Human-Animal Nature
in H.G. Wells and Edgar Allen Poe

H.G. Wells' The Island of Dr. Moreau and Edgar Allen Poe's "The Black Cat" are both tales that explore human and animal nature. Both Dr. Moreau and Poe's narrator deviate from societal norms in their perspectives on human nature. As a result, both men live instinctually and compulsively. Unlike the liberty they allow themselves, however, Dr. Moreau and Poe's narrator view animal nature as if it were composed of malleable, brutish compulsions unworthy of man. The innocent animals involved in each story suffer needlessly at the hands of the two men. Both Moreau and Poe's narrator are aware of the pain they inflict upon the animals, but their personal interests and underestimation of animal nature motivate them to reject blame in every instance of abuse. Instead, the men identify external forces that motivate their behavior, placing blame on these forces rather than themselves.

The difference between Moreau and Poe's narrator, however, lies in the feelings each man has about the pain he inflicts. For instance, though Poe's narrator does not accept blame for tormenting Pluto, he does feel remorse for his actions. Moreau, however, views pain as an unnecessary response to necessary scientific research. This perspective does not produce any sort of remorse, since "the study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature" (Wells 115). Ultimately, though, whether he experiences remorse or not, each man's cruelty and misjudgment becomes his downfall.

In Poe's tale, the narrator reflects much on his perception of human nature. He describes, for instance, the "humanity of feeling" that he once possessed, a trait inherently linked to humane treatment of other living creatures (Poe 197). He does not, however, identify this trait as human nature. Instead, he describes it as being unusual and fleeting – a "peculiarity of character" (192). On the other hand, Poe's narrator declares "perverseness" – the feeling that

motivates him to hang Pluto – to be "[a] the primitive [impulse] of the human heart…which give[s] direction to the character of Man" (194). This perception of human nature leads Poe's narrator to act according to his "perverse" impulses, rather than his ever-diminishing "humanity of feeling." Conveniently, Poe's narrator avoids blame by placing himself at the mercy of human nature.

Moreau also shirks the responsibility of his actions, but rather than condense humanity into a series of irreversible traits, Moreau views humanity as a continuum; it extends from the most underdeveloped animal on one end, to the most advanced, God-like human on the other. This continuum is based on one's drive in life. Moreau is driven to seek the laws of "this world's Maker…in [*his*] way" to "find out the extreme limit of plasticity in a living shape" (Wells 114-115). Moreau's theory allows him to view himself not only as God-like, but also to justify his actions. Concurrently, this continuum also allows Moreau to view pain-driven creatures (whether they be animals or humans) as inferior beings with plentiful opportunity for improvement. As Moreau tells Prendick, "But you see I am differently constituted. We are on different platforms. You are a materialist…so long as your own pain drives you…you are an animal" (Wells 113).

It is here that Moreau and Poe's narrator face potential danger. Moreau's view of animals underestimates the strength of their natural instincts, causing him to believe (incorrectly) that he can "conquer" their "stubborn beast flesh" (Wells 118). He believes this despite his awareness of "something [he] cannot touch…instincts…that harm humanity, a strange hidden reservoir to burst suddenly and inundate the creature with anger, hate, or fear" (Wells 120). But Moreau ignores the implications of this realization – he is blinded by his self-inflated perspective on human/animal nature: his remorseless ego.

Similarly, in Poe's narrator's skewed perception of self-control, he incorrectly judges Pluto as a lesser being – an inconsequential outlet for his angry impulses. In fact, although Poe's narrator regrets killing Pluto, he does not expect any immediate repercussions for his actions – only those allotted to him in the afterlife (Poe 194). His disregard for the potential ramifications of his actions foreshadows his demise.

Moreau fails in conquering the "strange hidden reservoir" of animal instinct in the Beast Men, and his callous cruelty drives the pain-driven puma to lash out against his so-called "research." As for Poe's narrator, his cold-blooded murder of Pluto seems to result in Pluto's reincarnation as a demonic "brute beast." This physical product of the narrator's "human nature" seeks Pluto's revenge by bringing about immediate, real-world consequences for the narrator's lack of humanity.

While it is apparent in each individual story that cruelty to animals yields negative consequences, the pairing of the two works emphasizes this idea to an extreme level. Though it is important to examine the similarities Moreau and Poe's narrator share in their reasoning and actions, it is the *difference* between their settings that highlights animal cruelty as the undeniable basis for each man's downfall. For a greater contrast could not exist between Moreau's secluded, island laboratory and Poe's narrator's private, metropolitan residence. By recognizing the lack of influence this difference had on either story's outcome, it becomes apparent that no other factor – not setting, motivation, remorsefulness, nor personal justification – matters when animal cruelty exists as well. And so, in the face of better judgment (i.e., "humanity of feeling"), the men determine their own fates.