At its core, H. G. Wells's novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) is a story about scientific ethics. Specifically, it asks how far scientists should be allowed to go to make their contributions successful, even if it causes harm to either animals or humans in the process. One figure in particular whom Wells seemed to be directly addressing is Charles Darwin. The obvious parallels between Moreau and Darwin push the reader to consider the aforementioned ethical question as they read the novel. When put in comparison, Moreau seems like a more malicious figure than Darwin was, but that is part of the artistic liberty Wells takes in this small science fictional island-world he creates. Certainly, the overexaggerated dystopian tone of the novel highlights the way literature offers a distinct opportunity for audiences to make sense of the fragmentation of the real world. Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), wrote at length about the power dynamics of what he referred to as the modern episteme. Instilled within Foucault's epistemology are questions that revolve around the validity of potentially oppressive concepts like evolution. As Wells examined in his novel, however, sometimes the ideas in and of themselves are not dangerous, but it is the means as well as what we do with the knowledge that can become problematic. Therefore, I explore in this paper how Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is an exemplary representative of the modern episteme as defined by Foucault in *The Order of Things*.

Foucault saw Darwin as one of the most important figures of the modern episteme because he was using pre-existing natural sciences to create new ways of thinking about the world. In this way, Darwin was a positive figure because of his subsequent impact on science. On the other hand, exactly like Moreau, his logical conclusions have potentially racist implications, exemplified by the survival of the fittest mentality of social Darwinism. As an illustration of this influence, one need not look further than the diction employed by Darwin and Wells. Much work has been done on the impact that SF language has had on vocabulary used in the actual sciences. When thinking about what words to use for a certain theory or material in science, literature offers a good starting point because of its creativity. The science fiction canon—Wells undoubtedly included—would be one place to look for this linguistic influence. In the words of Foucault, “What civilizations and peoples leave us as the monuments of their thought is not so much their texts as their vocabularies, their syntaxes, the sounds of their languages rather than the words they spoke . . . the discursivity of their language” (87). Taking this one step further, literature influences science just as much as science influences literature. Based upon this logic from Foucault, one might wrongfully assume that Wells was the one influencing Darwin, but Darwin died when Wells was still only a teenager. Building upon Foucault's point, there is a crucial element of the recursiveness of language here, in addition to the discursivity.
According to Foucault, there was a logical line of thinking that led humans to believe they gradually became stronger and smarter over time. In other words, it makes sense that a figure like Darwin emerged during the modern episteme. Interestingly, Foucault did not necessarily see the superiority of humans over other animals as the deciding factor; rather, he saw the connectedness of humanity to nature as the driving force. Foucault wrote, “‘evolutionism’ is not a way of conceiving of the emergence of beings as a process of one giving rise to another; in reality, it is a way of generalizing the principle of continuity and the law that requires that human beings form an uninterrupted expanse” (152). He acknowledges progress as a fundamental force of the modern episteme. What he fails to mention, however, is the cost of such progress—enter Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and other dystopian science fiction. Wells conveyed that humanity’s power over the natural would eventually lead to civilization’s demise in a way that Foucault did not. Through mad scientist figures like Moreau or even Victor Frankenstein, literature posits representations of the simultaneously positive and negative contributions to science for the real-world example of Darwin. Foucault wrote, “The quasi-evolutionism of the eighteenth century seems to presage equally well the spontaneous variation of character, as it was later to be found in Darwin” (153). We can see how the theories of Darwin are necessitated by the line of thought Foucault lays out. Subsequently, it makes sense that a person like Wells would come along to produce Moreau as a mediating character to help the reader make sense of Darwin. In short, important past contributions to science cannot be ignored no matter what means it took to attain them. It seems, however, that Foucault is too complacent with the problematic nature of Darwin, whereas Wells did not shy away from the horror and the terrible implications to follow.

Wells highlights the madness of Moreau through contrast with the degeneration of the protagonist, Edward Prendick. When Prendick is picked up early in the story in a little dinghy somewhere near the Galapagos in the Pacific Ocean, he makes it clear that he is familiar with the dominance of science as a field having studied under T. H. Huxley, but it is not his area of expertise. He says, “I told him my name, Edward Prendick, and how I had taken to natural history as a relief from the dulness of my comfortable independence.” Prendick goes on to explain, “He was evidently satisfied with the frankness of my story, which I told in concise sentences enough—for I felt horribly weak,—and when it was finished he reverted presently to the topic of natural history and his own biological studies” (Wells 11). This being said, Wells is establishing that there is going to be a metacognitive awareness of arts and sciences in the novel. In other words, by Prendick drawing attention to his familiarity with both natural history and biological studies from the start, he is revealing that they will eventually be central components addressed throughout the story. In the context of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, it is also interesting to think about the development of science as a concrete subject originating around the Renaissance roughly aligned with what he refers to as the Classical age. Talking about conducting surface-level analysis versus a truly formal one, Foucault wrote, “one is limiting one’s view of language to its Classical status. In the modern age, literature is that which compensates for (and not that which confirms) the signifying function of language” (44). Like what was discussed above with the influence of SF on real science vocabulary, one may see a way in which Wells is capitalizing on the linguistic
sophistication of scientific terms over time. The fact that Wells is demonstrating this sequence of thought articulated in language is part of what makes it a perfect representative of the modern episteme. In addition to discursivity, Foucault clearly saw intertextuality as one of the indicative markers of the thought from this time—more so than times preceding—especially as it pertains to looking backward for informing future progress. While the titular character, Moreau, is the most obvious subject that comes to mind when thinking about a comparison to Foucault’s modern episteme, Prendick shows how Moreau’s work can be dangerously influential in an everyday philosophy.

Given the interconnectedness of thought in the modern episteme, Prendick is plagued by an uncanny feeling of remembrance when he first meets Moreau. It is as if the figure of Moreau was inevitably going to become naturally actualized regardless of whether it was Moreau himself or someone else. To highlight how far back Moreau is reflecting in history, Prendick notices texts from antiquity while Montgomery, the stereotypical evil henchman, is showing him around their little island’s base hut: “He called my attention . . . to an array of old books, chiefly, I found, surgical works and editions of the Latin and Greek classics—languages I cannot read with any comfort” (Wells 32). Drawing upon the aforementioned epistemological nature of Foucault’s project, this is no surprise because one would expect Moreau to be well-versed in ancient teachings since a compilation of previous knowledge is one of the central elements of the modern episteme. Once again, however, the reader’s attention is pulled toward Prendick’s interpretation of Moreau as opposed to prompting us to come up with an objective judgment of the mad scientist ourselves. From the outset, we see the amount of respect the stranded visitor has for Moreau, and this is something that he toils with throughout the novel. While Prendick really wants to believe there is some scientific benefit behind Moreau’s creations, he cannot look past the immoral means of achieving such advancements. At any rate, this dilemma is evident from the first utterance of his name: “‘Moreau,’ I heard him [Montgomery] call, and for the moment I do not think I noticed. Then as I handled the books on the shelf it came up in consciousness: where had I heard the name of Moreau before?” (Wells 32). As the first mention of Moreau’s name mostly functions to foreshadow the eerily despicable actions to come, it also serves the purpose of showing how the scientist is somewhat of a universal character representing the many dangers of modern science. Just because something—like vivisection, for example—could be possible does not mean that we should experiment and find out, but that desire is the inescapable drive of the modern episteme.

Like Darwin, a significant figure of the modern episteme, Moreau draws upon past scientific practices to inform his own. Foucault understood the importance of implementing revolutionary methods unlike anything that has been conducted before for the purposes of generating new knowledge. Moreau, explaining to Prendick the origin of his experiments, notes, “mediaeval practitioners who made dwarfs and beggar cripples and show-monsters; some vestiges of whose art still remain in the preliminary manipulation of the young mountebank or contortionist. Victor Hugo gives an account of them in L’Homme qui Rit” (Wells 72). This line of thinking is representative of the modern episteme because Foucault acknowledged that people were
conceptualizing science and engineering epistemologically in a way that has never been done before, hence the emergence of groundbreaking technological movements during the Industrial Revolution. Wells’s novel is getting at the heart of a crucial question of whether innovative scientific ideas can be executed without malicious acts. For example, Moreau references other manipulative, deformative sciences that inspire his Beast People: “creatures as the Siamese Twins . . . And in the vaults of the Inquisition. No doubt their chief aim was artistic torture, but some at least of the inquisitors must have had a touch of scientific curiosity . . .” (Wells 72). Interestingly, these examples Moreau references are only possible through the colonization of vulnerable populations. Again, that makes the novel a perfect representative of the modern episteme because it takes a postcolonial world to make scientific discoveries like Darwin did, something Foucault recognized. While Moreau enlisted the corporeality of the Kanakas (native Hawaiians) as slaves to help him create his Beast People, the accomplishment of his abominations is still impressive. If anything, the colonial element of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is what sets it apart as more representative of the modern episteme than, for example, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). Victor Frankenstein’s monster was made using the body of a white man combined with animals, whereas Moreau abuses the labor of the colonized to make his creations. Embedded within Moreau’s philosophy, therefore, is a dense history of exploitation never before represented in this manner.

Prendick’s adoption of Moreau’s interdisciplinary approach to life and science at the end of the novel exemplifies Foucault’s use of multiple disciplines to represent the modern episteme. After Prendick eventually makes it back home off the island and re-enters normal, civilized society, one might expect him to commune with others given the traumatic experience of interacting with Moreau, the henchman Montgomery, and the Beast People. On the contrary, Prendick returns to a life of seclusion and study not dissimilar to the lifestyle he observed by Moreau: “I have withdrawn myself from the confusion of cities and multitudes, and spend my days surrounded by wise books, bright windows in this life of ours lit by the shining souls of men” (Wells 131). This hermetic existence goes to show that the problem with Moreau did not lie in his approach to science—in actuality, Moreau is a terrible but accomplished doctor the same way Voldemort is a terrible but great wizard. When Prendick decides to live his life similar to how Moreau lives after his adventures on the island, it reinforces Foucault’s emphasis on the ability of concentrated effort in a single discipline influenced by many to produce substantive, positive change: “What new modes of being must they have received in order to makes all these changes possible, and to enable to appear, after scarcely more than a few years, those now familiar forms of knowledge that we have called, since the nineteenth century, *philology*, *biology*, and *economics*?” (Foucault 220). To put it simply, Prendick represents everything that is good about the modern episteme while Moreau represents everything that is bad. The difference between the two of them lies in their sets of ethics that they implement in their approaches to scientific practice. Therefore, the last lines of the novel beg the reader to speculate whether Prendick will go on to make great contributions to science given everything he has learned: “There it must be, I think, in the vast and eternal laws of matter, and not in the daily cares and sins and troubles of men, that whatever is more than
animal within us must find solace and its hope” (Wells 131). There is potential in all knowledge to change the world for the better, but it is entirely dependent on what is done with said knowledge. To a certain extent, Moreau is a perfect example of a modern scientist because he saw a gap in the research and praxis, and he then went on to perform experiments that he thought would fill that gap based upon his area of expertise. The problem was in his horrific use of animal brutality through vivisection with the enslaved labor of Indigenous peoples. In other words, the ends are not problematic for Moreau, but the means through which he arrives at those ends are. As Wells suggested at the end of the novel, and as Foucault wished for the modern episteme, Prendick and other real-world scientists like him should be able to arrive at those desired ends without the use of such malicious means.

Notes

1. See, for example, B.L. King’s “Is That From Science or Fiction? Otherworldly Etymologies, Neosemes, and Neologisms Reveal the Impact of SF on the English Lexicon.”

Works Cited


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