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Hybridity and Performativity:

Different Approaches on Human Nature Through Human-Animal Hybrids in Science Fiction

Human-animal hybridity is a concept that has both terrified and fascinated humankind for centuries; the amalgam of human and animal provides rich territory for science fiction authors to explore what it really means to be human. This exploration is the focus of two such works of science fiction: H.G. Wells' classic novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and Nathan Adler's (Salteaux Ojibwe) contemporary short story "Abacus" (2020). Wells' novel follows Edward Prendick, a Victorian gentleman stranded on an island under the control of Doctor Moreau. Moreau is a disgraced scientist who has dedicated his work to vivisectioning animals in an attempt to make them human, to little success. "Abacus" focuses on the relationship between two focalizing characters living on the extant space station "Marius," which orbits Io, one of Jupiter's moons. These characters are Abacus, a hyper-intelligent rat AI who has built himself a human avatar, and Dayan, an Anishinaabeg teenager and the son of programmers working on the Marius. The nature of humanity is a core theme to both texts; however, as they diverge significantly in their thematic approaches, how do *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and "Abacus" compare and contrast in their explorations of what it means to be human, and what part do the relationships and identities of their focalizing protagonists play in this? I will argue that the relationship between Prendick and the Beastfolk, and the relationship between Dayan and Abacus highlight two fundamentally different perspectives on human-animal hybridity and what

it means to be human. And yet, through their conceptual breakthroughs, both texts come to a similar conclusion—humanity is ultimately performative. I will explore this argument through an analysis of the way in which both texts utilize focalization, characterization, empathy towards “the other,” and the relationships between their human and human-animal hybrid characters.

Science fiction often challenges the idea of humanity as something that is inherent or unmalleable. Estrangement is a core part of the genre, and, as can be seen in both *Doctor Moreau* and “Abacus” a large part of this element relies on an exploration of “the other,” more specifically, through seeing oneself in the other, and through seeing the other in oneself. In her 2017 essay, “Questing to Understand the Other without ‘Othering’: An Exploration of the Unique Qualities and Properties of Science Fiction as a Means for Exploring and Improving Social Inequity,” Janelle Marie Evans writes, “[...] science fiction is uniquely suited to the herculean task of allowing our species to experience, understand, and accept the varied ways in which people express what it means to be human” (Evans 145). Evans argues that science fiction, as a cross between art and science, is the key to promoting understanding and acceptance between human beings. Particularly, Evans focuses on the way in which science fiction literature can help people understand “the other,” or those who are considered deviant in society and therefore less than human. As science fiction is meant to criticize the status quo, it is a powerful tool to address and critique the binaries often recognized in real-world societies. This is made clear in *Doctor Moreau* during the novel’s conceptual breakthrough as Prendick reflects,

Poor brutes! I began to see the viler aspect of Moreau’s cruelty. I had not thought before of the pain and trouble that came to these poor victims after they had passed from Moreau’s hands. I had shivered only at the days of actual torment in the enclosure. But now that seemed to be the lesser part. (Wells 95)

In this particular scene, Prendick stands upon a hill and bears witness to the burial of one of the Beastfolk, the Leopard Man, at sea. Prendick had killed the Leopard Man in a previous scene out of mercy when he “[...] realized again the fact of its humanity” (94), an action taken to spare the Leopard Man from the torture that he was about to face at Moreau’s hands. Prendick’s relationship with “the other” changes throughout the text, as does his empathy towards them. This scene marks the turning point of the novel, where Prendick recognizes himself in the Beastfolk, something that later leads him to recognizing them within himself. In “Abacus,” this understanding is represented not only from the focalization of a human character, but from a hybrid character as well. During Abacus’ attempted escape from the Marius, he remarks, “The hallways are like a larger network of tunnels, a larger maze outside the maze. I see why Dayan feels trapped” (Adler 21). Similarly, when Dayan joins Abacus to flee the station alongside him, Dayan says, “I want to get off this ship as much as you do” (33). As these passages suggest, Dayan and Abacus have an understanding of one another’s feelings, and similarly, they share the same motivation. Through this understanding, they are able to recognize the personhood of one another. Both characters are estranged: while the Marius is their birthplace, Earth is their home. The contexts in which Prendick and the focalizing characters in “Abacus” face their estrangement differ vastly in tone. However, both texts—through a focus on the relationships that these characters form and the empathy that arises as a result—put forth the notion that “the other” is not as separate from them as they may have once believed.

Contrary to Wells, Adler addresses the topic of hybridity from an Indigenous perspective, which lends itself to the text’s unconventional take on humanity. While the humanity of the Beastfolk is an act of cruelty, enforced upon them and condemned within the narrative, Abacus’ humanity is of his own choice. Ultimately, the former regress, while the latter does not.

Throughout “Abacus,” the eponymous character frequently discusses the self-made modifications to his programming. In the scene where Abacus and Dayan make their getaway, Abacus states, ““What’s rat-super-intelligence good for if you don’t use it? [...] I’ve been tinkering with the holo-projectors on board this shuttle for months. I couldn’t very well escape if I couldn’t reach the gas pedal”” (Adler 34). Abacus has been programmed to perform a specific task. In accordance with this programming, Abacus was intended to function as a biological computer—a product and an object. Abacus not only reclaims the intelligence he was designed with to further his own goals, but he alters the programming of the station where he himself was treated in a much similar way. Additionally, Abacus reclaims the culture of the consumers for which he was designed. Being Ojibwe is a part of his identity, and through this reclamation, Abacus forges his own personhood. He becomes a subject rather than an object. In his 2018 essay, “How Do We Learn to Be Human?” Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation) provides further insight into humanity from an Indigenous lens. As Justice explains,

In thinking about how we learn to be human, we also have to keep firmly in mind that Indigenous traditions generally don’t limit the category of *person* solely to the *human*. As humans, we’re simply one of the many peoples [...] Multiplicity is inherent in kinship; good relations require acknowledgement and, importantly, mindful accommodation of difference.

(Justice 37)

In focusing on the definition of personhood through the lens of Indigenous traditions, Justice proposes that personhood is not exclusive to humanity. The difference between humans and animals is not something that should create a division; rather, this difference should be understood and accommodated. Abacus learns to be human, and through this lens, his humanity is just as legitimate as Dayan’s. Comparatively, Moreau approaches the personal autonomy of

one's humanity through a much different perspective. As Moreau reveals to Prendick when he explains why he is performing these experiments, "I have been doing better; but somehow the things drift back again, the stubborn beast flesh grows, day by day, back again... I mean to do better things still. I mean to conquer that'" (Wells 77). Moreau's attempts to mould animals into humans is an ultimately fruitless endeavor. Try as he may, the Beastfolk continue to revert from the human forms he attempts to impose on them. The refusal of the "stubborn beast flesh" to obey Moreau's work runs parallel to Abacus' refusal to follow his programming. Fundamentally, humanity is, as Justice argues, a process, and not one that can—or perhaps should—be meaningfully enforced or applied, as addressed in both texts. By focalizing through both Indigenous protagonists of "Abacus," choice and agency are explicitly made central to this humanizing process.

While "Abacus" explores humanity as a conscious act less beholden to biology than choice, *Doctor Moreau* takes a similar, albeit darker approach. The focalization of Prendick—and his relationship to the Beastfolk—highlights not only the performative humanity of the Beastfolk, but of Prendick himself. He is just as caught between human-and-animal as the Beastfolk are, perhaps even more so. As stated by Prendick near the novel's conclusion, "I was almost as queer to men as I had been to the Beast People. I may have caught something of the natural wildness of my companions" (Wells 130). In this scene, Prendick reflects on his return to London after escaping from the island. Living on the island for nearly a year created a fundamental change in Prendick: he can no longer connect with other humans in the way he once could. Prendick has been made strange, "*queer*" in his words, to other humans (130). Furthermore, the trauma Prendick carries from his experience leads him to view not just himself, but other humans in a similar, queer light. Prendick notes, "I feel as though the animal was

surging up through them; that presently the degradation of the Islanders will be played over and over again on a larger scale” (130). Prendick’s understanding of what it means to be a human has fundamentally shifted. What was once an aspect of himself that he understood as standing separate from animality has become irreversibly tangled with it. Greta Colombani’s 2020 essay, “Humanity as a Performance in H.G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau*,” elaborates further on Prendick’s understanding of humanity. Colombani writes,

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. (148)

By focusing on the comparison between the humans that Prendick has begun to fear and the Beastfolk, Colombani highlights the line Prendick walks. Not only has his sense of identity been permanently altered by his experience with the Beastfolk, but his perception of the identities of others has as well. In his new understanding of the world around him, there are fewer fundamental differences between both parties than he once believed. The portrayal of walking that line between human and animal in “Abacus” can be summarized succinctly through Abacus’ auto-characterization when he explains, “There is an AI for every surviving Terran culture, and I, Abacus rat, have been programmed for a household amongst the three-fires confederacy of the Anishinaabek. I am an Ojibwe rat” (Adler 20). Adler ties Abacus’ identity as a rat to his humanity by making a direct connection to the human culture for which he was originally programmed to be a part. Abacus—much like Prendick—is caught between human and animal. Ultimately, both texts are able to emphasize the performative act that is humanity.

The Island of Doctor Moreau and “Abacus” therefore approach the topic of human-animal hybridity with methods that differ vastly in both tone and perspective. The representation of humanity as something that is not innate, but rather a conscious act, is produced through the conceptual breakthroughs of both texts and reenforced by the relationships between their focalizing characters. The idea that the line between human and animal is less of a *line* and more of a gradient is reflected in *Doctor Moreau*, which offers the notion that “the other” and “the self” share more similarities than differences. Prendick’s understanding of this notion is framed through his empathy, and through his trauma by the end of the novel. As Colombani illustrates, Prendick comes to understand that “humanity is always a performance and that the people around him are no different than Moreau’s creatures” (148). Prendick’s relationship to the Beastfolk, their humanity a result of Moreau’s cruelty, leads Prendick to isolation. Comparatively, Dayan’s relationship to Abacus, whose humanity is a result of his own agency, leads them home. “Abacus” differs in the manner with which it approaches the gray area between human and animal, and by putting the choice of identity directly into its hybrid character’s control, Adler is able to foil the grim tone surrounding Wells’ representation of the Beastfolk with one which offers a sense of hope, rather than a sense of horror. The reflection of *Doctor Moreau*’s deconstruction of humanity and animality as two distinct and separate categories in “Abacus” relies on the examination of personhood through Adler’s perspective as an Indigenous author. Dayan’s understanding of “the other” becomes fully realized throughout the course of his relationship with Abacus, and through his recognition of Abacus’ personhood. Overall, the genre of science fiction offers nearly endless opportunities to explore the nature of humanity and the concept of hybridity, two interconnected topics which may be terrifying or uplifting, and altogether undeniably fascinating.

Works Cited

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