63).

tradition and its influence on Wells' work, especially concerning the figure of the mad scientist.

Braun, for instance, identifies in Moreau's vivisection practice the inherently Gothic feature of blurring pre-established dichotomies, such as the self/other, human/animal or savagery/civilisation (502). This disintegration of the threshold between seemingly contrasting notions is embodied by monstrous, uncanny *abhumans* like Moreau's Beast Folk, who defy said dichotomies by representing an intermediate state and generate horror and disgust within the readers, thus, destabilising their comprehension of the world. Such manifestations are directly linked to the idea that certain scientific practices cause nature, embodied by monstrous avengers, to strike back, in a fantastic twist of the idea of the sublime, which was very much present in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, whose radical development of the Gothic novel along scientific terms has already been mentioned as a commonly acknowledged source of departure for the genre of science fiction. The presence of these beings in *Moreau* is why Hurley also chooses to address the novel as Gothic, opting for the term of 'abhuman bodies' to refer to entities who are "incorporating, mimicking, or taking on a human form, thereby constituting another kind of threat to the integrity of human identity" ("British Gothic Fiction" 190). Furthermore, Hurley suggests that these beings reflect Victorian anxieties towards degeneration in a twofold manner: on the one hand, they personify the possibility that humans may be neither "fully evolved" nor "fully human," and on the other, that instead of progressing "towards a telos of intellectual and moral perfection," humanity could recede back to a more animalistic state (*The Gothic Body* 56). At the back of such anxieties hovers the idea of the sublime as a natural process of regulation and punishment.

The aforementioned notion of the 'uncanny' or *unheimlich*, coined by Sigmund Freud and used to describe the Beast Folk by many scholars, refers to a familiar thing which is rendered unfamiliar or *vice versa*, a disturbing thing that creates a sense of apprehension. Freud himself wrote that the "uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (74). With respect to the representation of the uncanny in the previous German Romantic *Kunstmärchen*, he identifies E. T. A. Hoffman as "the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature" (69), and refers to Jentsch's praise of Hoffman's use of the uncanny to create a feeling of uneasiness in the reader regarding the true nature of a particular being, without openly

drawing attention to this concern so that the mysteriousness of the matter is still maintained (Freud 65). The idea of the sublime is here made manifest by a psychological process that changes our perception of the world and our own place in it, as when we are overwhelmed by natural forces larger than ourselves that act upon us in a threatening way.

3.2. Doctor Moreau and the ‘mad scientist’ in the Gothic tradition

As was clarified before, the perception of ‘genius’ in the Victorian period vastly differed from the emphasis on poetic genius upheld during Romanticism. Stiles posits that due to the widespread association between genius and insanity during the nineteenth century, many authors were increasingly interested in writing about scientific prodigies, which led to the development of the ‘mad scientist’ trope known today (323). In this tradition, arguably inaugurated by Frankenstein in the homonymous novel, these scientists usually follow the narrative of scientific Prometheanism, that is, “an obsessive or excessive pursuit of knowledge, aiming to equal God and create humanoid beings, . . . which can end in catastrophic destruction” (Hao 330). Following Danta’s claim that Moreau is characterised by his teratogenic endeavours, i.e. by his “artificial production of monstrosities” (699), I would argue that this trait stems from the preceding Gothic renderings of the trope in Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein and Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr Jekyll, since their experiments produce monstrous or, as Hurley would put it, *abhuman* creatures who convey a sense of uncanniness within society — and are punished by sublime manifestations of natural forces which regulate that which they have (illegitimately) striven to modify.

Therefore, I will now focus on a character analysis of Moreau, arguing that, being a composite of traits already present in his Gothic predecessors Frankenstein and Jekyll, Moreau is a typically *fin de siècle*-representation of the mad scientist which portrays a particular version of the Romantic sublime. In order to defend this point of view and analyse the evolution of explicit and implicit literary manifestations of the sublime forces of nature through the trope of the mad scientist and his projects, from Romanticism until the late Victorian period, I will compare the three scientists — Victor Frankenstein, Dr Jekyll and Dr Moreau — in terms of their ambition, responsibility and the creator/creation power dynamics so as to confirm that due to Moreau’s characteristics, he belongs more to the *fin de siècle* perception of the mad scientist than to previous conceptions.

Frankenstein, Jekyll and Moreau seem to share several features of the mad scientist stereotype, the most evident of which is their overbearing ambition: an all-consuming intellectual hunger that knows no boundaries and is the main driving force behind their respective pursuits. The three appear to believe that the end justifies the means, even if it implies working under perilous conditions as well as accepting a rather strict self-imposed reclusion, and regard their passion for knowledge more as an irresistible impulse than controlled enthusiasm. Frankenstein, for instance, states that he “desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation” (Shelley 50), while Jekyll similarly notes that “the temptation of a discovery so singular and profound . . . overcame the suggestions of alarm” (R. L. Stevenson 57), hence, placing the success of their experiments before their own safety.

While all three characters share the trait of over-ambition, what seems to have evolved from Romanticism until the *fin de siècle* is the justification of the mad scientist’s endeavours. The common justification, that still prevails today, is informed by utilitarian precepts: for instance, Hao, in a recent article on the moral predicaments derived from the development of artificial intelligence, asserts that “[i]ntellectual freedom is no excuse for scientists to abdicate their own responsibility for the higher interests of humankind” (331). With respect to this, many scholars have concluded that Frankenstein manifests certain “Promethean virtues,” since his experiment is aimed at the betterment of humanity (Ruddick 199) — which can be seen when Frankenstein states his wish to “banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death” (Shelley 32) and to “renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (Shelley 47). Even though Frankenstein seems to entertain a genuine interest in applying his discoveries to the improvement of society, I would not entirely agree that this is his main motivation, as there are other examples which imply that there is a monomaniac private ambition behind his pursuit of knowledge: “a new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (Shelley 47), Frankenstein says at one point. It could be extrapolated that even though Frankenstein does see the practical benefits of his research, examples such as this one illustrate an inner desire for self-aggrandisement and even self-deification, taking on the role of god by virtue of his own “sublime” creation, which overwhelms and fascinates in equal measure. As for Jekyll, he transforms into Hyde for his own personal gratification and in no moment tries to share his newly-found discoveries with other people. Lastly,

Prendick acknowledges the lack of social interest in Moreau's pursuits, remarking that "he was so irresponsible, so utterly careless" and that "[h]is curiosity, his mad, aimless investigations, drove him on" (Wells 184), which is what makes it impossible for him to sympathise with Moreau. In fact, Gomel claims that Moreau's agenda is not utilitarian but rather egotistical, as inflicting pain on the creatures allows him to "re-create himself in the image of cruel and sublime nature" (416), an idea which I will develop later. Therefore, I would contend that the foundations of Moreau's selfish motivations had already been laid by Frankenstein and intensified by Jekyll, and that all three show different manifestations of the scientist striving to take nature in their own hands in an attempt to produce something sublime.

In spite of their similarities, it is in their repentance that they significantly differ, since the first two narrate a cautionary tale which warns about the dangers of overambitious scientific endeavours, whereas Moreau, as a character, does not. For example, Frankenstein advises the polar explorer Walton against pursuing overbearing enterprises in the following terms: "[I]earn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow" (Shelley 46). Moreau's apparent absence of remorse could be partly due to the fact that he is not the narrator of the novel, which is entirely told from another character's perspective, i.e. Prendick's, unlike *Frankenstein* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. I would argue, however, that even in the chapter "Moreau explains," where the doctor clarifies the motivations behind his project and is allowed to focalize the narrative, there is no sign of apparent regret. As we shall see below, this is in itself a manifestation of the *fin de siècle* version of the mad scientist.

The mad scientist in the tradition of nineteenth century Gothic and science fiction, then, is marked by an adherence to the notion of the sublime and characterised by his lack of responsibility, not only towards the rest of humanity but also towards his own creation. Although Ganz claims that Stevenson does declare Jekyll guilty of all charges in his novella (367), it should be noted that in the last chapter's retelling of the events, Jekyll attempts to justify his actions and prove his innocence before the readers. When referring to Hyde's assassination of Sir Danvers Carew, Jekyll states that "no man morally sane could have been guilty of that crime upon so pitiful a provocation" (R. L. Stevenson 64), thus, alleging that he suffers from moral insanity and should not be held accountable for

his actions. As we have discussed above, in the late Victorian period geniuses were commonly linked with this mental illness, which led to the association between ‘madness’ and ‘scientists’ that created the popular mad scientist trope. In fact, we can appreciate certain similarities between traits represented through Jekyll’s and Moreau’s characterisations and the symptoms of a morally insane patient, which Victorian psychiatrist Henry Maudsley enumerates in the following way: “[h]e has no capacity of true moral feeling; all his impulses and desires, to which he yields without check, are egoistic; his conduct appears to be governed by immoral motives, which are cherished and obeyed without any evident desire to resist them” (qtd. in Ganz 372). In relation to this, Stiles suggests that French neurologist Jacques-Joseph Moreau served as a source of inspiration for Wells’ character, lending him not only his surname but also the belief that geniuses’ obsessive works are a “result of impulse and an instinctive need, and of an intellectual appetite that makes itself felt” (Moreau qtd. in Stiles 325). Thus, being subject to involuntary impulses and lacking a sense of empathy towards the Beast Folk, I would argue that Wells’ Doctor Moreau could be categorised as morally insane.

Turning now to the creator/creation dichotomy, this relationship develops from Frankenstein’s abhorrence of his Creature to Jekyll’s initial acceptance of Hyde as a means of liberation from strict Victorian standards of propriety, and finally, to Moreau’s deep indifference towards the Beast Folk. Even if all of them avoid their responsibilities as ‘the creator’, the relationship between the scientist and his uncanny creation is very similar in the first two cases, whereas Moreau is incapable of developing any significant connection with the Beast Folk, given that he is “churning out monsters in an almost industrial fashion” (Gomel 416). In the case of Frankenstein, as a consequence of his repudiation of the Creature, the creator’s initial authority over his creation is completely undermined, to the extent that this shift in power dynamics is explicitly stated in the novel by the Creature itself: “You are my creator, but I am your master – obey!” (Shelley 172). In Jekyll, however, we find a co-dependent relationship where both sides of the same being struggle for dominance, but the creator still maintains a degree of power over the creation because Hyde “fears [Jekyll’s] power to cut him off by suicide” (R.L. Stevenson 69). Lastly, Moreau is depicted as having the upper hand in this power dynamics right until he dies, becoming the epitome of what Gomel calls the image of “Dr Death”: “a ruthless surgeon, a monster-maker who indiscriminately destroys and creates life” (396). It is important to note that when Prendick manifests his disgust regarding Moreau’s

methods and the unnecessary infliction of pain derived from his procedures, Moreau rapidly disregards his complaints, describing his own views on pain as follows: “[s]o long as visible or audible pain turns you sick, so long as your own pains drive you, so long as pain underlies your propositions about sin, so long, I tell you, you are an animal, thinking a little less obscurely what an animal feels” (162). This example seems to highlight real life vivisectionist Claude Bernard’s influence on the composition of Moreau, since the character’s justification is similar to Bernard’s, who claims that a true scientist “no longer hears the cry of animals, he no longer sees the blood that flows, he sees only his idea and perceives only organisms concealing problems which he intends to solve” (qtd. in Braun 509). Moreover, Glendening adds that Moreau’s upper position in the creator/creation hierarchy is caused by his infliction of pain, as it shows his control over the Beast Folk, who are left to suffer while he witnesses (589). Thus, I would argue that it is the infliction of pain and fear on behalf of Moreau that marks the last stage in the development of the mad scientist and allows him to be in full control of his creations.

Regarding the method through which Moreau instils subservience in his creations, it is carried out by means of a repetition of a set of doctrines preached by the “Sayer of the Law” by which the Beast Folk are forced to abide, and this results in a deification of the scientist that had not been achieved in Frankenstein’s or Jekyll’s incarnations. As can be seen in this example, after chanting their series of prohibitions, the relevance of which will be further explained in the next section, the ceremony continues by emphasising Moreau’s ability to create and destroy life, to both inflict pain and cure: “*His* is the House of Pain. / *His* is the Hand that makes. / *His* is the Hand that wounds. / *His* is the Hand that heals” (149). Indeed, Gomel claims that Dr Death, in the process of inflicting pain, does not empathise with the victim but rather identifies with “the sublime power that is responsible for the suffering” (405). Recapitulating on Burke’s perception of the sublime, Moreau too seems to evoke sheer terror within his victims, to the point of retaining their submissiveness even after his death. This proves that unlike Frankenstein and Jekyll, Doctor Moreau, while neglecting his responsibilities as creator of the Beast Folk, has still managed to devise a deification of himself that keeps his power in place.

Following Moreau’s assertion that the “study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature” (164), I would argue that what distinguishes him from his predecessors, despite their similar pursuits to go beyond the limits of nature, is the fact that Moreau’s ultimate goal is to emulate nature, to *be* nature, by imitating the powerful

brutality of the evolutionary process. This point of view is supported by Hurley, who interprets Moreau “as a personification of Nature itself, a Nature whose idle experiments on living flesh are as wanton, as aimless, as random, and finally as cruel, as Moreau’s” (*The Gothic Body* 110). As was mentioned in previous sections, Wells’ perception of evolutionary theory followed the *fin de siècle*’s inherent pessimism, consequently focusing on the cruelty and suffering involved in the process. Moreau himself addresses this brutality in the following excerpt, where his identification with the driving force behind evolution is made apparent: “[e]ach time I dip a living creature into the bath of burning pain, I say: this time I will burn out the animal, this time I will make a rational creature of my own. After all, what is ten years? Man has been a hundred thousand in the making” (167). By creating an association between his imperfect experiments and humanity’s evolution through the ages, Moreau is raising his status to the level of the sublime natural selection, which carelessly discards individuals until the fittest specimen adapts to its environment in a process filled with endless pain and suffering (Gomel 409).

All in all, it could be extrapolated that as the personification of the mad scientist progresses, and the egoist motivations behind the experimentation become more evident, there is little justification of Moreau’s inexorable actions in terms of either utilitarianism or insanity, and the goal of surpassing the limits of nature turns into an attempt to emulate nature’s sublime omnipotence, in order to position himself as superior to every other species on Earth. Therefore, rather than flaunting the fundamentally Romantic moral imperatives (informed by notions of the inviolability of nature and the sublime) by going *beyond* the laws of nature, Moreau wants to dominate nature by pretending to *mimic* evolution. In this, the character differs from previous literary renderings of the mad scientist and embodies the *fin de siècle* pessimism in which he was created.

3.3. Degeneration: the atrophy of morality and the atrophy of the body

Having discussed Moreau’s portrayal as belonging to a *fin de siècle* version of the mad scientist, seen against the backdrop of Romantic notions of the sublime, this section addresses a possible explanation for the failure of his experiments: his endeavours are prone to go awry due to the impossibility of overcoming the natural force of degeneration. With respect to this, I will proceed to argue that degeneration seems to affect both humans

and animals in a twofold manner, through processes henceforth referred to as the atrophy of morality and the atrophy of the body.

As was explained in the scientific context above, in spite of Wells' primarily Darwinian influence, among the Lamarckian tenets accepted by the author we find his defence of the degeneration of certain body parts as a by-product of the overuse of other organs. According to Hurley, the previously mentioned neurologist Jacques-Joseph Moreau maintained that "the genius' overexpenditure of cerebral energy results in immorality and criminal behaviour as well as monomaniacal insanity" (*The Gothic Body* 109), meaning that the enhancement of intelligence is compensated by the degeneration of moral qualities, i.e. by the atrophy of morality. In fact, during the vivisection controversy in the 19th century, those who were against the practice publicly demonised it on the grounds that "vivisection embruted its practitioners by destroying their capacity to empathize" (Braun 518). Following this point of view, then, it could be extrapolated that Moreau's disdain for and lack of empathy towards the Beast Folk, already identified as a possible symptom of moral insanity, might be perceived as a consequence of this supposedly degenerative process that affects human emotions and morality.

Since the development of morality was believed to be one of the last stages to achieve in the evolutionary process, Victorian psychiatrists suggested that its stability was compromised and, therefore, that morality was prone to be rapidly eliminated once degeneration began (Maudsley qtd. in Mighall xxiv). In fact, this particular matter is also addressed in the novel by Moreau himself, as his relative mastery of bestowing a rather humanoid physical appearance upon the Beast Folk seems to be overridden by his struggle to develop the creatures' intelligence and emotions:

But it is in the subtle grafting and reshaping one must needs do to the brain that my trouble lies. The intelligence is often oddly low, with unaccountable blank ends, unexpected gaps. And least satisfactory of all is something that I cannot touch, somewhere – I cannot determine where – in the seat of the emotions. (167)

Thus, I would contend that while the Beast Folk and eventually Prendick undergo physical degeneration through the atrophy of their bodies, which will be analysed later, Moreau's degeneration is purely intellectual and involves the atrophy of morality, best depicted through his unrelenting indifference towards his creations. In his ambitious quest to "find out the extreme limit of plasticity in a living shape" (164), Moreau has

emotionally alienated himself from his experiments, defining the crux of the creator/creation relationship in the following way: “[t]he thing before you is no longer an animal, a fellow-creature, but a problem. Sympathetic pain – all I know of it I remember as a thing I used to suffer from years ago” (164). As can be seen in his explanation, Moreau has rid himself of significant empathetic connections towards the Beast Folk, disregarding this estrangement as a consequence of any intellectual inquiry and acting in accordance with his contemporary vivisectionists, who had to “maintain awareness of [their] biological similarity with the animal on the table while simultaneously controlling any anxiety about the ethical implications of that similarity” (Braun 504). The fact that vivisection involves the reification of a living being, viewed in the previous example as nothing more than a mere “problem,” could be one of the ways in which Moreau manages to emotionally distance himself from the brutality of his practices. Furthermore, Moreau explains to Prendick that pain, both emotional and physical, is not necessary for any physiology, proved through its absence in living organisms such as plants, and states that, following Darwin’s theory, he has “never yet heard of a useless thing that was not ground out of existence by evolution sooner or later. . . . And pain gets needless” (163). Hence, the very fact that Moreau suffered from emotional pain in the past might imply that evolution’s disposal of this particular type of pain has already been carried out, as Moreau has evolved (or, more likely, degenerated) from feeling sympathy towards the Beast Folk to being fully indifferent, through the process of moral atrophy.

The atrophy of the body, on the other hand, is the most evident display of the effect of degeneration on living beings and is illustrated in the novel as an inevitable regressive process, the interruption of which proves impossible even for geniuses like Moreau. In spite of this impending degeneration, it should be mentioned that Moreau is nevertheless actively attempting to avoid this reversion through the suppression or inhibition of the Beast Folk’s lowest and most bestial instincts. Glendening suggests that Wells was influenced by Lamarckism’s emphasis on the importance of education and language in the improvement of society (579), an idea which is incorporated in the novel through the Beast Folk’s ability to talk like human beings. When Prendick questions Moreau about this matter, the latter explains that this artificial modification was made with the purpose of “replacing old inherent instincts by new suggestions” through practices such as hypnotism (161). Hence, we know through Prendick’s perspective that the particular “Fixed Ideas” inculcated by Moreau in the minds of the Beast Folk not only

result in the scientist's deification, as I mentioned earlier, but also in an imposition of human behaviour over their animalistic tendencies, repressing their very own nature. This ensues the constant recitation of said prohibitions, led by the "Sayer of the Law":

Not to go on all-Fours; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?

Not to suck up Drink; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?

Not to eat Flesh or Fish; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?

Not to claw Bark of Trees; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?

Not to chase other Men; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men? (149)

The particular repetition of "Are we not Men?" in the chant could correspond to the Lamarckian principle that all beings strive towards a more elevated state. Notwithstanding, McNabb claims that the "reiteration of the law in the novel is more by rote than by conviction and comprehension" (395), thus, implying that despite the ability to mimic human speech that these *abhuman* beings demonstrate, their understanding of the meaning of the words is still superficial, never reaching humanity's level. Furthermore, regarding the Beast Folk's representation in *Moreau*, McNabb also extrapolates that Wells' initial version of these beings might have adhered better to Lamarck's principles than the depiction seen in his final draft. Originally, the creations of Moreau's experiments were portrayed as having developed a more sophisticated civilisation, a community which was consciously trying to act according to human laws and conduct through the means of education, whereas in the final draft there seems to be "no sense of a society trying to improve, rather the impression is of a society trying to stave off the inevitable — retrogression" (McNabb 395). In addition to this, Hurley notes that the repression of natural impulses depicted through the Beast Folk is not unlike the socially inculcated restraint of animal instincts that all human beings must maintain in order to live in communities (*The Gothic Body* 107).

However, despite Moreau's incessant efforts to convert these animals into human beings through vivisection and the inculcation of certain human behaviours, the resulting uncanny hybrids never embody his conception of humanity, even though Prendick does recognise certain human traits within them on rare occasions, and they always revert to their previous animal condition after some time. With regard to the manner in which their degeneration is triggered, Moreau describes it in the following terms: "[a]s soon as my

hand is taken from them the beast begins to creep back, begins to assert itself again” (167). According to neo-Darwinism, when the struggle for existence becomes unnecessary, degeneration ensues; thus, once Moreau’s infliction of pain in his laboratory comes to an end (once the actual experiment is completed and the newly-created being is discarded and free to explore the island) it is inevitable for the degenerative process to take charge (Glendening 582). Therefore, insofar as his personification of natural selection prompts degeneration when the brutality of the process disappears, I would postulate that it is also Moreau’s attempt to *be* nature, to mimic the power of natural selection and control the development of life forms other than his own, that necessarily dooms his endeavours.

4. Conclusion

Returning to the premise posed at the beginning of my dissertation, this work has attempted to answer the question of why Moreau’s vivisections in H. G. Wells’ *Island of Doctor Moreau* always fail to embody a fully human form and, parting from a Romantic perspective, has also demonstrated that Wells’ depiction of nature resembles the Romantic notion of the sublime, albeit in a version heavily informed by *fin de siècle* pessimism and scientific theories of degeneration.

By analysing Moreau’s portrayal with respect to previous incarnations of the mad scientist’s stereotype, namely, Frankenstein and Jekyll, my contention is that not even the epitome of this trope, in its most ruthless manifestation, is able to fully emulate the power of natural selection. Insofar as degeneration is representative of the sublime nature in *Moreau*, I would contend that Wells’ portrayal of degeneration as inevitable follows the Romantic conception of a sublime omnipotent nature which can never be overpowered, neither by human constraints nor by scientists attempting to mimic nature’s sublimity, since everyone in the island undergoes a certain form of degeneration, be it through the atrophy of the body or through the atrophy of morality.

Furthermore, Wells’ choice of depicting a more primitive community in his final draft, instead of a set of hybrid creatures who might potentially succeed in developing a cultivated society, seems to conform to *fin de siècle* pessimism, whereby any opportunity of upwards evolution is erased and degeneration becomes the only possible and tragic

outcome. As a consequence, the ambitious *fin de siècle*-version of the mad scientist, in his mimicking of the sublime natural selection, not only dooms his experiments by triggering degeneration once his infliction of pain ceases, but also himself, as it is the Beast Folk's reversion to their animal selves that leads to Moreau's murder. Hence, Wells' narrative appears to parallel the belief supported by the Romantics that trying to surpass nature by aiming to go beyond our natural abilities as human beings yields catastrophic results.

Lastly, it should be pointed out that due to practical constraints and in spite of the many similarities between *Moreau* and Wells' other scientific romances such as *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*, and the author's personal interest in pursuing this matter, it has been beyond the scope of this study to offer a comparison of this topic with respect to Wells' most famous works. However, further research regarding the role of degeneration as an unstoppable sublime process seen throughout his whole oeuvre might yield deeper insights into the question of Wells' scientific motivations and, more generally, provide further background to one of the most recurring themes of science fiction.

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