

Representations of Western Religion in Animal-centric Literature

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Often in literature, animals are used as proxies for their human counterparts or as caricatures representing specific traits of humankind. In this essay, I will outline the ways in which animal characters are used to highlight different aspects of Western religion in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Each of these three novels, though written in different centuries and featuring vastly different subject matter, describes fantastical situations and satirizes certain aspects of the societies in which each author wrote his work.

Because religion is such an integral part of cultures all over the world, it is no surprise that much of literature includes strong religious connotations. Whether or not a reader considers himself or herself religious, there is no denying the pervasive nature of human religion in all aspects of society. Because this essay and the works referenced herein are exceedingly Western, Christianity will be the focus of the topics of religion discussed in regards to the three novels mentioned.

The first novel I will discuss is Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, particularly part IV: "A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms."

Swift originally published this work in 1726 as a thinly veiled satire of the English government and the nature of imperialism. In part IV, Gulliver encounters the Houyhnhnms, horses who possess extremely high levels of reason and intelligence. Gulliver is amazed by these creatures who have no use for emotions, which they consider irrational and useless in their strictly logical society. Each Houyhnhnm considers what is best for his or her society as a whole; therefore, there are no serious conflicts among the members. As the Houyhnhnms take Gulliver in as a kind of entertaining anomaly (compared to the base Yahoos they are used to, whom Gulliver resembles as a human being), he is continuously amazed at how seemingly perfect Houyhnhnm society is. This eventually leads Gulliver to turn on his own kind based on the harsh judgements the Houyhnhnms cast upon humans and their insatiable appetite for vice and folly.

Swift is a brilliant satirist and a strong influence on the other two authors I will discuss later. Not only is Swift satirizing human nature and our propensity to liken ourselves to more advanced, civilized creatures rather than Yahoos (uncivilized creatures without advanced cognitive function), but he is also satirizing the coldness of the Houyhnhnms' sterile society. There are two main schools of thought regarding Gulliver's encounter with the Houyhnhnms. One considers Swift's message to be that Houyhnhnm society is an ideal but unattainable goal for humankind. However, the second faction of critics considers Swift's message to be a less hopeless one: that "the life of pure rationality, portrayed by the Houyhnhnms, where reason is fully in control of passion, is seen as greatly lacking rather than ideal" (Casement 531).

It is important to note that Swift was quite religious and a clergyman. Therefore, religion itself is not being satirized in Gulliver's Houyhnhnm adventure. However, the perfect rationality of Houyhnhnm culture in itself leaves no room for religion at all. Swift is

commenting on the need for a balance between rationality and emotion to experience a full human life. There can be no religion without human passions and emotions because, by nature, religious faith is based in beliefs which absolutely cannot be quantified in empirical, rational terms. Also, because the Houyhnhnms have no words for falsehoods, fraud, et cetera, and are not driven to harm or steal from one another, they would have no use for a book of commandments instructing them on how to live.

Another interesting reading of the Houyhnhnms flips the idea of human dominion on its head. Human dominion, which many consider to be dictated by the Bible, basically states that man is the peak of God's creation and that all other animals on Earth are considered lesser than humans. In Swift's story, Yahoos are essentially humans, but they are far below Houyhnhnms because of their ever-present animality and lack of reasonable behavior. Although this is an extreme representation of humanity, it is accurate in the sense that, placed next to a society like the Houyhnhnms, we would seem brutish and uncivilized based on our readiness to participate in questionable practices which we excuse with rational justification. According to Swift, mankind is not inherently rational but instead possesses the ability to behave rationally, as stated by Hartwick College's David Cody. The breakdown of human morality vexed Swift throughout his life so readers are able to interpret from the Houyhnhnms' critique of man:

But when a creature pretending to reason could be capable of such enormities, he dreaded lest the corruption of that faculty might be worse than brutality itself. He seemed therefore confident, that, instead of reason we were only possessed of some quality fitted to increase our natural vices; as the reflection from a troubled stream returns the image of an ill-shapen body, not only larger but more distorted. (Swift 2603)

Exactly one hundred and seventy years later, in 1896, H.G. Wells published his novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, considered a work of early science fiction. The tone and atmosphere of this novel are entirely different from those of *Gulliver's Travels*, but it is obvious after studying both that Wells was heavily influenced by Swift's satirical work. Both pieces involve a protagonist who is thrust into unknown lands, encountering strange and fantastical creatures far different from those to which humans are typically accustomed. However, unlike Gulliver's excursion with the Houyhnhnms, Prendick does not experience an enlightened society that has transcended emotion and passionate impulse.

Doctor Moreau, the "master" of the island is a radical, obsessive scientist who uses his knowledge of biology to infuse animals with human characteristics, essentially, speeding up their evolution artificially. However, his true goal is never made clear, and readers are left to infer, alongside Prendick, that Moreau is utilizing harsh, cruel practices in vivisection for no other reason than to push the boundaries of his own creative ability at the expense of these Beast Folk.

At the turn of the twentieth century, vivisection was an extremely controversial topic in the U.K. and America. The pursuit of scientific knowledge at the cost of inflicting great suffering upon nonconsenting animals did not mesh well with the prevalent principles of Christianity at the time, which valued compassion and respect for all of God's creation. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* represents the stark battle between religious ideals and scientific accomplishments in the late nineteenth century, particularly those that arose after Charles Darwin's publications.

Thanks to Moreau's tampering, his beasts obtained traits such as reason, spoken language, impulse control, and a vague idea of religion, all of which we consider altogether human. These are all characteristics that have allowed us as a species to consider ourselves elevated above

all others. However, Moreau, even at his death, was never successful at completely transforming an animal, and his projects would always eventually regress back to their base animalistic natures. This is representative of the fear that humans themselves might revert back to their more base natures of violence and predation on the weak without the influence of some kind of outside force which works to keep us in line (Harris-Fain 11).

An extremely significant aspect of Moreau's conditioning routine was the implementation of "The Law" which banned eating flesh (fish and animal meat), clawing bark, walking on all fours, sucking water from streams, and chasing other animals on the island. Keeping the Beast Folk from hunting shows Moreau's fear at how quickly one of his projects might revert once it tastes blood. This is striking, again, because humans themselves might also be susceptible to this kind of regression. In *Homo Necans*, Walter Burkert considers humanity a "special case" in this aspect. "Being trained to kill against his instincts and heritage, man would experience the man-animal equivalence and thus mix impulses of aggression with the craft of hunting" (Gross).

Though Moreau denied his involvement in the creation of The Law to Prendick, the Beast People told him otherwise. Arguably, their word is more reliable than Moreau's as they are not wholly human, thus unable to deceive. The punishment for breaking any one of these laws was a return to Moreau's "House of Pain," where he practiced his grueling vivisections. None of the Beast People wished to return to these conditions, so they followed The Law as best they could. In human terms, Christians typically try to avoid breaking the law of God for fear of entering Hell. However, on Moreau's island, the threat of pain and suffering is very real and tangible, unlike its human counterpart.

The Beast People considered Moreau their Maker, which, for all intents and purposes, he was, as he was the one who gave them self-

awareness — for better or for worse. This is a thinly veiled allusion to Christianity, whose God is the ultimate Creator of all things. However, the unfortunate plight of the Beast People leaves them permanently at odds with the idea of a Maker and master. While the Beast People have some semblance of humanity and reason, they lack a sense of purpose and understanding of their existence. They understand that Moreau altered them, but because The Law was implanted into their psyche without their consent, they lack the kind of free will that is necessary to consider oneself a true believer in any higher power.

Once Moreau dies, they begin to question everything The Law taught them as they now see that their Maker is not invincible but is able to be destroyed by one of their own kind, a puma who, throughout the novel, had been suffering in the House of Pain. Also a nod to the Christian Bible is the fact that Moreau and his work were ultimately destroyed by a female puma, much like how the fall of man was kickstarted by a pesky Eve. She did not become more human in spite of all Moreau's cutting and experimentation, yet, it was her animality and true nature that allowed her to survive and conquer her captor in the end.

This representation of Christianity is bleak and can be attributed to Wells' own religious ideas (Luckhurst). Once a Christian, Wells converted to a Darwinian worldview and practiced it devoutly throughout his life. This resulted in a nihilistic perspective toward the end of Wells' life because, following Darwinism to its core and applying it to society; nature was harsh, and those that are unable to adapt deserved to be killed off. After witnessing the horrors of Nazi eugenics, Wells wavered in his stark exaltation of science as a means of human salvation. (Glover 117, Bergman 88). While that came decades after *The Island of Dr. Moreau* was published, it is significant to mention among the observations regarding religion and Wells' use of animals and nature to represent Christianity, humanism, scientific pursuit, and the

fact that not one of those things alone is satisfactory in cushioning one from the harshness of life in the natural world.

The third and final work I will discuss in this essay is George Orwell's 1945 novel, *Animal Farm*. Orwell is first and foremost satirizing and critiquing the Stalinist totalitarian dictatorship over the USSR in the twentieth century. However, while the primary focus of Orwell's harsh criticisms is Joseph Stalin himself, *Animal Farm* is also a critique of the proletariat culture in Stalinist Russia. At first read, *Animal Farm* might not seem to reference Christianity and religion in general. Religion was a huge part of life for the proletariat Orwell is referencing, though, and the animals of *Animal Farm* have a complicated relationship with religion despite the fact that it is not explicitly outlined.

Old Major, a boar who represents Karl Marx, first rallies the animals on Manor Farm (its title while still under the rule of the human Mr. Jones), to promote, in so many words, the beauty of socialism. It is Old Major who plants the idea of a self-sufficient farm run by the animals themselves for the benefit of the animals themselves. However, Old Major dies early in the novel, and his dream of a perfect socialist utopia among the animals is poisoned and corrupted by the pigs who replace him as the heads of the animal hierarchy. Napoleon, Orwell's surrogate Stalin character, becomes more corrupt as he becomes more human-like. This is significant because it boils down to the true nature of people in power being vice-riddled and prone to deceitful behavior. This is where religion comes into play. Christianity at its core praises the Christ-like character traits of compassion and honesty. However, it has been tainted time and time again by those who crave power and see themselves as superior to the common man. This is represented by the commandments of *Animal Farm* being constantly altered in order to fit the agendas of those in power.

Those who are toward the bottom of the hierarchy, though, cling more desperately to the core principles of religion because that is where

they find comfort. When a group of people is trapped and oppressed, it is natural that they would seek peace in the metaphysical. When life becomes so painful and intolerable, the afterlife is the only thing to which one can look forward. It is Karl Marx who acknowledged this fact in 1843 in “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

Orwell believed that members of the proletariat were weak-willed. They became content to ignore their horrific plight because they were able to utilize cognitive dissonance in order to trust a broken system and discard any personal responsibility, much like Orwell’s Boxer. Boxer lied to himself about the conditions he and his fellow animals were in up until the moment he was being taken away to die in a glue factory. By that point, he was too weak to fight back. Orwell is commenting on the lower class’ uncanny ability to resign themselves to their fate and use all their energy on demanding physical labor, making them unable to fight back against their oppressors should the opportunity arise.

It would be a mistake to discuss the significance of religion in Orwell’s *Animal Farm* without mentioning Mr. Jones’ pet raven, the aptly named Moses. Moses is special to Mr. Jones and is not interested in an animal revolution at Manor Farm. Moses is a priest-like figure who tries to convince the other animals to be happy with their lots in life because they will get to experience “Sugarcandy Mountain” in death — an obvious reference to Heaven. Once the animals take over and Mr. Jones is exiled, Moses follows, and readers do not see him again until he returns to preach similar ideals. “Their lives now, they reasoned, were

hungry and laborious; was it not right and just that a better world should exist somewhere else?" (Orwell 118).

It is curious that the pigs allow Moses to return to the farm since he was somewhat of an enemy to their initial revolution. However, as a priest-like figure (who represents The Russian Orthodox Church), his work is valuable to the pigs who would rather the oppressed animals remain content with this religion and its potential afterlife rewards than to rise up against their horrible conditions. This is clearly seen in both Moses' relationship to Mr. Jones and his later relationship to the pig regime.

While each of these three authors was writing during very different times in history, they shared similar ideas on the true nature of humanity. While Swift never experienced Stalinist Russia, he was discontented with the English government and its treatment of its people. Wells' Moreau was tasked with roles as both the governing body and deity of his island, his hubris ultimately destroying his chances of success at either. Whereas Swift satirized the Houyhnhnms and their lack of religion, Wells and Orwell saw the failings in Christianity. All three authors used animals in their own ways, but the animals worked as stand-ins for humanity. The use of animals is especially effective in making these types of points as they would be most vulnerable and confused in regards to human ethos. The animals in these three works represented the characteristics of humanity most affected by religion: the abilities to reason, to deceive, to experience anguish, and to contemplate one's own mortal purpose.

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