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Humanity as a performance in H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*[*]

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Abstract: At first glance, H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) seems to question the boundary between humans and animals only to reaffirm its inescapable naturality, as Moreau attempts to turn animals into humans by altering their physiology and his creatures ultimately revert to their original animality. Yet, through the interpretive frame of animal queer and Harvey Sacks's Membership Categorization Analysis, my paper aims to show how other elements of the text actually counter this perspective, thus suggesting a performative notion of humanity in its opposition to animality. By focusing on the role of the ritual recitation of the Law and on how the narrator's experience on the island of Doctor Moreau radically affects his views on humanity, I will argue that the novel challenges well-established essentialist conceptions of the human-animal divide and boldly explores the disquieting possibility that humanity is nothing but a performance.

Keywords: literary criticism; H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*; animal queer; performativity.

The Island of Doctor Moreau is an 1896 science fiction novel by H.G. Wells, a prolific English writer and futurist. The story is told by a first-person narrator, Edward Prendick, who is rescued by a passing boat after a shipwreck in the southern Pacific Ocean and brought to an uncharted and mysterious island. Here Dr Moreau, a formerly celebrated British physiologist who had to leave London after a vivisection scandal, has been conducting gruesome experiments for over ten years in order to turn animals into humans. The outcome has been the creation of human-like creatures who populate the island and go under the name of the 'Beast Folk'.

Even at first glance, themes such as the definition of humanity and animality and the relationship between them appear to be at the core of the novel. However, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* seems to question the boundary between humans and animals only to reaffirm its inescapable naturality. If it is true that Dr Moreau manages to blur the distinction between

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them by making humans out of animals, it is also true that he attempts to do so primarily by altering their physical aspect and physiology. As Moreau explains to Prendick, "it's not simply the outward form of an animal I can change. The physiology, the chemical rhythm of the creature may also be made to undergo an enduring modification" (Wells 1896: 69-70). He aims not only to make an animal look like a human by "transplant[ing] tissue" and "modify[ing] the articulation of its limbs" but also to "alter its chemical reactions and methods of growth" and "indeed to change it in its most intimate structure" (Wells 1896: 70). The idea that the key to animal and human nature resides in biology betrays an essentialist conception of these two notions, as humans and animals are considered to be inherently such because of the outer and inner structure of their bodies. This view is further reinforced by Moreau's inability to completely eradicate animality from his subjects. "The tendency of their animal instincts to reawaken" (Wells 1896: 79) and the regression they undergo throughout the novel testify to the presence of some ineliminable degree of animality within them. In Moreau's words, "somehow the things drift back again, the stubborn beast flesh grows, day by day, back again" (Wells 1896: 75). There is something within animals – in their flesh, in their deepest instincts –, something, as he says, "that I cannot touch, somewhere" (Wells 1896: 76) and that therefore cannot be humanised.

Starting from the acknowledgement of these essentialist strands in how humanity and animality are presented in the novel, my paper aims to show how other elements of the text actually counter this perspective.[1] By exploring the ways in which the human-animal divide is actually blurred and denaturalised, in fact, I will argue that *The Island of Doctor Moreau* suggests a performative notion of humanity in its opposition to animality. Being the main topic of the novel, a large number of critics has focused on the way in which *The Island of Doctor Moreau* questions the boundary between humans and animals and many have argued for the disruptive potential of the novel,[2] but none of them has approached the topic

1 As maintained by Sherryl Vint as well, "the novel, on its surface, appears to reinforce this boundary [the human-animal boundary], for Moreau's experiments fail and the animals devolve back to their animal natures, but a closer examination shows that this boundary is never secure" (Vint 2007: 93).

2 A few interesting examples are: Rohman 2005, according to whom the novel debunks the Enlightenment myth of humanity as purely rational and entirely distinct from animality; Kiang 2019, who, by adopting an ecocritical approach, sees the novel as presenting relation-

specifically from a performative perspective. The only isolated mention can be found in "Animals and Animality from the Island of Moreau to the Uplift Universe" (2007), where Sherryl Vint asserts that "the category of 'human' is something that is performed" (Vint 2007: 93-94). This insight, however, is not further developed and performativity is not taken into consideration through a systematic methodological approach. This is precisely what the present paper aims to do by contributing to this critical trend committed to showing how *The Island of Doctor Moreau* ultimately deconstructs the human-animal divide but through the lens of performative theory.

An analysis of the novel that takes into account the notion of performativity in a more extensive and structured way, in fact, has been attempted only by Timothy Christensen in "The 'Bestial Mark' of Race in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*" (2004) but in relation to a different theme and through a different methodological approach. Whereas Christensen centres his interpretation on "the performative basis of society and the subject within society" (Christensen 2004: 590) that emerges from Wells's work, the present analysis will apply a performative perspective to the human-animal dichotomy around which the whole novel revolves. In order to do so, unlike Christensen, I will approach the text from the standpoint of queer theory, as it presents one of the most incisive formulations of performativity. The deconstruction of identity as a performance in opposition to essentialist conceptions of it as something innate and unchangeable is, in fact, at the heart of queer's theoretical stance and it has already been applied to the seemingly natural and unquestionable boundary between humanity and animality by animal queer.[3] I intend to explore the relevance of this performative perspective and its fruitfulness through the analysis of a novel in which the problematisation of the distinction between humans and animals plays such a central role. In doing so, I will also resort to methodological tools that are not traditionally associated with the queer genealogy of performativity – such as Harvey Sacks's Membership Categorization

al, non-identitarian and non-binary notions of humanity and animality; and Vint 2007, who tackles the question from the point of view of animal studies. In addition, the issue is often approached in relation to the evolutionary theories of the time: see, for instance, McNabb 2015 and Glendening 2002.

3 A fundamental contribution to the field of animal queer has been made by Carmen Dell'Aversano in insightful works such as "The Love Whose Name Cannot be Spoken: Queering the Human-Animal Bond" (2010) and "Postumano/postanimale: Una prospettiva queer" (2016).

Analysis –, thus arguing for their usefulness in this research area.[4]

First of all, the bodily alterations Doctor Moreau inflicts on the animals are not enough to turn them into humans. In addition to these, they are provided with a law – or rather the Law with a capital L – as a means to curb their persistent animal instincts: "A series of prohibitions called the Law – I had already heard them recited – battled in their minds with the deep-seated, ever-rebellious cravings of their animal natures. This Law they were perpetually repeating, I found, and – perpetually breaking" (Wells 1896: 80). The Law consists in a set of commandments with which the Beast Folk need to comply in order to fulfil their humanity. Its prohibitions take the following form: "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?" (Wells 1896: 57), and so on. The form in which the precepts of the Law are expressed is extremely meaningful. On the one hand, the question at the end – "Are we not Men?" – seems to be a rhetorical one: of course we are men, *hence* we do not go on all-fours, we do not suck up drink, and so on. On the other hand, the interrogative form suggests that being human is not a condition that is stable and certain but rather something that is constantly questioned and needs to be constantly reaffirmed by conforming to the Law: we are men, *because* we do not go on all-fours, and so on. The question is, therefore, only seemingly rhetorical: it actually entails the possibility of a negative answer – the possibility that they may *not* be men –, thus suggesting an idea of humanity as something that cannot be taken for granted once and for all.

As just pointed out, Moreau's creatures are humans as long as they follow the Law. The commandments of the Law are the conditions that ensure their humanity and can thus be interpreted as what Harvey Sacks would call the Category Bound Activities of being human. Category Bound Activities – in short, CBAs – are activities that the members of a category need to perform in order to be acknowledged as such. The prohibitions of the Law identify the CBAs of the category 'human' by forbidding their opposite. For instance, the first precept suggests that standing erect is a CBA of humanity, which is confirmed in other significant passages of the novel.

Upon his arrival at the island, before knowing the exact nature of Moreau's experiments, Prendick believes what he is told and considers the

4 The relevance of Harvey Sacks's Membership Categorization Analysis to queer theory has been extensively discussed by Carmen Dell'Aversano in "A Research Programme for Queer Studies: Queer Theory and Harvey Sacks's Membership Categorization Analysis" (2018).

odd-looking creatures living there to be human beings. He calls them "unaccountable men" (Wells 1896: 29), whose otherness can only be accounted for by assuming that they belong to a different, yet unknown race.[5] However, soon afterwards he starts witnessing behaviours on their part which conflict with their supposed humanity. He sees one of them going on all fours and sucking up water directly from a stream – that is, violating the first two commandments of the Law – and he is taken aback: "Then I saw it was a man, going on all fours like a beast!" (Wells 1896: 35). Going on all fours is understood as a CBA of animality, but, at this point, Prendick still identifies the creature as human in spite of their contradictory behaviour. Yet, he is well aware of the contradiction and wonders: "Why should a man go on all fours and drink with his lips?" (Wells 1896: 36). In other words, why should a man not behave like one?

As Prendick gets the chance of taking a closer look at the odd creatures on the island and witnessing other instances of similar non-conforming behaviour, he becomes uncertain whether they are animals or humans. "What on earth was he – man or animal?" (Wells 1896: 39), he asks himself at his second meeting with the creature he had seen drinking from the stream. Their behaviour is read as revealing of their identity. For instance, going on all fours now unquestionably betrays an animal nature: "Then one slipped, and for a moment was on all fours, to recover indeed forthwith. But that transitory gleam of the true animalism of these monsters was enough" (Wells 1896: 39). This acknowledgement of "true" animality, however, is less definitive than it would seem and, indeed, it precedes the question that has been quoted just above. As the behaviour of the Beast Folk oscillates between humanity and animality, so does Prendick's identification of their nature, which depends on the former. In fact, when he bumps into another member of the Beast Folk and sees that they do not walk on all fours, he immediately draws the opposite conclusion: "It was no animal, for it stood erect" (Wells 1896: 42). This identification process can be analysed in a more specific way by means of Sacks's theory.

According to him, "one way to decide that an activity is category-bound is to see whether, the fact of membership being unknown, it can be 'hinted

5 Prendick asks Montgomery, Moreau's assistant: "what race are they?", but he evades the question and simply replies: "Excellent fellows, aren't they?" (Wells 1896: 33).

at' by naming the activity as something one does" (Sacks 1992: I, 249). In this case, the activity is seen instead of being named, but the principle is the same and standing erect emerges as a CBA of being human. The category to which the being belongs is unknown, but seeing them perform an activity that is bound to a certain category – in this case, humanity – is enough to allow their identification as a member of that category. Sacks calls it the "viewer's maxim": "for an observer of a category-bound activity, the category to which the activity is bound has a special relevance for formulating an identification of its doer" (Sacks 1992: I, 259). The unaccountable creature stands erect, therefore they are human – and can be acknowledged as such by Prendick. As seen in other passages, the reverse is also true: the member of the Beast Folk goes on all fours, therefore they are animal. Their identification as human or animal is thus determined by the way they act. The instance of humanity, however, is even more interesting and telling, as, in this case, their behaviour is explicitly not the result of a supposedly 'natural' instinct but rather of compliance with a set of imposed rules – precisely the Law. It follows that the humanity of the Beast Folk depends less on what they are than on what they do – that is, less on their essence than on their performance. Understanding the importance and functioning of the Law through Harvey Sacks's notion of Category Bound Activity thus allows us to see more clearly the performative dimension of humanity in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.

However, the role of the Law is not limited to the observance of its precepts. In fact, not only do Moreau's creatures have to act according to the commandments of the Law, but they also need to repeatedly recite them. As already mentioned, Prendick reports that "this Law they were perpetually repeating" (Wells 1896: 80). The recital of the Law takes the form of a regular ritual. When he first witnesses it, Prendick calls it a "rhythmic recitation" and a "mysterious rite" (Wells 1896: 38). He then refers to it as "the insanest ceremony" (Wells 1896: 56), during which the Beast Folk intone the Law swaying from side to side and beating their hands upon their knees. Prendick, who takes part in the ritual this time, describes it in the following way: "a kind of rhythmic fervour fell on all of us; we gabbled and swayed faster and faster, repeating this amazing law" (Wells 1896: 57). The fact that the recitation of the Law is presented as a repeated ritual is extremely interesting for the present analysis, as it can be directly related to the very definition of performativity.

One of the most influential theories of performativity – which holds a privileged place in queer studies – is provided by Judith Butler in her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). In her book, Butler famously deconstructs essentialist, natural notions of gender by exposing gender as a performance – or rather, the iteration of a performance. "Gender is an 'act'" (Butler 1999: 187), she states, but when asking herself in what sense gender is an act she replies: "As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated" (Butler 1999: 178). She then goes on to argue that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" and, again, that "the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity" (Butler 1999: 179). 'A stylized repetition of acts' is an expression that would well suit the definition of 'ritual'.

Ritual repetition thus appears as a pivotal element in Butler's theory of performativity, which could be easily extended to identity categories other than gender. In my analysis of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, for instance, I have been showing that humanity itself – as fundamental an identity category as gender[6] – may be conceived as an act. The humanity of the Beast

6 As Dell'Aversano points out, the divide between humans and animals is "one of the most basic and most pervasive assumptions on which society, with all its potential for hegemony and repression, rests, and which is, indeed, basic to the very shape of our shared life on this planet" (Dell'Aversano 2010: 74). It is also important to point out that the categories of gender and species – and their corresponding systems of domination – do not work entirely independently of one another but more often in an intersectional way. In this respect, the works of Donna Haraway provide precious insights into the way in which the cultural construction of nature intersects with other forms of domination and allows "the inequities of race, sex, and class" to "be naturalized in functioning systems of exploitation" (Haraway 1991: 2): see Haraway 1989, 1991, 2016. The intersectionality of species, gender, class, and race – I have already mentioned an instance in which the Beast Folk is read by the narrator in racial terms – plays a part in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and has been object of critical investigation. Just to mention a few examples, Christensen focuses his attention on the racialised bodies of the Beast Folk (see Christensen 2004), Taneja analyses the imperialist and class connotations of animalisation in the text (see Taneja 2013), and Braun points out how "in dissolving the boundary between human and animal, Wells's novel disrupts other classificatory systems", "including those of gender and race" (Braun 2019: 506). However, while acknowledging the intersectional presence of these categories in the book, the present study deliberately chooses to focus exclusively on the human-animal divide – as the most fundamental one around which the whole novel revolves – in order to analyse the specific strategies through which the novel constructs and exposes its performativity. The way in which the revelation of humanity as a performance may intersectionally affect how the other identity categories are conceived in the novel from a specifically performative perspective could be interestingly explored in future studies.

Folk is indeed determined by their actions, but these actions, in line with Butler's views on performativity, have to be constantly repeated. In order to create the illusion of a stable human identity, Moreau's creatures need to continue performing the acts prescribed by the Law. This is the reason why the Law needs to be regularly recited – so as to prevent the Beast Folk from forgetting its precepts and the need to comply with them. However, the repeated ritual of the recital of the Law is also meaningful at another level. It literalises the very same definition of performativity, which, as Butler states in her introduction to *Gender Trouble*, "is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual" (Butler 1999: xv). The ritual recitation of the Law plays a fundamental role in establishing Moreau's creatures as members of the category 'humans'. By taking part in it, the Beast Folk reaffirm – or rather construct – their humanity. They implicitly answer "yes" to the reiterated, formulaic question "are we not Men?" every time they repeat it. As Laura Otis points out in "Monkey in the Mirror: The Science of Professor Higgins and Doctor Moreau" (2009), the Law consists in "performative speech" (Otis 2009: 502), where 'performative' is used in its original Austinian sense[7] and means that "in being pronounced, [the Law] strives to bring about what it promises" (Otis 2009: 502). This ceremony ultimately reveals the performative – here again in its Butlerian sense[8] – dimension which underlies ordinary constructions of humanity: it shows – by literalising it in this fictional scene – that humanity is the result of the ritualistic repetition of a social performance.

The idea that the performative nature of humanity as represented in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* also concerns the ordinary notion of humanity is supported by a significant detail – that is, Prendick's participation in the ritual. In fact, if only the Beast Folk needed to participate in the ceremony,

7 Austin's notion of performativity belongs to the linguistic theory of speech acts that he developed in his seminal work *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). He defines performative utterances as instances in which "the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action" (Austin 1962: 5). In these cases, "to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my *doing* of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it" (Austin 1962: 6). As far as *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is concerned, the Law in an instance of performative speech because, by reciting the conditions that ensure their humanity, the Beast Folk are already ensuring it.

8 The two notions of performativity are, however, related. Even though Butler does not mention Austin in *Gender Trouble*, she derives the term 'performative', in all likelihood, from his work. She first acknowledges her debt to Austin in "Critically Queer" (1993), which begins with a reference to his theory of performative speech acts (see Butler 1993: 17-18).

it could be argued that humanity is a performance only as far as they are concerned and that they have no choice but to perform humanity, as they are not 'proper' humans. 'Proper' humans would not need a set of rules to ensure that they act like humans, because acting like humans would be the natural consequence of their *being* humans. This interpretation of the scene would clearly endorse an essentialist view of humanity. In this case, the performance of humanity by the Beast Folk could be disqualified as an imitation of humanity. 'Imitation' is another concept that is introduced by Harvey Sacks in order to account for how identity categories work. According to him, "'imitation' seems to involve a way of characterizing some action which somebody does when they are unentitled to do that class of action" (Sacks 1992: I, 70).[9] In other words, when someone who is not acknowledged as a member of a certain category performs a CBA of that category, they cannot but be imitating the members of the category, who are the only ones entitled to that action. Resorting to the notion of imitation is a defence mechanism against possible disruptions to the system of categories which contributes to perpetrate the idea of identity as substance. A similar perspective is embraced by Moreau himself when he defines the way of life of the Beast Folk as "a kind of travesty of humanity" and "a mockery of rational life" (Wells 1896: 77). At a certain point, Prendick too refers to it as a "mock-human existence" (Wells 1896: 96). These expressions suggest the idea that Moreau's creatures can only imitate humanity because Moreau's experiments ultimately fail to transform them completely and they remain 'essentially' animals. "They build themselves their dens", he states, "gather fruit and pull herbs – marry even. But I can see through it all, see into their very souls, and see nothing but the souls of beasts" (Wells 1896: 77). Such

9 The notion of imitation is one of the potential points of convergence with the issue of race. Sacks himself, in fact, has recourse to racial categories as his primary example in order to explain the workings of imitation: "I came across an extraordinarily interesting use of this category in some of the older ethnographies, dealing with the situation of Negroes in the pre- and post-Civil War periods in the South. Again and again I found references to the activities of Negroes as 'imitating whites.' And they were characterized as being 'marvelous imitators'" (Sacks 1992: I, 70). Moreover, Homi Bhabha refers to a similar phenomenon through his notion of 'mimicry', which describes the tendency of the colonised to mimic the colonisers, thus producing a behaviour that is "almost the same, *but not quite*" (Bhabha 1994: 86), as they are "*almost the same but not white*" (89). However, he then develops the concept in a different direction by focusing on the ambivalent role – both reinforcing and threatening – that mimicry plays in the strategies of colonial power. Sacks's definition is more interesting for the present analysis, since it tackles the issue from a more general and abstract perspective that takes into account the kind of dynamic between categories upon which imitation relies.

passages confirm the presence of an essentialist conception of the boundary between human and animal in the novel – in particular, from the point of view of the two main characters. Yet, as I argued at the beginning, this notion of identity co-exists with the opposite performative one.

Coming back to the scene of the recitation of the Law, the performative idea of humanity that emerges from it cannot be dismissed as something limited to the imperfectly human Beast Folk because Prendick himself is involved in the ritual. Despite being a – so to speak – 'proper' human being, whose humanity does not seem to be questionable, Prendick has to take part in the ceremony and recite the commandments of the Law in order to be fully acknowledged as human.[10] When he comes face to face with the Beast Folk, one of them states: "It is a man. He must learn the Law" (Wells 1896: 56). "Say the words", the Ape Man orders him. All humans must learn and recite the Law – it is a condition of their humanity. Being human entails compliance with the Law and its ritual recitation but, at the same time, depends on them. In this regard, Prendick does not differ at all from the Beast Folk and his humanity is equated with theirs. His participation in the recital of the Law highlights that the performative aspect of humanity that is literalised in this repeated ritual is not limited to the 'imperfect' humanity of the Beast Folk but also extends to 'proper' humanity. The scene thus reveals something about how humanity works in general.

A similar kind of revelation is experienced by Prendick as well. If it is true that he sometimes seems to embrace Moreau's essentialist views and to dismiss the human-like behaviour of his creatures as a mere imitation, it is also true that coming into contact with the Beast Folk radically affects his perception of humanity. As he reports, the acquaintance with the Beast Folk makes it increasingly difficult for him to "keep my general impressions of humanity well defined" (Wells 1896: 83). First of all, he gets so used to their oddities that, at times, he sees them as ordinary human beings: "I

[10] As Christensen points out, "he is only provisionally recognized as a man until he participates in a ceremonial recitation of the Law" (Christensen 2004: 580). Christensen too interprets the recitation of the Law as a "performative event" (Christensen 2004: 580) whose outcome, however, is establishing Prendick as a social subject. His emphasis on the use of the term 'law' leads him to argue that the ritual recitation of the Law foregrounds "the performative basis of the law" (Christensen 2004: 577). By focusing, instead, on the actual content and formulation of the Law, which is explicitly aimed to establish the humanity of the participants in the ritual more than their belonging to a social group, my interpretation refers the performative dimension of the scene to humanity itself.

would see one of the bovine creatures who worked the launch treading heavily through the undergrowth, and find myself trying hard to recall how he differed from some really human yokel trudging home from his mechanical labours; or I would meet the Fox-Bear Woman's vulpine shifty face, strangely human in its speculative cunning, and even imagine I had met it before in some city byway" (Wells 1896: 83). In these moments, no suspicion of imitation seems to undermine the performance of humanity by the Beast Folk. Prendick is unable, in Moreau's words, to "see through it all" – or rather, for a moment there seems to be nothing to see beyond the performance, no ultimate animal core to uncover.

Later in the novel, Prendick goes as far as to say: "A strange persuasion came upon me that, save for the grossness of the line, the grotesqueness of the forms, 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" (Wells 1896: 95). The physical aspect of the Beast Folk, which had played a fundamental role in establishing their humanity at the beginning, now appears as their least human feature.[11] At the same time, their behaviour, their rites and, in general, their way of life become a sort of mirror in which Prendick can see a reflection of human life as a whole, the human life he has always known outside the island. This is the key significance of his experience among the Beast Folk: it provides him with the opportunity to see humanity from a different perspective, thus revealing things about it that he would have never been able to see otherwise – such as its performative nature.[12]

The ending of the novel shows how deeply Prendick's view of humanity

[11] That their appearance is not such a determining factor had already been suggested. Before joining the ritual of the Law, Prendick is hailed by the Ape Man as "a five-man, a five-man, a five-man… like me" (Wells 1896: 58). The term "five-man" means that they both have five-fingered hands, but it also highlights that there are different kinds of 'men' other than 'five-men', that is, that having five fingers per hand is not a necessary – actually, not even a common – condition of humanity among the Beast Folk. During his stay among them, in fact, Prendick learns that "a great proportion of these Beast People had malformed hands, lacking sometimes even three digits" (Wells 1896: 52). Therefore, even though having five-fingered hands is a physical trait that characterises the – so to speak – 'standard' form of human beings – as proven by the fact that Prendick calls the hands with a different number of fingers "malformed" –, it is not a prerequisite to ensure their humanity.

[12] As John Reed asserts, "on Moreau's island Prendick becomes fully aware of what it means to be human" (Reed 1990: 142), but his interpretation of Prendick's discovery concerning human nature differs from the present performative one. According to him, Prendick realises that humans have instincts like animals but they are able – and wise enough – to control them.

has been affected by what he has seen on the island of Doctor Moreau. Once back in human society, in fact, he falls prey to "a strange enhancement of the uncertainty and dread [he] had experienced during [his] stay upon the island" (Wells 1896: 132). His uncertainty concerns the human status of the people around him. As he explains, "I look about me at my fellow men. And I go in fear. I see faces keen and bright, others dull or dangerous, others unsteady, insincere; none that have the calm authority of a reasonable soul. I feel as though the animal was surging up through them; that presently the degradation of the Islanders will be played over again on a larger scale" (Wells 1896: 132). He then goes on to add: "I know this is an illusion, that the seeming men and women about me are indeed men and women, men and women for ever, perfectly reasonable creatures full of human desires and tender solicitude, emancipated from instinct and the slaves of no fantastic Law – beings altogether different from the Beast Folk. Yet I shrink from them" (Wells 1896: 132). Prendick tries desperately to hold on to the reassuring essentialist idea that humanity is something substantial and unchangeable, something that is "for ever". He wants to believe that *seeming* human cannot but be the natural consequence of *being* human in an unquestionable, essential way.

However, his long acquaintance with the Beast Folk has repeatedly shown him that his fellow human beings are not "altogether different" from them. His "general impressions of humanity" (Wells 1896: 83) have been irremediably altered to such an extent that he cannot look at people in the same way as before: "I could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast People, animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls" (Wells 1896: 132). Seeing the performative nature of the humanity of the Beast Folk leads Prendick to suspect that humanity is always a performance and that the people around him are no different than Moreau's creatures. They pass better as humans – as he says, they are "still passably humans" in comparison to the Beast Folk – simply because they are better than them at performing humanity.

The use of the word "passably" evokes the notion of 'passing' as defined by Erving Goffman in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). 'Passing' is the phenomenon that occurs when a member of a category hides his belonging to that category and manages to 'pass as' a member of another category. Goffman defines it as "the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self" (Goffman 1963: 42). It occurs between

categories occupying different hierarchical positions and is performed by what Goffman calls 'stigmatised people' or 'spoiled identities' who have every interest in passing as 'normal' or 'privileged' subjects. It applies very well to the situation Prendick is describing, since animality is traditionally considered to be inferior to humanity. Prendick suspects that the seemingly human people around him are actually animals who manage to pass as humans – they are able to do so because humanity is a performance and they can thus perform it. In this case, however, the practice of 'passing' seems to be so widespread that it involves all the human beings Prendick meets, thus exposing the performative nature of humanity even in its most ordinary and 'normal' form. At the end of the novel, no essentialist belief is strong enough to dispel the suspicion of performativity that has been sown in Prendick by coming into contact with Moreau's creatures.

Ultimately, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* details the radical change that Prendick undergoes as far as his views on the humanity of the Beast Folk, humanity in general, and its boundary with animality are concerned. In the first part of the novel, as already pointed out, he readily embraces Moreau's essentialist views and believes human and animal nature to be unchangeable substances. This is the reason why his first participation in the recital of the Law does not affect him at all. It has been argued that his involvement in the ritual contributes significantly to questioning the naturality of the human-animal divide and to exposing the performativity of humanity even when it comes to 'proper' humans, but Prendick is still alien to these ideas at this point. He takes part in the ceremony solely at the insistence of the Beast Folk and his engagement is just for show. As he explains, "superficially the contagion of these brute men was upon me, but deep down within me laughter and disgust struggled together" (Wells 1896: 57). He laughs at their pretence of humanity while being disgusted by it, because he is certain that the Law – which he calls "this idiotic formula" (Wells 1896: 56) – does not concern him and that he is "altogether different from the Beast Folk" (Wells 1896: 132). He does not feel that his own humanity is at stake in the face of what he deems "grotesque caricatures of humanity" (Wells 1896: 58). As already shown, however, his experience among Moreau's creatures will lead him to see them as perfectly human – even the epitome of human life as a whole – and to deny their difference from 'proper' humans to the point of considering the latter as another Beast Folk. The boundary between humanity and animality is revealed to be so

flimsy that Prendick himself seems to cross it: "I, too, must have undergone strange changes. […] I am told that even now my eyes have a strange brightness, a swift alertness of movement" (Wells 1896: 125), which are characteristically animal traits.

The fact that Prendick's idea of humanity is altered so drastically – from an essentialist one to a performative one – by his experience on the island of Doctor Moreau plays a major role in the overall interpretation of the novel. Prendick, in fact, occupies a pivotal position in the text because he is not only the main character but also the narrator. The story is told from his first-person viewpoint that is the one through which the reader has access to the narrative. As Wolfgang Iser argues in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), the narrator constitutes one of the main perspectives[13] through which the reader experiences the text. In particular, it traditionally provides the reader with "orientation […] as regards evaluation of characters and events" (Iser 1978: 208). The narrator's perspective directs the reader in navigating the story and appraising what it tells. According to Iser, "its original function" is "to establish the overall pattern" (Iser 1978: 122) that the reader is supposed to follow during the act of reading. In other words, "normally the reader of fiction accepts the lines laid down for him by the narrator in the course of his 'willing suspension of disbelief'" (Iser 1978: 8).

In *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, therefore, it is through Prendick's perspective that the reader gains access to the story. The reader's experience of the narrated events is determined by Prendick's experience, which provides orientation and guides the evaluation process. By being 'forced' to take Prendick's point of view by the literary device of first-person narration, the reader is placed in his same position throughout the novel. As a result, Prendick's conversion from essentialism to performativity is a development that the reader is called to experience directly. From the very beginning of the present analysis it has been highlighted that essentialist and performative strands coexist in the way humanity is represented in the novel. Yet, by resorting to Iser's theorisation of the pivotal role of the narrator's perspective in shaping the reader's experience of the text, it is possible to argue that these two conceptions of humanity are not of equal

[13] Iser identifies four of them: "As a rule there are four main perspectives: those of the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader" (Iser 1978: 35).

value in Wells's work. In fact, even though the essentialist aspects are never entirely dismissed, as they underlie the ultimate degeneration of the Beast Folk, the book clearly traces a transition from an essentialist notion of humanity to a performative one. This transition is experienced by Prendick first-hand, but, given his role as first-person narrator, it constitutes a fundamental guiding line that orients the reader's overall experience of the novel. By occupying the same position as Prendick throughout the whole story, in the last chapter the reader too is confronted with the possibility that all human beings are simply performing their humanity. A performative view of humanity is thus the end point that the text envisages for the reader, which gives it pre-eminence over the essentialist one. As Iser points out, the ending is of key importance in understanding and interpreting a text, since reading is a one-way activity which unfolds following temporal linearity. He asserts that "the time axis basically conditions and arranges the overall meaning" (Iser 1978: 148) and quotes a related passage by Riffaterre:

> One can never give enough stress to the importance of a reading that runs in the direction of the text, i.e., from beginning to end. If one ignores this 'one way' sign, one is missing a vital element of the literary phenomenon: namely, that the book unfolds (just as in antiquity the scroll was materially unrolled) and that the text is the object of a progressive discovery, a dynamic and constantly changing perception, whereby the reader not only advances from surprise to surprise, but at the same time sees as he advances how his comprehension of what he has read changes, because each new element lends a new dimension to preceding elements by repeating, contradicting or developing them (Riffaterre, quoted in Iser 1978: 222).

In this case, as already seen, a significant part of the reader's progressive discovery centres on the narrator's changing perception of the nature of the Beast Folk and of humanity. As a consequence, the reader's own changing perception progresses from essentialism to performativity, which thus constitutes the destination of the reading experience. It does not follow, however, that, after reading the novel, the reader will necessarily embrace a performative perspective on humanity beyond the textual boundaries of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. In order to better understand this point, it is useful to refer to another notion presented by Iser, that is, the difference between 'meaning' and 'significance'. According to him, "meaning is the

referential totality which is implied by the aspects contained in the text and which must be assembled in the course of reading. Significance is the reader's absorption of the meaning into his own existence" (Iser 1978: 151). 'Meaning' is what all readers are supposed to produce by duly fulfilling the instructions and guidelines that the text provides. It is determined by textual elements and it is assembled "by realizing the structure inherent in the text" (Iser 1978: 152), thus being intersubjectively valid. 'Significance', instead, depends on how each reader refers the meaning to their own life. Its production transcends the boundaries of the text and is subjective, albeit "not arbitrary" (Iser 1978: 122), as it is influenced by what shapes the reading experience beyond the text, most notably the different times, spaces, and subjectivation processes of the readers. As Iser points out, "it follows that the intersubjective structure of meaning assembly can have many forms of significance, according to the social and cultural code or the individual norms which underlie the formation of this significance" (Iser 1978: 151).

As I have been arguing, the 'meaning' – in Iser's specific sense of the term – of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* can be identified with the performative nature of humanity, but what the reader will do with this discovery once they have finished reading is a matter of significance. The novel puts the reader in the position of asking themselves the question whether humanity is a performance, but the answer is up to them. Yet, significance is not arbitrary and the text tries to direct the reader also in this process that takes place beyond the text itself. As Iser points out, "by the end of our reading we are liable consciously to want to incorporate the new experience into our own store of knowledge" (Iser 1978: 37). Just as Prendick brings the experience of the performative nature of humanity that he had among the Beast Folk outside the island of Doctor Moreau, so the reader is encouraged to bring his own experience of the performative nature of humanity that they had while reading outside *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. Once again, this is made possible by the coincidence of perspectives that the text establishes between the reader and Prendick as first-person narrator.[14] Naturally, the way in which the reader will actually incorporate the experience that *The Island of Doctor Moreau* made them have in their own

14 As Iser maintains, the reader's "position must therefore be manipulated by the text if his viewpoint is to be properly guided" (Iser 1978: 152).

store of knowledge is unfathomable, but the novel's import lies in allowing the reader to have that experience.

In conclusion, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* can be read as a bold exploration of humanity and its conflicting notions as essence or performance. Even though their contradictory coexistence is never ultimately solved and the tension between them runs through the whole novel, Prendick – and with him, the reader – makes a geographical and existential journey that will radically affect his "general impressions of humanity" (Wells 1896: 83) and will lead him to question his own idea of it as something innate and unchangeable. Seeing how the Beast Folk perform and, in this way, construct their humanity will make him unable to see his fellow human beings without suspecting that they too are simply performing – and passing – as humans. By questioning – and overcoming – the seemingly impermeable boundary between humanity and animality, the novel thus challenges well-established essentialist conceptions and suggests the disquieting possibility that humanity is nothing but a performance also beyond the island of Doctor Moreau.

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