

Close Reading: “Mark of the Beast”

Rudyard Kipling’s description of the titular mark upon Fleete’s character in “Mark of the Beast” subtly changes in a way that suggests that the mark is indicative of Fleete’s humanity. First, I will discuss how the language used to introduce the mark promotes a reading that loosens boundaries between flora, fauna, and human. Then, an analysis of both an omission and an addition to the description of the mark will prove that the mark is not tied to Fleete’s beastliness.

In the early afternoon following the night in which Fleete is marked by the Silver man, the mark is candidly described by the narrator as “[...] a mark, the perfect double of the black rosettes [...] on a leopard’s hide” (Kipling 212). Here, the language referring back to nature is quite clear. The mark is compared to “black rosettes,” a variety of flower, and to a “leopard’s hide.” Using these two phrases that refer to different parts of nature is a way of expanding how one should interpret the meaning of the mark. It is not purely described by comparing it to an animal, and this is further obfuscated by a comment the narrator makes in private conversation to Strickland. The narrator offers alternate explanations for the mark and raises the possibility that it is “a birth-mark newly born...” (Kipling 214). Admittedly, this comparison is not made directly, but some resemblance can still be implied. This last description now offers a view of the mark that relates it to a human quality. While I am unsure of Kipling’s personal beliefs on evolution, to me these descriptions undoubtedly frame humanity as simply a small part of nature as a whole. Kipling must be positing this about humanity as there is a singular common thread that unites plants, animals, and humans. This thread is that they are products and participants of nature.

Later in the story, Fleete appears to complete his transformation into a beast. It is notable that at this point they refer to Fleete simply as “the beast” (see Kipling 218). This time, the mark is described as “the black rosette mark on the left breast. It stood out like a blister.” (Kipling 218). Again, the comparison to flowers is made, but there is no connection to animals. The comment about a “leopard’s hide” is absent despite how beast-like Fleete is now acting. Now more than ever it seems that there should be a vivid description of how the mark upon Fleete resembles some animal, but no such comparison is made. Instead, Kipling provides us with a new comment on the appearance of the mark, “It stood out like a blister.” This addition is notable as the mark can now be seen under a different context. Fleete’s mark seemingly stays constant after its initial description and can be viewed as the only feature that was present in descriptions pre and post transformation into the beast. The fact that the mark now stands out against the appearance of the beast, and appears incongruous enough to resemble a blister, leads one to realize that the mark is not a quality integral to the beast. So, while earlier in the story it may have appeared logical that the mark denoted Fleete’s connection to the beast, it now can be seen that the mark may have more to do with him being human. There is, however, one final mention of the mark that appears after Fleete is cured. The narrator remarks on its absence by saying “We looked and saw that the black leopard-rosette on his chest had disappeared” (Kipling 222). The animal comparison makes a return, and this inclusion simply makes its prior exclusion more visible. It appears now that the mark’s function is not to show that a man is a beast but rather that a beast was formerly a man.

Works Cited

Kipling, Rudyard. *Life's Handicap: Being Stories of Mine Own People*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1891. Print.