

Wells' caustic attack on vivisection in the island of dr. moreau



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Vivisection, an issue explored by many different scholars, including religious, scientific, and literary, has engendered a fierce debate since its inception. Philosophers early as Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas began addressing issues concerning mankind's relation to animal, which had great implications in shaping societal views on vivisection during later years. Such views were shaken, however, when Darwin began publishing his work delineating the relationship between animals and humans. H. G. Wells, a student of science and a well-acclaimed science fiction writer, employs a unique setting in his novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, to question supporters of vivisection. Wells attacks the act of vivisection by providing the reader with acoustic filled descriptions of the suffering experienced by the animals, satirizing the traditional Christian belief system, and discussing Darwinism and its implications on the relationship between animals and humans. One of the primary means by which Wells attacks vivisection is through his descriptions of the pain the animals are forced to undergo. These descriptions are important because they draw empathy from the reader. Wells focuses his descriptions on stimulating the reader's acoustic senses to draw such empathy. For example, Prendick, when describing the howling of the puma, states, " A sharp, hoarse cry of animal pain came from the enclosure behind us. Its depth and volume testified to the puma. I saw Montgomery wince" (36). The diction used here, such as " sharp" and " hoarse," is important because it allows the reader to actually hear the cries of the puma rather than simply reading about them. Moreover, hearing these cries, the reader empathizes with the puma to a greater extent because the reader is essentially hearing the pain the puma must be experiencing through these cries. Montgomery's wince is also important because it reveals to the reader

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that even after several years Montgomery has not grown accustomed to these cries of pain-that is, the pain experienced by the animals each time is real, and the howls and moans never seep into the background. Prendick continues to describe these howls when he states, " I found myself that the cries were singularly irritating, and they grew in depth and intensity as the afternoon wore on. They were painful..." (37). The fact that each of the cries is " singularly irritating" is significant because Wells is emphasizing that each cut during the vivisection process is uniquely painful. This idea draws further empathy because the reader sees that the puma feels a sharp, acute pain each time it yelps as opposed to growing accustomed and experiencing a general, dull pain. Furthermore, Wells uses this idea of uniqueness to convey to the reader that animals are unique beings just like humans, and thus the act of vivisection should not be justified. Eventually, these cries become so strong that Prendick starts to feel the pain. The pain he speaks of is important on two levels. On the surface, this pain simply arises from the intensity and sharpness of the cries and howls that Prendick hears. On a deeper level, the pain Prendick feels actually represents the puma's real pain-that is, the pain from the vivisection is transferred from the puma to Prendick through the acoustic medium. Eventually, Prendick cannot stand the cries any longer when he states, " The emotional appeal of those yells grew upon me steadily, grew at last to such an exquisite expression of suffering that I could stand it in that confined room no longer" (37). At this point, the reader is already empathizing with the puma. Wells' writing strategically here because, by having Prendick leave the room, Wells in effect forces the reader to exit the scene, leaving the reader with echoes of the puma's worst cries and wondering what will become of her. In addition to <https://assignbuster.com/wells-caustic-attack-on-vivisection-in-the-island-of-dr-moreau/>

utilizing such descriptions to attack vivisection, Wells crafts his novel into a religious satire to debunk the philosophies of those supporting vivisection through religious convictions. Before exploring the satirical features of the novel, however, it is important to understand Christianity's relationship with and stance towards nonhuman animals. In general, as Rod Preece, a professor of Political Philosophy at Wilfrid Laurier University, states, "...the reputation of the Christian tradition has fared poorly in the burgeoning literature on the history of attitudes to nonhuman animals" (399). The reason for this may be due to the writings of early scholars, especially those of St. Thomas Aquinas, a philosopher and theologian of the Church. In one of his most famous works, *Summa Theologica*, published in the mid to late thirteenth century, St. Aquinas states, "According to the Divine ordinance the life of animals and plants is preserved not for themselves but for man. By a most just ordinance of the Creator, both their life and their death are subject to our use" (20). Thus, St. Aquinas clearly believes that God has planned the creation animals and plants for mankind's use. Many have analyzed Christian tradition by examining a key passage in the Book of Genesis, which states, "Then God blessed them, and said to them, Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (149). Most scholars have interpreted this passage to represent how the Christian tradition disregards the rights of animals and justifies the use of vivisection. These thoughts continued to resonate during the late nineteenth century, when *The Island of Dr. Moreau* was published. For example, Edward Evans, an author and educator at the time, interprets the passage from Genesis when he writes: "Upon the being thus arbitrarily <https://assignbuster.com/wells-caustic-attack-on-vivisection-in-the-island-of-dr-moreau/>

created absolute dominion is conferred over every beast of the earth and every fowl of the air, which are to be to him for meat. They are given over to his supreme and irresponsible control, without the slightest injunction of kindness or the faintest suggestion of any duties or obligations toward them” (89). Thus, Evans, like many other authors and scholars at the time, interprets the passage in Genesis in a manner that mirrors the ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas. Wells, frustrated with scholars rationalizing their reasoning through Christianity and the idea of a centralized, planned world in which God created mankind with purpose, attacks the source directly. That is, Wells crafts a satire out of religion to debunk the source of justification for the many scholars who refer to religion when justifying vivisection. Early in the novel, Wells' questioning of the central importance of human life, and thus traditional Christianity, becomes apparent. Prendick's emotions and tone are often dissonant with the events that surround him. For example, after observing his fellow men scuffle on the lifeboat and eventually fall overboard to their deaths, Prendick states, “ They sank like stones. I remember laughing at that and wondering why I laughed. The laugh caught me suddenly like a thing from without” (2). Foremost, these thoughts manifested early in the novel are disturbing to the reader as Prendick finds humor in the deaths of fellow humans. By interlacing humor with death, Wells uses this situation to force the reader to question the seriousness and importance of human life. Furthermore, this incident introduces Wells' idea concerning the lack of sacredness or holiness to mankind's existence-that is, there may not be a divine figure that has placed humanity in a centralized and planned life. Wells continues to attack traditional Christianity and the idea of a divine figure through other characters. For example, Montgomery, after discussing <https://assignbuster.com/wells-caustic-attack-on-vivisection-in-the-island-of-dr-moreau/>

his life or lack thereof for the previous twenty years, exclaims, "What's it all for, Prendick? Are we bubbles blown by a baby?" (111). Foremost, one generally thinks of bubbles blown as moving in random motion without any importance to their paths. Wells uses these bubbles to create such imagery and represent the lives of humanity, and thus argues that our lives are not necessarily of central importance to the functioning of the world.

Furthermore, Wells creates a mockery of the idea of a divine figure by having a baby blow the bubbles. What kind of planning is devised for human life if a baby is blowing such bubbles in a haphazard manner? These ideas again allow Wells to stir up thoughts of confusion and uncertainty in the reader's mind. Wells forces the reader to look critically upon those who support vivisection through religion, especially when this justification is based on assumptions such as the unique importance of human life and the presence of a divine figure, both of which Wells renders tenuous through his satire.

Wells continues this satire on religion when discussing the laws of the Beast People. The Beast People continually chant, "Not to go on all-Fours; that is the Law. Are we not Men? Not to suck up Drink; that is the Law. Are we not Men? Not to east Flesh or Fish; that is the Law. Are we not Men? Not to claw Bark of Trees; that is the Law. Are we not Men? Not to chase other Men; that is the Law. Are we not Men?" (61). These laws are analogous to the Ten Commandments set forth in Christian Bible (310). Wells creates parallels between the two in various ways. Foremost, looking at the written structure of the laws of the Beast People and the Ten Commandments, one can see that both are written in short statements that repress the follower from performing certain actions. While the Ten Commandments repeat the phrase "thou shalt not," the laws of the Beast People repeat "not to." In addition, <https://assignbuster.com/wells-caustic-attack-on-vivisection-in-the-island-of-dr-moreau/>

similar to the traditional Christian belief system, the Beast People are encouraged to repeat these laws. Wells is creating a satire of religion once again through the Beast People's laws. In fact, when Prendick encounters these laws for the first time, he states, " I realized I had to repeat this idiotic formula. And then began the insanest ceremony" (60). Wells directly conveys his own thoughts on religion through Prendick's views. Words such as " idiotic" and " insanest" serve as caustic remarks against traditional Christianity. Once again, Wells, by attacking the source of rationale, persuades his readers that religion cannot serve as a justification for vivisection. In addition to crafting a satire of religion, Wells explores of Darwinism, which serves as his third angle of attack against vivisection. Although Christianity had convinced many that vivisection was rationalized because God created animals for the use of mankind, these views were suddenly challenged when Darwin published his research on the relationship and links between mankind and animals. Darwin proposed that man had evolved from animals and that there existed an irrefutable link of common ancestry between the two. Specifically, in his work *Descent of Man*, Darwin describes the similarities between humans and animals when he writes: All have the same senses, intuitions and sensations-similar passions, affections and emotions, even the more complex ones such as jealousy, suspicion, emulation, gratitude and magnanimity; they practice deceit and are revengeful; they are sometimes susceptible to ridicule, and even have a sense of humour; they feel wonder and curiosity; they possess the same faculties of imitation, attention, deliberation, choice, memory, imagination, the association of ideas and reason... (*Descent of Man*, 89) Thus, Darwin draws large similarities between animals and mankind, especially concerning <https://assignbuster.com/wells-caustic-attack-on-vivisection-in-the-island-of-dr-moreau/>

feelings and emotions. This is important because, as discussed below, Wells places a large emphasis on showing how both the Beast People and humans revert back to their baser instincts or emotions, which reveals the direct influence of Darwinism in Wells' work. Thus, Darwin's work clearly revolutionized societal views towards the treatment of animals, influencing and molding the thoughts of many scholars and authors at the time. For example, Thomas Hardy, a novelist and poet, writes: The discovery of the law of evolution, which revealed that all organic creatures are of one family, shifted the center of altruism from humanity to the whole conscious world collectively. Therefore, the practice of vivisection, which might have been defended while the belief rules that men and animals are essentially different, has been left without any logical argument in its favour. (11) Hardy argues that if animals and humans were different, vivisection may have been rationally defended. However, now that it has clearly been shown that the two are not different, no logic can be used to justify vivisection, which is what Wells emphasizes through his novel. The theme of Darwinism becomes immediately apparent from the beginning of the novel when Prendick discovers that the ship that has saved him up is bound from Africa to Hawaii (7). This is significant because the journey maps what many believe to be the path of migration and evolution for mankind. Furthermore, Wells uses such plot structure for foreshadow his discussion of Darwinism later in the novel. Wells is keen to inject Darwinism into all aspects of the book because it allows him to drive the theme of Darwinism into the reader's mind before the reader even begins to read about the vivisection. Thus, Wells reinforces the mind early with connections between animals and mankind so that when the reader does arrive at the vivisection, the descriptions will be even more

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terrifying and draw greater empathy. Wells further discusses Darwinism as he draws parallels between Moreau's explanations of the animals and mankind's disposition. For instance, Moreau, when discussing with Prendick the details of his experimentation, states, "...just after I make them, they seem to be indisputable human beings. It's afterwards as I observe them that the persuasion fades. First one animal trait, then another, creeps to the surface and stares at me..." (81). Thus, the animal instincts always seem to dominate and resurface. This phenomenon is analogous to Wells' descriptions of the humans characters in the novel. For example, Prendick's thoughts and actions, after listening to the puma, shed light on the human innate human disposition: "...but their constant resurgence at last altogether upset my balance. I flung aside a crib of Horace I had been reading, and began to clench my fists, to bite my lips, and pace the room" (37). The pain that the puma feels strongly affects Prendick, almost as if he feels a direct connection to the puma. Moreover, Prendick's actions here mirror those of what one generally attributes to animals. Thus, Wells shows that humans, just like the animals with which Moreau experiments, revert back to their base instincts and emotions. Because both the Beast People and humans such as Prendick ultimately return to a common set of instinctual emotions and actions, Wells is essentially putting forth the argument of Darwin-that is, humans and animals arose from a common background and the distance that separates the two is not nearly as large as many previously believed. Thus, Wells argues that the act of vivisection should not be condoned, especially because mankind is inflicting pain on its own type. Wells furthers the theme of Darwinism when Prendick, during the chase of the Leopard Man, thinks, "...but now, seeing the creature there in a perfectly animal

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attitude, with the light gleaming in its eyes, and its imperfectly human face distorted with terror, I realized again the fact of its humanity...I slipped out my revolver, aimed between his terror-struck eyes and fired" (98). Prendick clearly sees the terror in the Leopard Man's eyes, an emotion that, according to some, only humans should be able to experience. Moreover, it is significant that Prendick's description create a dichotomy. The Leopard Man's animal attitude stands perfect, yet its human face is distorted and imperfect. Wells argues that the innate emotions and thoughts of animals cannot be penetrated or altered, which is why the " animal attitude" stands perfectly. In contrast, the artificial manipulation of the face, to make the Leopard Man appear more human like, will easily be overtaken by the base emotions, which in this case is terror, an emotion recognized universally. Finally, it is to recognize that, by having Prendick kill the Leopard Man, Wells is making a statement on the amount of pain and torture caused by the vivisection and related experimentation-that is, death is more desirable than returning to the House of Pain. Finally, even when Prendick returns to civilization, he cannot escape Darwinism, as he states, " Then I would 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" (139). Prendick's experiences on the island have allowed him to see the increased connection between mankind and animals. The fact that such notions are ingrained into his mind even as he returns to civilization, is important because it extends the Wells' use of Darwinism to all parts of society instead of limiting it to an isolated island. Again, Wells is arguing that if so much similarity exists between mankind and other animals,

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then one cannot justify the acts of vivisection when these animals are simply our fellow beings. Thus, during a time in which issues such as vivisection and evolution are hotly debated, Wells offers compelling arguments through science fiction writing. Not only does Wells draw empathy from the reader but also incorporates the important issues surrounding vivisection, such as religion and Darwinism, to formulate a caustic attack. Ultimately, Wells makes it evident that he believes vivisection is an inexcusable process by which mankind is inflicting pain on its own kind. Works Cited Preece, Rod. "Darwinism, Christianity, and the Great Vivisection Debate." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64. 3 (2003): 399-419. Wells, HG. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. New York: Random House, Inc., 2005.