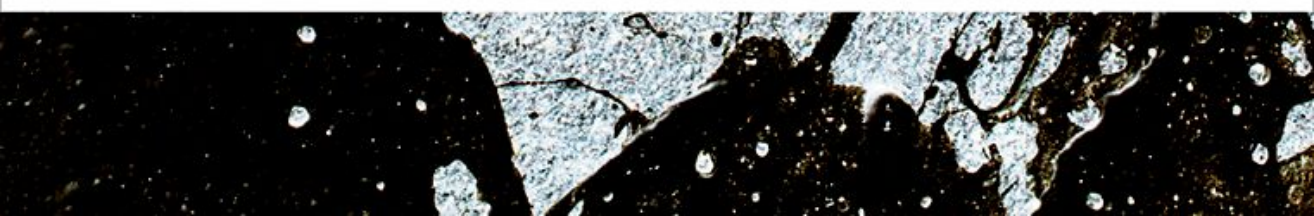
H. G. Wells

The Island of Dr. Moreau

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



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THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR MOREAU

H. G. Wells (1866–1946) was born to lower middle-class parents in straitened circumstances in the Kentish market town of Bromley. He was apprenticed to a draper, a position he loathed, but won a scholarship to the Normal School of Science in Kensington, which had been recently established under the leadership of the eminent biologist T. H. Huxley. There he was trained to be amongst the first generation of school science teachers. He did not complete his degree, but did begin to write and edit a student journal. His brief career as a teacher was ended by illness, and he turned to science journalism and reviewing professionally. He finally published *The Time Machine* as his first book in 1895. This 'scientific romance' was enthusiastically received by leading critics and editors and Wells began a whirlwind writing career, often writing several books a year. By 1901 he had completed several of his most famous scientific romances, including *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901).

After his non-fiction speculations on the year 2000, *Anticipations* (1901), Wells became a leading social and political commentator. He wrote utopias, comic novels of lower middle-class life, and 'problem novels', often on controversial subjects, such as sexual freedom for women in *Ann Veronica* (1909). He was associated with the liberal-left Fabian Society, although scandalized respectable society with a string of affairs. He also alienated many literary figures, quarrelling with Henry James over the purpose of fiction. Modernists like Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster despised his work and often defined their new style against his. Yet with *An Outline of History* (1919), his epic and controversial history of the world, Wells became a truly global figure. After the Great War, he campaigned for world government and in the 1930s visited both American and Soviet leaders to press for peaceful solutions. He lived long enough to see the atomic bomb, something he accurately predicted in *The World Set Free* (1914), used on Japan. One of his last books was called *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945).

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H. G. WELLS

The Island of Doctor Moreau

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by
DARRYL JONES

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Working on a book in which there is so much pain and suffering would not have been bearable without my wife, Margaret Robson, and my daughter, Morgan Jones.

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INTRODUCTION

Readers who are unfamiliar with the novel may prefer to treat the Introduction as an Afterword

It 'ought never to have been written'.[1] The *Review of Reviews*' hostile response to *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, H. G. Wells's third novel, published in April 1896, was by no means untypical. Just a year previously, the selfsame *Review of Reviews* had greeted the publication of Wells's debut novel, *The Time Machine*, as marking the arrival of 'a man of genius' upon the literary scene.[2] But now the widespread consensus was that the young author had gone too far—in exploring the outer limits of his undoubted talent and imagination, he had transgressed the boundaries of decency.

Unlike almost all of Wells's novels of the 1890s, *Moreau* had not first been published in serial form—because, a recent biographer suggests, its content was considered too extreme.[3] Indeed, Wells's letters from around this time are full of complaints that the novel was not even being properly marketed or distributed by its publisher, William Heinemann. Looking to broker a new publishing deal with J. M. Dent, Wells complained that Heinemann 'disappointed by funking the "Island" pitifully because the Chronicle slated it'.[4] Pretty much everyone, in fact, slated it. In *The Athenaeum*, the historian Basil Williams called it 'nauseating'.[5] *The Speaker* believed that *Moreau* marked a new low point for the novel as a literary form, offering as it did 'still lower depths of nastiness, and still cruder manifestations of imbecility' than anything seen hitherto.[6] Perhaps worst of all,

[1] Michael Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* (London, 2010), 114.

[2] [Anon.], 'A Man of Genius', *Review of Reviews* 11 (March 1895), 263, in Patrick Parrinder (ed.), *H. G. Wells: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1972), 33. This notice was either written by the *Review of Reviews*'s founding editor, W. T. Stead, or by his assistant, Grant Richards: both would later take credit for having 'discovered' H. G. Wells.

[3] Sherborne, *Wells: Another Kind of Life*, 112.

[4] H. G. Wells to J. M. Dent (letter of 12 September 1896), in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, i. *1880–1903*, ed. David C. Smith (London, 1998), 268.

[5] Basil Williams, unsigned review in *The Athenaeum* (9 May 1896), 615–16, in Parrinder (ed.), *Critical Heritage*, 51.

[6] Unsigned review, *The Speaker* 13 (18 April 1896), in Parrinder (ed.), *Critical Heritage*, 51.

Wells's colleague on the *Saturday Review*, the distinguished zoologist Peter Chalmers Mitchell—later secretary of the Zoological Society of London and biographer of Wells's scientific idol T. H. Huxley—wrote a damning review of *Moreau*, claiming that the novel was misleading and founded on scientific error—assertions which Wells vigorously disputed.[7]

Delivering its *coup de grâce*, the *Review of Reviews* suggested that the novel should be withdrawn from circulation[8]—which was, in effect, Wells believed, what Heinemann had done. At around this time, he wrote complainingly to the novelist Grant Allen that 'Publishers are I think . . . the most stupid human beings. There is no publisher in London . . . with the intelligence & originality to set fashions.'[9] 'I hope you've read The Island of Doctor Moreau,' he wrote to his long-time friend and correspondent Elizabeth Healey in the spring of 1896, 'and I do hope that you don't think [it] merely a festival of 'orrors.'[10] On December 1896, Wells wrote plaintively to an unknown admirer of the novel, 'I'm very glad to find anyone who thinks well of my Moreau. The book was unlucky at the outset but I think it has the vitality to live through its troubles. My warmest thanks to you for backing my opinion. Voluntary appreciations such as yours are one of the pleasant things in authorship.'[11] The publication and reception of *Moreau* had clearly been a bruising experience for H. G. Wells.

In his second novel, *The Wonderful Visit* (1895), an Angel is accidentally shot by an English vicar, and is forced to spend some time recuperating in the Home Counties. This affords Wells the opportunity for a wide-ranging and gently trenchant satire on *fin-de-siècle* England. At its close, having been shunned, mistreated, and victimized by almost everyone he encounters, the Angel laments, 'Truly, this is no world for an Angel. . . . It is a World of War, a World of Pain, a World of Death.'[12] This bleak conclusion is typical of the early

[7] Chalmers Mitchell, *Saturday Review* 81 (11 April 1896), 308–9, in Parrinder (ed.), *Critical Heritage*, 43–6. For Wells's response to Chalmers Mitchell, see Wells to the Editor, *Saturday Review* (letter [undated, *c.*1 November 1896]), in *Correspondence*, i. 275–6.

[8] Sherborne, *Wells: Another Kind of Life*, 114.

[9] Wells to Grant Allen (letter [undated]), in *Correspondence*, i. 264–5.

[10] Wells to Elizabeth Healey (letter [undated, late spring 1896]), in *Correspondence*, i. 261.

[11] Wells to an unknown recipient (letter of 17 December 1896), in *Correspondence*, i. 279–80.

[12] Wells, *The Wonderful Visit*, in *The Works of H. G. Wells*, Atlantic Edition, i. *The Time Machine, The Wonderful Visit, and Other Stories* (London, 1924), 269.

phase of Wells's fiction, which tends, as Steven McLean has argued, to be characterized by an outlook of 'extreme pessimism'.[13] *The Island of Doctor Moreau* takes the Angel's intuition further still, literalizing his metaphor of 'a World of Pain': 'It was as if all the pain in the world had found a voice' (p. 34), Prendick says on hearing the cries of the vivisected puma.

Saturated in pain and disgust, suffused with grotesque and often unbearable images of torture and bodily mutilation, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is unquestionably an extreme novel. The issues it raises and the images it presents remain shocking. Wells was not altogether wrong to fear that it would be read as 'a festival of 'orrors'—it's the nearest he ever got, certainly in his long fiction, to writing straightforward horror. But *Moreau* is also a serious, and highly knowledgeable, philosophical engagement with Wells's times, with their climate of scientific openness and advancement, but also their anxieties about the ethical nature of scientific discoveries, and their implications for religion; with their speculations about the nature and origins of humanity; and with their often confused and anguished pronouncements on race and empire—pronouncements from which Wells himself, we shall see, was not immune. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is, like all of Wells's best fiction, fundamentally a novel of ideas.

H. G. Wells was a trained scientist. In the 1880s he had studied Zoology in the Normal School of Science in London (now Imperial College) under the tutelage of the great Victorian evolutionary theorist T. H. Huxley. He was well aware of what was for him the intimate relationship between scientific discourse on the one hand and imaginative literature on the other. For Wells, at least, far from representing the irreconcilable 'Two Cultures' that C. P. Snow was famously to observe in the twentieth century, science and literature were both part of the same endeavour.[14] Thus, at the same time as he was beginning to make a name for himself as a novelist in the mid-1890s, he was also carving out a living and an identity as a prolific scientific essayist. An 1894 essay, 'Popularising Science', makes explicit Wells's ideas on the

[13] Steven McLean, *The Early Fiction of H. G. Wells: Fantasies of Science* (London, 2009), 39.

[14] 'The Two Cultures' was the title of the scientist-novelist C. P. Snow's influential 1959 Rede Lecture at Cambridge University, later published as *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge, 1959).

relationship between literature—and most particularly popular genre fiction—and the scientific method:

> The taste for good, inductive reasoning is very widely diffused; there is a keen pleasure in seeing a previously unexpected generalisation skilfully developed. . . . The fundamental principles that underlie such stories as Poe's 'Murders in the Rue Morgue', or Conan Doyle's 'Sherlock Holmes' series, are precisely those that should guide a scientific writer.[15]

Like Arthur Conan Doyle, in fact, and many other writers of their generation, Wells was lucky to be writing at a boom time for the publication of popular genre fiction. In the 1880s, Cassell began to publish a series of reasonably priced (1 shilling) single-volume novels, of which Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) and H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) were notable, stunning successes.[16] The success of novels such as these, along with the contemporaneous decline of formerly all-powerful circulating libraries such as Mudie's, were the death knell for the great publishing vehicle for Victorian realism, the 'three-decker' novel, which had effectively vanished by the mid-1890s. A new, largely urban, relatively classless reading public emerged, with a taste for shorter, more spectacularly exciting fiction, fed by the one-volume novels, but also by the emergence of the *Strand Magazine* (1891) and a host of others, often specializing in short-form fiction.[17] Out of this publishing revolution emerged, in their recognizably modern forms, many of the great genres of twentieth-century popular fiction—the detective story, the horror story, the adventure story, the ghost story, and the science fiction story—or, to use Wells's own term, the scientific romance.

As well as being a combination of the scientific romance and horror story, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* very self-consciously partakes in another important literary subgenre. It is an island novel. Traditionally, this form uses its remote, isolated, exotic locations as vehicles for the examination of the nature of human society, or even of human nature itself. Thomas More's *Utopia*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Jonathan

[15] Wells, 'Popularising Science', *Nature* 50 (July 1894), 301.

[16] See Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel, 1875–1914* (London, 1989), 15–16. This passage on the literary marketplace of the late nineteenth century draws heavily on Keating's work.

[17] As Keating notes, the very concept of the 'short story' as it is understood today was formulated out of this climate; *Haunted Study*, 39 ff.

Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and many others all operate in this way. Even *Treasure Island*, the example chronologically nearest to Moreau, has interesting things to say about class to its implied readership of young boys. At a crucial stage in the novel, young Jim Hawkins has to decide whose side he is on: the exciting, dangerous, disreputable, working-class pirate crew of Long John Silver, or the respectable landowning gentry and bourgeoisie represented by Squire Trelawney and Dr Livesey. As a good Victorian, Jim casts his lot with the forces of order, dull but respectable, for whom effectively he works as a double agent.

If island fiction is fundamentally an intellectual form, then the message of *Moreau* is a very unsettling one. From the very start of the novel, we are made aware that something terrible is going on, some kind of violation. From Montgomery's ominous observation that 'there were spots of blood on the gunwale' (p. 10) of the dinghy from which Prendick is rescued onwards, the early part of the novel is full of images and utterances which break down stable categories of social life, suffusing the novel with a sense of dread, a sense that something inarticulable, perhaps unspeakable, is going on. In her classic work *Purity and Danger* (1966), the anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that pollution and taboo arise from the violation of the clear category distinctions through which social organization—and perhaps the human mind itself—is structured.[18] Straying into the interstices between these clear categories has tended to produce, Douglas argues, social or existential disorientation, revulsion, or disgust. It is on the border between the supposedly distinct categories of human and animal that *Moreau* situates itself, leaving its characters—and perhaps its readers (certainly many of its initial readers in 1896)—all at sea, profoundly shocked by what they encounter. What they encounter, there on Noble's Isle far out in the Pacific Ocean, is something of which they cannot (and should not) speak, for which their language has no signifiers. On first encountering one of the Beast Men, Prendick feels that 'In some indefinable way, the black face thus flashed upon me shocked me profoundly' (p. 13). Moreau himself acknowledges to Prendick that 'Our little establishment here contains a secret or so,

[18] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966).

is a kind of Bluebeard's Chamber, in fact' (p. 28).[19] What is the nature of the violation, this terrible, shocking, unspeakable, secret thing? Why are Dr Moreau's activities so *wrong*?

Looking back on *Moreau* for the publication of the Atlantic Edition of his works in 1924, Wells observed that 'the influence of Swift is very apparent in it'.[20] Indeed, the coda to *Moreau* directly parallels that of *Gulliver's Travels*—just as Gulliver returns to England but—having been given a view of humanity at its most base and bestial—can now see only Yahoos, and feel only disgust, so Prendick, returning home at last, is revolted by what he sees: 'When I lived in London the horror was wellnigh insupportable. I could not get away from men' (p. 116). In his influential critical study *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, John Carey notes the particular appeal of writers such as Wells to a new and characteristic representative of Victorian modernity, the suburban commuter. The short form of much *fin-de-siècle* genre fiction, and its relative lack of formal and aesthetic complexity, made it ideal reading material for the commute to and from work in the city.[21] It is these people—Wells's own reading public—that really disgust Prendick:

> weary pale workers go coughing by me, with tired eyes and eager paces like wounded deer dripping blood [. . .] 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. (pp. 116–17)

Wells's fiction would soon find ingenious ways of doing away with these suburban commuters: when the Martians arrive to wreak their holocaust upon humanity in *The War of the Worlds* (1898), it is to the London suburbs that they come first.

The Island of Dr Moreau itself, Noble's Isle, is quite deliberately and precisely located on the novel's opening page. The *Lady Vain*, on which Edward Prendick is a passenger, is shipwrecked at 'latitude 1° s. and

[19] The most famous version of the folk tale of Bluebeard was published by Charles Perrault in 1697. Bluebeard is a serial wife-murderer who keeps the corpses of his victims locked in a secret chamber in his castle.

[20] Wells, 'Preface to Volume II', in *The Works of H. G. Wells*, Atlantic Edition, vol. ii, p. ix.

[21] John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939* (London, 1992), 46–70. For a full-length study of the significance of figures such as this, see Jonathan Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880–1939* (London, 2006).

longitude 107 w.' (p. 3). This situates the action of the novel, and Noble's Isle itself, in the Pacific Ocean, a few hundred miles west of Ecuador. That is to say, Noble's Isle occupies the same imaginative territory that the Galapagos Islands do on a real map of the world.

'The natural history of this archipelago is very remarkable: it seems to be a little world within itself; the greater number of its inhabitants being found nowhere else.'[22] So wrote Charles Darwin in *The Voyage of the Beagle*, published in 1839. 'The voyage of the *Beagle*', Darwin was later to recall, 'has been by far the most important event in my life and has determined my whole career.'[23] HMS *Beagle*, with Darwin on board as a naturalist, visited the Galapagos in September and October 1835. Darwin's observations of the unique fauna of the islands, and particularly its many varieties of finches, had a very profound effect on his later thinking. The evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould has warned against straightforwardly accepting the 'myth of the *Beagle*'—according to which, on setting foot on the Galapagos, the scales fell from Darwin's eyes, converting him instantly to an evolutionist—reminding us that 'Darwin entered and left the Galápagos as a creationist'.[24] Nevertheless this visit to the archipelago was the major formative event in the long process that led to the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859.

From the perspective of a modern evolutionary biologist, Gould writes of the Galapagos:

> Isolated oceanic islands are the great natural laboratories of evolution. . . . Many features conspire to turn islands into crucibles for profound and rapid evolutionary change among their inhabitants: absence of competitors, ecological availability of unconventional niches, the small size of founding populations. Islands therefore become homes for bizarre versions of animals that may be stereotyped in continental situations throughout the world.[25]

Wells himself was completely aware of the evolutionary potential of islands, and—in yet another example of the interrelatedness of science

[22] Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, ed. and introd. Janet Browne and Michael Neve (London, 1989), 269. [23] Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, 2.

[24] Stephen Jay Gould, 'Darwin at Sea—and the Virtues of Port', in *The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections in Natural History* (New York, 1985), 347, 355.

[25] Stephen Jay Gould, 'In an Evolutionary Crucible', *New York Review of Books* (20 November 1980), http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1980/11/20/in-an-evolutionary-crucible/.

and literature in his mind—had written a scientific essay on this very subject a few months before the publication of *Moreau*. 'The Influence of Islands on Variation', in fact, articulates a central scientific thesis of the novel, that island life and human intervention are the two major causes of species variation:

> When man has taken the wild things of the woods and domesticated them, he finds, even in the absence of conscious selection in his part, that the creatures gradually change in colour and shape and structure from their primitive form. . . . Island life offers a second case in which the abeyance of usual conditions of environment results in great variation. . . . The remotest oceanic islands, indeed, contain practically no true natives; their population consists of creatures that may be blown to them on the wings of the wind, or wafted to them across measureless expanses of ocean. Having reached their isolated new homes, they vary abundantly. . . . Now the special point of this little essay is to suggest that isolation on islands has played a larger part in the evolution of animals and plants than is usually attributed to it.[26]

Islands, Wells realized, could act not only as crucibles of evolution but also as powerful reminders of the place of humanity in evolution, and as a product of evolution. As with Gulliver and Prendick, island encounters raise questions about the nature of humanity, and our supposed place at the pinnacle of creation.

This is exactly the territory Wells explores in his other island fiction of the 1890s, the short story 'Æpyornis Island' (1894). Here, an orchid-hunter is trapped on a desert island with an extinct flightless bird, and soon finds himself in a desperate struggle for survival: 'I admit I felt small to see this blessed fossil lording it there. . . . A great, gawky, out-of-date bird! And me a human being—heir of the ages and all that.'[27] In the introduction to their collection of his scientific writings, Robert Philmus and David Y. Hughes note that the 'repudiation of anthropocentricity' is central to Wells's vision, particularly in the 1890s.[28] We see this vision radically in *The Time Machine*, where humanity splits over time into two distinct subspecies, the Eloi and the Morlocks, before disappearing altogether from the surface of the

[26] Wells, 'The Influence of Islands on Variation', *Saturday Review* 80 (17 August 1895), 204.
[27] Wells, 'Æpyornis Island', in *Works*, Atlantic Edition, i. 333.
[28] Wells, *Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*, ed. Robert Philmus and David Y. Hughes (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), 15.

earth, whose last inhabitant at the end of time is some tentacular creature 'hopping fitfully about'.[29] In *The War of the Worlds* (1898), human dominance of the planet proves no match for superior Martian technology; we are saved only by the presence of Earth's primordial life-forms, the germs against which the Martians have no resistance.

'Æpyornis Island' was first published in the *Pall Mall Budget* on 27 December 1894. A few days earlier, Wells had published a scientific essay, 'The Rate of Change in Species' which mused on the slowness of human evolution, fundamentally unchanged since the Stone Age. The logic of this observation leads Wells to a bleak conclusion, which precisely anticipates the orchid-hunter's terminology in 'Æpyornis Island':

> The true heirs of the future are the small, fecund and precocious creatures; those obscure, innumerable plastic species that die in myriads and yet do not diminish . . . No doubt man is lord of the earth to-day, but the lordship of the future is another matter. . . . No doubt he is heir of all the ages, but the herring, the frog, the Aphis, or the rabbit, it may be, is the residuary legatee.[30]

The 'hopping creature' that is *The Time Machine*'s residuary legatee to the ages may well be an evolved descendant of a frog, or perhaps a rabbit. The rabbits which Moreau has brought to Noble's Isle for a food supply make frequent cameo appearances throughout the novel, there in the background or middle distance—Wells rarely passes up an opportunity to remind us of their presence (I count about a dozen appearances in what is not in any case a long novel). Indeed, attentive readers will spot them on the novel's opening page, listed among the surviving fauna discovered on Noble's Isle when HMS *Scorpion* visits there in 1891, some four years after the action of the novel: 'A party of sailors then landed, but found nothing living thereon except certain curious white moths, some hogs and rabbits, and some rather peculiar rats' (p. 3).

It is difficult to overestimate the psychic shock which the publication of *The Origin of Species* caused to Victorian society in 1859. It brought about a profound revolution—a paradigm shift—in scientific, social, cultural, and religious thinking. The mid-Victorian 'crisis

[29] Wells, *The Time Machine*, in *Works*, Atlantic Edition, i. 111.

[30] Wells, 'The Rate of Change in Species', *Saturday Review* 78 (15 December 1894), 666.