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## Houyhnhnms on the Island of Doctor Moreau: An Analysis of Monstrosity

**Houyhnhnmy na wyspie doktora Moreau. Analiza potworności****ABSTRAKT**

Potworność w literaturze przybiera najrozmaitsze formy, od człowieka do istot, które w niczym go nie przypominają. Niniejszy tekst poddaje analizie i porównuje ze sobą dwie jej postacie: Houyhnhnma z satyry Jonathana Swifta *Podróże Guliwera* oraz zwierzoludzi z *Wyspa doktora Moreau*, czyli powieści science fiction Herberta Georga Wellsa; przedstawia on ponadto postacie samych autorów, jak również tło historyczne ich dzieł. Co więcej, analizuje istotę antropomorfizacji potworności i to, jak wpływa ona na czytelników. Zauważając podobieństwa między Houyhnhnmami a zwierzoludźmi, artykuł ostatecznie umieszcza stworzenia w tej samej kategorii potworności, nie wywodzącej się bynajmniej od Jonathana Swifta bądź H.G. Wellsa.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** Potworność, Jonathan Swift, H.G. Wells, *Podróże Guliwera*, *Wyspa doktora Moreau*, Houyhnhnm, zwierzoludzie, antropomorfizacja, empatia

### Introduction

Both *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) by Jonathan Swift and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) by Herbert George Wells are known as emblems of their authors' literary styles and themes, and the former has long been considered a significant intertext for the latter. A number of studies devoted to the relation between the two have informed

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the present article, including texts by Adam Schultheiss<sup>2</sup> and Robert M. Philmus<sup>3</sup>. In what follows, *Gulliver's Travels* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* are compared; the focus of the analysis being their conceptions of monstrosity as manifested in the Houyhnhnm and the Beast People, respectively<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, both similarities and disparities between the monstrosities' appearance, behaviour, nature, origins, and symbolism are equally analysed by referring to a number of different cultural texts, including painting, popular science, and literary fiction.

First published in 1896, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is a science fiction novel whose protagonist, an English man named Edward Prendick, lands on a remote island where two doctors, Moreau and Montgomery, experiment on various animals. The doctors attempt to operationally transform their animals into human beings, and their efforts are not entirely unsuccessful; however, the Beast People eventually regress to their previous state, resulting in Moreau's death and the failure of his project. Wells wrote the novel during the scientific revolution of the nineteenth century; hence he was necessarily influenced by the controversial theory of Charles Darwin. The concept of evolution was revolutionary for the times, as it put into question human dominion over the animal kingdom. This change caused reforms in Western civilization; one example of this transformation is the implementation of the 1876 Act in the United Kingdom, which prohibited vivisection<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, society's interest in animals grew, resulting in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) – a collection of stories whose plots are presented from the perspective of various wild animals – becoming an international bestseller. The nineteenth century was indeed crucial to science and society – and as both a biologist and a writer, H.G. Wells monitored the revolution's developments with interest, which produced scientific papers such as *The Province of Pain* (1894), *Bio-Optimism* (1895), or *Human Evolution, An Artificial Process* (1896).

*Gulliver's Travels* reflects a considerably different mindset and a different ideology. Originally titled *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships*, Jonathan Swift's arguably most famous novel debuted in 1726. It tells the story of an eighteenth-century Everyman who finds himself in a number of fantastic countries with curious inhabitants, and the last creatures he meets are Houyhnhnms – humanly intelligent equines who live in a utopian society. In Houyhnhnmland, Gulliver also interacts with Yahoos – primitive, savage ape-men, whom the horses enslave, and his attitude toward both constitutes a pinnacle of the transformation the character undergoes

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<sup>2</sup> A. Schultheiss, *Language, Science, Society, and the Line between Human and Animal in Swift's Gulliver's Travels and Wells's The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Stony Brook University, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> R. M. Philmus, *The Satiric Ambivalence of The Island of Doctor Moreau*, "Science Fiction Studies", 1981 Vol. 8, No. 1.

<sup>4</sup> The present paper somewhat inevitably also mentions Yahoos – the other monstrous creatures who appear in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*; nevertheless, they are not given the same amount of attention.

<sup>5</sup> M.A. Finn, J.F. Stark, *Medical science and the Cruelty to Animals Act 1876: A re-examination of anti-vivisectionism in provincial Britain*, "Stud Hist Philos Biol Biomed Sci" 2015 Feb; 49:12-23.

throughout the book. In spite of employing the conventions of the adventure novel, *Gulliver's Travels* is a satire, as Swift himself had several controversial opinions on contemporary political and cultural issues, which he expressed in the book, as well as in his first major text – *A Tale of a Tub* (1704). Consequently, *Gulliver's Travels* – and the dichotomy of Houyhnhnm/Yahoo in particular – is an expression of its author's infamous misanthropy; as Swift wrote, "principally I hate and detest that animal called man"<sup>6</sup>.

### The image, origins, and nature of the monsters

Anatomically, the Houyhnhnms are nothing but ordinary horses; scientifically – due to their inhabiting merely one geographic location – they are an endemic species. All in all, their population, diet, and even the sounds they make may be called natural; as Gulliver observes:

[w]hile he and I were thus employed, another horse came up; who applying himself to the first in a very formal manner, they gently struck each other's right hoof before, neighing several times by turns, and varying the sound, which seemed to be almost articulate<sup>7</sup>.

In contrast, it is rather difficult to find the Beast People natural or normal in any sense, as Moreau's very method goes against (their) nature; they are abnormal by definition; used for scientific experiments, their bodies combine the features of several species. Moreover, their physiology is later remodelled in the image of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. The appearance of the Beast People, unlike the appearance of Houyhnhnms, is loathed by the novel's protagonist, who describes one of them in a manner reminiscent rather of Gulliver's reaction to the Yahoo:

They were naked, save for swathings of scarlet cloth about the middle; and their skins were of a dull pinkish-drab colour, such as I had seen in no savages before. They had fat, heavy, chinless faces, retreating foreheads, and a scant bristly hair upon their heads. I never saw such bestial-looking creatures<sup>8</sup>.

Not only does Prendick despise the Beast People – he finds them terrifying too, which is arguably justified since he is hunted, bitten, and scarred by the hybrids many times. On the other hand, Houyhnhnms do not put Gulliver in jeopardy; moreover, he utterly lionizes them and describes them as "noble" and "glorious"<sup>9</sup>. Thus – alongside their origin, intellect, and appearance – the attitude of Houyhnhnms and the Beast People towards the respective protagonists (and vice versa) distinguishes the monsters; these, however, appear to be either the most critical or perhaps even the only differences between the creatures of Swift and Wells.

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<sup>6</sup> Letter to Alexander Pope, 29 September 1725. Retrieved from <https://www.ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/shop/swift/letters/chap2.htm> (3.11.2023).

<sup>7</sup> J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/829/829-h/829-h.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/159/159-h/159-h.htm> (8.04.2023).

<sup>9</sup> J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels...*, *op. cit.*

## The symbolism of monstrosity

The introduction of the present paper attempted to prove that the monsters of Wells and Swift alike have been designed for the sake of referring to rather specific matters. The literary monsters reflect the insights of their authors, hence the function that the Beast People and Houyhnhnms perform in their narratives arguably unites them. The latter may be taken to stand for Swift's misanthropy; they are purer and intellectually brighter than humans, who at the time were thought to be undisputedly superior to animals. The horses make *Homo sapiens sapiens* look primitive and barbaric – in the end, after Gulliver introduces England's politics and history to his new masters, Houyhnhnms start treating him almost like just another Yahoo, an ape whose rationality only makes it more despicable in their perspective, since it takes away the excuse of irrationality and ignorance. Eventually, Gulliver himself acquires misanthropic beliefs; and his final statement is anticolonial, going very harshly against the conquering spirit of the age. This was, perhaps unsurprisingly, to a large extent the worldview of Jonathan Swift, who despised humanity in the same manner Gulliver has grown to despise Yahoos. When considered closely, Houyhnhnms themselves also undermine the Enlightenment's faith in reason, exhibiting eminently inhuman(e) lack of empathy and terrifying indifference to individual suffering. Indeed, Houyhnhnms' passiveness and cognition could even parallel artificial intelligence, especially in the light of the rapid development of chatbots – computer programs not only connected to enormous databases but also capable of conducting a dialogue with their users. The mercilessly rational, emotionless, eerily powerful horses might speak to humanity's fear of being overpowered by AI, which has been extensively documented in literature<sup>10</sup>, movies<sup>11</sup> and video games<sup>12</sup>.

Over a century after the first publication of *Gulliver's Travels*, Charles Darwin revolutionised science; his evidence for evolution was debated, but not debunked. Thus, scientists grew to question what had hitherto been the *status quo* about animals, whom they had, following Descartes, treated as machines. In the wake of the theory of evolution, the origin of humanity and its genealogical relationship with animals were put under debate. It is not difficult to consider the Beast People as reflecting this nineteenth-century transformation of dominant views on the position of humanity in the natural world. With the motifs of scientifically-induced hybridisation and regress into the previous, natural state of the Beast Folk, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* can well be read as H.G. Wells' literary contribution to the debate on evolution.

The propensity that monsters in general have for expressing the spirit of the age that produces them is a well-documented trope. According to the American scholar Jeffrey J. Cohen's seminal *Monster Culture* (1996):

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<sup>10</sup> M. Szollosy, Freud, *Frankenstein and our fear of robots: projection in our cultural perception of technology*, *AI & Soc* 2017/32, 433–439. DOI: 10.1007/s00146-016-0654-7.

<sup>11</sup> L. Wachowski, L. Wachowski, *The Matrix*, Warner Bros, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Quantic Dream, *Detroit: Become Human*, Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC, PlayStation 4, 25 May 2018.

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. [...] A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' that which warns,' a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again<sup>13</sup>.

Unsurprisingly enough, this quote could refer simultaneously to Houyhnhnms and the Beast People; in spite of the surface differences, the monsters share in common the particular function that goes outside the structure of the narratives, as they personify the beliefs of their respective literary authors on issues central to their times.

However, the monsters might be interpreted in another way, as reflecting two extremes of humanity. Houyhnhnms are too human: unlike people, they have managed to create a utopian society; furthermore, they are driven entirely by ruthless logic, unclouded by emotions – hence, Houyhnhnms have no “courtship, love, presents, jointures, settlements”<sup>14</sup>. The Beast People, on the contrary, are not human enough, despite Moreau’s efforts. Although shaped in the image of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, they inescapably return to the wild state of both body and mind; furthermore, even at their most civilized, the Beast People barely speak, break the laws established for them by Moreau and continue to live in primitive huts. Disappointed, Doctor Moreau casts them away into the island woods, where they regress.

Thus, the monstrosity of Jonathan Swift’s and H.G. Wells’ literary creations can be seen to reflect changes taking place in culture and science, and at the same time, they may be taken to stand for two opposite extremes of humanity; Houyhnhnms are too human, and the humanity of the Beast People is forever insufficient.

## The monsters and empathy

Houyhnhnms and the Beast People are animals other than humans – a concept that has been made somewhat familiar by animal studies scholars, although still by no means uncontroversial, which would certainly be shocking to the original audiences of both Swift and Wells. Despite their undeniable bestiality, however, they show many clearly human characteristics; and it is precisely this anthropomorphism that problematises Gulliver’s and Prendick’s relation to these hybrid others. Even the great apes – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans – that are commonly taken to resemble humans the most are nowhere near as human-like as Houyhnhnms or the Beast People. Thus, Gulliver’s horses and Moreau’s freaks are not just another animals, but neither are they humans; rather, they find themselves in the uncanny, uncomfortable space in between, which makes them monstrous in the most fundamental sense of the term. As the third of Cohen’s seven theses on monster culture postulates, monsters escape and subvert

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<sup>13</sup> J. J. Cohen, *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, [in:] J. J. Cohen (ed.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, University of Minnesota Press 1996, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> J. Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels...*, *op. cit.*

all attempts at categorisation<sup>15</sup>, and this remark is certainly true of both Houyhnhnms and the Beast People. Gulliver and Prendick both struggle with what to make of them; inevitably, so do the readers of the novels. Interestingly, this phenomenon has biological background, as this confusion is related to the mechanisms of empathy.

Empathy has been a subject of countless scientific texts. Perhaps one of those that are most interesting from the point of view of the present article is the book *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates* (2013) by the Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal, who explains that, due to mirror neurons, which “are activated when we perform an action” and “don’t distinguish between our own behavior and that of others”, one reflects emotions of another. In his book, de Waal delivers an example:

Anyone who looks at Michelangelo’s slave statue, in which a life-sized person struggles to free himself from a block of marble, feels his or her muscles straining. Standing in front of Caravaggio’s painting called *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, in which Jesus watches his doubting disciple poke an index finger into his chest wound, we flinch at the pain this must have caused<sup>16</sup>.

Emotions of animals, however, are not necessarily as relatable. As specified in a 2019 report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services<sup>17</sup>, humans have produced a staggeringly devastating effect on our planet’s ecosystems, with over one million species almost driven to extinction. According to Britannica, humanity has been able to exterminate species in a matter of thirty years (such was the lot of Steller’s sea cows)<sup>18</sup>. In compliance with the Our World in Data<sup>19</sup>, around 900,000 cows are butchered each day. Emile-Edouard Mouchy’s drastic painting *A physiological demonstration with vivisection of a dog* (1832), which presents curious and unbothered men gathered around a canine being vivisected, shows that humans are capable of detaching themselves from animals’ emotions. This observation may be justified with a reference already made in the present text – in the seventeenth century, the French scientist René Descartes theorized that animals do not even perceive pain nor thought<sup>20</sup>. As a result, empathy for the crying dog in Mouchy’s painting is easily dismissed. The realities of industrial breeding of animals are perhaps less spectacular than this visual representation, but equally possible to attribute to the Enlightenment approach to our non-human companions<sup>21</sup>.

According to de Waal’s argument, *Homo sapiens sapiens* is programmed to relate to feelings of another; at the same time empathy for animals, as history proves, is by no means certain.

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<sup>15</sup> J.J. Cohen, *Monster Culture...*, p. 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> F. de Waal, *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates*, Cracow 2014, p. 194.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.nbcnews.com/mach/amp/ncna1002046>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/list/6-animals-we-ate-into-extinction>

<sup>19</sup> M. Roser, *How many animals get slaughtered every day?* Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: '<https://ourworldindata.org/how-many-animals-get-slaughtered-every-day>', 2023.

<sup>20</sup> D.J. Brown, *Animal Souls and Beast Machines: Descartes’s mechanical biology*, [in:] *Animals: A History*, Oxford Philosophical Concepts, P. Adamson, G.F. Edwards (eds), New York, 2018, p. 187-210.

<sup>21</sup> In an article devoted to Wells’ stance on vivisection, Andrew Bishop paints a hair-raising picture of the stance of the Victorian scientific world on the suffering of animals, with quotes from Claude Bernard (“man of science [...] no longer hears the cries of animals”) or Emmanuel Klein (who declared having “no regard at all” to animal pain). A. Bishop, *Making Sympathy “Vicious” on The Island of Dr. Moreau*, [in:] *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 43:2, p. 205.

That is why Houyhnhnms and the Beast People cause mixed feelings; the monsters are non-human organisms, which nevertheless act as if, and in fact at least to some extent they actually are – somewhat human. Apparently, this has a disorienting effect on the reader's empathy on the biological level.

## Lovecraftian themes in Houyhnhnms and the Beast People

In spite of a number of undeniable differences between them, Houyhnhnms and the Beast People could be said to belong to a particular category of monsters. The memory of Houyhnhnms and the Beast People follows Gulliver and Prendick even after they leave the respective islands. On the mainland, their traumas show, thereby resulting in anxiety and fetishes, which – alongside madness, isolation, and self-doubt – are fundamentally the sort of effect that H.P. Lovecraft's monsters produce in the humans unfortunate enough to encounter them. However, the American author was arguably not the first writer who presented this approach to horror, therefore one could argue that the classic Lovecraftian monstrosity is older than H.P. Lovecraft himself.

*The Horla* (1887) by Guy de Maupassant is a prime example of a Lovecraftian text. In this short story, a gentleman of great social status and wealth decides of his own free will to reside in an asylum. He is not mad, neither does he pose a threat to himself or others. He tells a story of an invisible thing that invaded his mansion. Maupassant's main character finds it dreadful; although the thing did not hurt him, he considers it a horseman of the Apocalypse; furthermore, he is afraid of his nemesis learning its invisible advantage over humanity. For the protagonist of *The Horla*, the most terrifying attribute of the short story's monster is not what it does, but what it *could* mean and do.

H.P. Lovecraft himself wrote characters who, during journeys, discover dreadful revelation<sup>22</sup>; Danforth, one of the two protagonists of *At the Mountains of Madness* (1934), might be taken as a prime example. Alongside his friend and a number of assistants, he undertakes a scientific expedition to the Antarctic. Their dig results in the discovery of an ancient alien civilization; and Danforth, described as lettered, sensitive, and intelligent, is to explore the ruins of an ancient, alien civilization. In the end, he learns the truth so dreadful that he cannot even speak it out aloud, which leads him to insanity. Last but not least, he recovers in an asylum, similarly to the main character of *The Horla*; furthermore, his lot is apparently reminiscent of Gulliver's and Prendick's, who too keep thinking about their monsters. The protagonist of Swift's satire admits:

By conversing with the Houyhnhnms, and looking upon them with delight, I fell to imitate their gait and gesture, which is now grown into a habit; and my friends often tell me, in a blunt way, "that I trot like a horse;" which, however, I take for a great compliment. Neither shall I disown, that in speaking I am apt to fall into the voice and manner of the Houyhnhnms, and hear myself ridiculed on that account, without the least mortification<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *The Other Gods* (1933), *Dagon* (1924), *Out of the Eons* (1935).

<sup>23</sup> J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels...*, *op. cit.*

Neither does Prendick ever forget about the Beast People; after his return to England, he becomes an outsider, who

[w]ould turn aside into some chapel, – and even there, such was my disturbance, it seemed that the preacher gibbered “Big Thinks,” even as the Ape-man had done; or into some library, and there the intent faces over the books seemed but patient creatures waiting for prey. Particularly nauseous were the blank, expressionless faces of people in trains and omnibuses; they seemed no more my fellow-creatures than dead bodies would be, so that I did not dare to travel unless I was assured of being alone. And even it seemed that I too was not a reasonable creature, but only an animal tormented with some strange disorder in its brain which sent it to wander alone, like a sheep stricken with *gid*<sup>24</sup>.

Although not aliens themselves, Houyhnhnms and the Beast People appear to have an influence on Prendick and Gulliver as unfathomable as the Elder Things undeniably have on Danforth – or, as the invisible thing of *The Horla* has on Maupassant’s protagonist. Curiously enough, the monsters’ physical appearance, history, and behaviour are strikingly different, thereby implying that the Lovecraftian terror is not exclusively associated with any of these traits.

## Conclusion

The present paper has demonstrated how Houyhnhnms of Jonathan Swift and the Beast People of H.G. Wells vary in intellect and naturalness of their origins, appearances, and behaviours. Neither do the respective human characters – who co-exist with the monsters – treat them similarly, since Lemuel Gulliver idolises the horses, and Edward Prendick despises the hybrids. Last but not least, differences show in the way the characters interact with Houyhnhnms and the Beast People (and vice versa); the main character of the Island of Doctor Moreau is in danger due to the beasts, and the protagonist of Gulliver’s Travels exists with the equines rather peacefully. However, in spite of these dissimilarities, Houyhnhnms and the Beast People simultaneously show a fair amount of likeness. They both symbolize their literary authors’ views; furthermore, the monsters seem to represent the extremes of humanity. Also, Houyhnhnms and the Beast People are somewhat similarly grotesque, for they hybridize characteristics of an animal and a human, thereby puzzling readers’ empathy. Last but not least, both the horses and the hybrids change the lives of the respective protagonists in an uncanny way: since his return from Houyhnhnmland, Lemuel Gulliver attempts to follow the example of Houyhnhnms in every possible way and despises humanity; and after his adventure on the tropical island, Edward Prendick alienates himself from society, too, unable to participate in it daily. Apparently, the very existence of the monsters disturbs the characters, thereby recalling the monstrosities of H.P. Lovecraft. As a consequence, in spite of many differences, both Houyhnhnms and the Beast People could be put into the category of monstrosity that is perfectly described by the adjective – “Lovecraftian”.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/159/159-h/159-h.htm> (8.04.2023).



Selecting both similarities and dissimilarities between the creatures of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and *Gulliver's Travels*, the present analysis hopefully proves the insightfulness of both authors, whose texts – long considered unquestionable classics – still have not exhausted their potential to inform our perceptions of the ever-changing reality crafted by human civilisation. Jonathan Swift and H. G. Wells have undeniably tapped into what makes the monstrous such a powerful trope in our culture, and for this reason, remain valid as texts of culture in our very different times.

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**Houyhnhnms on the Island of Doctor Moreau: An Analysis of Monstrosity**

Summary

Monstrosity in literature takes vivid forms, from quasi-human beings to utterly inhuman ones. This paper both analyses and compares two of its forms – Houyhnhnms of Jonathan Swift’s satire titled *Gulliver’s Travels*, and the Beast People of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, the science-fiction novel by Herbert George Wells. The article also depicts the figures of these authors themselves, as well as the historical background of their works; furthermore, it analyses the matter of anthropomorphising inhuman monstrosity and its influence on readers. By noticing similarities between Houyhnhnms and the Beast People, the text classifies them both into the kind of monstrosity developed neither by Jonathan Swift or H.G. Wells.

Keywords: Monstrosity, Jonathan Swift, H.G. Wells, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Houyhnhnm, The Beast People, anthropomorphisation, empathy