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Assignment #8:The First Paper

Behind the Canvas: Expectation, or Horror?

In *The Island of Dr. Moreau,* by H. G. Wells, Edward Prendick finds himself, unfortunately, trapped on an island of monstrous scientific creations who blur the line between man and beast. The creatures are not what haunt him, though, either on the island or once he is away; rather it is how the island has shaken his fundamental beliefs about humankind. Combined with René Magritte's painting *The Human Condition,* the book proves that humanity is in a state of willful ignorance. It is our chosen ignorance of being animals, however, that prevents us from turning into beasts.

Possibly the strangest aspect of the painting-within-the-painting is its existence. Why is the canvas necessary, assuming *The Human Condition* would look nearly identical without it? Why would an artist recreate the view that he can see from his window? For that matter, why does realistic art exist at all? Perhaps it is pride: by replicating the work of God, man deifies himself. (This certainly applies to Moreau's man-making "art.") Perhaps it is arrogance: the artist accepts nature as *almost* perfect, but believes that he can do better, that he can make it flawless. And perhaps it is fear: the ever-present human fear of impermanence, death, *change,* and the desire to preserve the most beautiful fleeting version of something. Change, in general, is inconvenient; change in a view is painful.

Prendick's oscillating opinion about the Beast People, and his eventual "abhorrence" (Wells, p. 75) for them, are explained by human aversion to change. We, as people, do not want to revise our viewpoints, and therefore admit that we were once wrong. Acknowledging the fact that we *can* be wrong would make us doubt all subsequent beliefs, and therefore, our sanity itself. We *wish* our ideas to be perfect originally. We *assume* that they are, and fight to maintain this illusion.

From the beginning, Prendick has an idealistic view of humanity. He believes, innocently, that three men starving in a lifeboat will not kill each other. He thinks that men are above the beastly act of cannibalism, and he would rather die than be proved wrong. In this way, he is the artist. The artist covers the window with the painting, so that even when it is night, or when dark clouds fill the sky, or when the tree is chopped down, he has a lovely, still, consistent view to look upon. Prendick, also, has painted a selective picture for himself, of the very best and noblest of mankind, and he has placed this canvas in front of the window which may later show him otherwise. Prendick's painting is based in reality — humanity *does* have *some* commendable moments in its history. But by clinging to the canvas as an unmoving anchor in tides of uncertainty, he deludes himself. It is not only that our expectations differ from reality; it is our

expectations themselves that blind us from reality. We paint our pictures, we decide what to display and what to omit, and thus we are willingly ignorant.

Prendick struggles and sways, throughout the novel, between justification and condemnation of Moreau, and between empathy for and separation from the Beast People. These internal conflicts agonize the protagonist more than any external events. Originally, Prendick defends Moreau's work as a vivisector, calling his previous desertion by the scientific community a "shameful thing" (W, 23). Later, as the puma's screams and the Leopard Man's terror intrude beyond the canvas and into Prendick's consciousness, he is forced, uncomfortably, to rethink his ideas. It is not that the new idea — that of vivisection being wrong for both humans and animals — is necessarily distasteful. It is the transition itself that is so unpleasant; in *Allegory of the Cave,* Plato states that transitioning to a new belief is as painful as looking at the sun, but the new belief, once accepted, is not so terrible (*Rdr.* 53:17-25). Accepting the wrongness of vivisection would require Prendick to feel guilty for having once condoned it. Therefore, he runs away from all signs of the truth he does not want to know, eventually avoiding the Beast People "in every possible way" (W, 75). This is not hatred towards *them,* but hatred towards the mental situation he is placed in by their existence.

In order to preserve his initial idealistic view of humanity and his justification of Moreau's work, Prendick must maintain a sharp distinction between himself, as the man, and the Beast People. Until the very end, this is not so difficult. Although the Beast People remind him of humans he has encountered, he remains completely ignorant of the ways in which *he* resembles them. We are used to perceiving ourselves differently. We observe interesting habits of others, or read scientific pieces about human psychology, but we imagine that they don't apply to us. We may, for example, learn about tactics advertisers use to manipulate us, but we each think to ourselves, "That would never work on me!" The audience of *The Human Condition,* as another example, may look at the painting-within-the-painting and wonder how the inhabitants of the beige room could be so naive and childish to imagine their canvas is reality. Is the outside audience not doing exactly the same thing by imagining the beige room real enough to be inhabited? The outside audience will not realize this, nor wants to; observing faults in others is a great way to distract oneself from introspection.

In this same way, Prendick maintains his illusory superiority to the Beast People. Somehow, he does not realize how much he resembles an animal, when he paces his room (W, 26) like a caged beast, or when he falls out of his hammock and lands on all fours like a feline (W, 35). He sees the Beast People's terror of Moreau, right before the Leopard Man vainly takes off across the island, and he wonders that he "had ever believed them to be men" (W, 69). Has he

already forgotten his identical terror and attempted flight of the prior day? Only when he starts living with Moreau's creations, out of necessity of food and shelter, does he recognize that he has "become one among the Beast People" (W, 92). He may have truly been one of them long before, but it is this awful realization that changes his entire outlook on humanity.

Up to this point, I have considered the canvas in the painting to be nearly identical to the view which it hides, at least at the current moment represented in *The Human Condition*. But what if the view behind is something completely different, something that has never once resembled the content of the artwork, something so horrific that it would drive the room dweller mad, and this is why the artist created his work? If it is for sanity's sake, then is it right to lie to each other and to ourselves?

By the end of Prendick's long sojourn on the island, his canvas has been ripped away from his window, and what he sees is worse than anything he could have dreamt up. Scientists are not as righteous as he once thought. Humans are equal to beasts in their unpredictable capacity of wildness and cruelty. Like Plato's cave dweller who ascends to the surface, Prendick is seen as a lunatic by his fellow-men. Unlike the enlightened person in *The Allegory of the Cave,* however, Prendick begins to doubt himself and believe that he is the crazy one. He tries to restore his truth-blocking canvas. He says to himself, lying, that the people around him are "perfectly reasonable creatures, [...] emancipated from instinct, and the slaves of no fantastic Law" (W, 103). Wishing to believe otherwise, saying it to himself, can not erase his knowledge. At best, all he can do is keep the terrible truth he knows in the back of his mind and try to ignore it.

The greatest difference between humanity and the rest of the animal kingdom is our imagination. Only humans can lie to themselves; animals are too practical. But this delusion may or may not be a bad thing. Belief in routine, law, religion, philosophy, morality, and, above all, the distinction between ourselves and other species, is what causes that distinction to exist. Just like the Beast People, we continuously remind ourselves that we are humans, and remind ourselves what humans can or can not do. It may seem a very fragile basis for cooperation and society — and indeed, if enough people around Prendick had shared his experiences and his final paranoia, London would have become a very dangerous place — but it generally works very well. Millions of people may live near each other and live predictably and peacefully, with low rates of violence considering the population. The canvas, therefore, may represent our ignorance, arrogance, and self-deception, but it may also be necessary for the way of life we know.