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The Descent of Man:
Re-envisionings of "The Fall" in Post-Darwinian Novels

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

At Massey University, Albany

New Zealand

Anaise Irvine

2010

ABSTRACT

In *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin presented a revised creation narrative which contradicted and superseded the Judeo-Christian narrative in Genesis. His second significant text, *The Descent of Man*, reflects in its title the ideological and philosophical impact his ideas have had in reversing the anthropocentric assumptions of humanism. This research examines how Darwinian theories have been mediated by science writers and incorporated by literary critics and authors, with emphasis on the representation of Edenic archetypes and the renegotiation of hierarchical relationships between animal, human, and posthuman forms. The thesis is divided into two parts. Part One explores critical responses to Darwinism. In popular science writing, a renewed emphasis has emerged on the dominance of human nature over nurture, and human activities (including art and culture) have been explained in terms of their adaptive functions. In literary criticism, the new school of Literary Darwinism has begun reading texts as expressions of biological drives. Part Two uses a modified form of Literary Darwinism to analyse pairs of literary texts which negotiate the anxieties raised by the implications of Darwinian theory. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and *Brave New World* (1932) express the fear that mad scientists might exploit their knowledge of evolutionary science to create new, genetically altered species whose freedoms are curtailed by their creators. As Darwinian evolution gained credence, later novels turned away from fear of the scientist and towards fear of the science. Works such as *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and *Galapagos* (1985) explore the notion of human as beast, depicting biological and/or societal 'devolution' scenarios in which humanistic higher reasoning loses ground to animalism. More recent novels have combined the fears of mad scientists and devolved humanity to imagine future societies in which the genetic alteration of humans is controlled and politicised. In *Oryx and Crake* (2003), one dangerous and errant mind genetically extinguishes the human race and creates, in its place, a race of naive and unsophisticated posthumans. And in *Genesis* (2006), the human race is merely something to be studied by a post-apocalyptic chimp-android hybrid species which is physically devolved, but sufficiently advanced intellectually to have conquered humanity. In all of these novels, the depictions of alternative and future societies run alongside re-envisionings of the 'fall of man'. In their Darwinian updates of the Fall, authors imagine evolutionary biology to be the Tree of Knowledge from which their Adams and Eves eat. Their new societies thus become alternate (inverted) versions of Eden; however rather than the lost paradise of Genesis, these Darwinian Edens are prisons which leave residents trapped and stripped of their humanity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Jenny Lawn for her expert academic guidance and feedback throughout the thesis-writing process.

Thanks to Kay Kennedy and Bob Irvine for their unfailing encouragement.

Thanks to Toni Haddon, Kelly Jackson, Alistair Stafford, Garth Manson, Kimberley Jamieson, and Rachel Davidson for their support, and for their tolerance of 'thesis rants.'

And last but not least, thanks to Caitlin Irvine for being available to play with cute puppies whenever it all got too much.

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INTRODUCTION

Darwinism was widely interpreted as a major blow both to religion and to the humanities. As Flanagan notes, Darwin's theories amounted to no less than the deconstruction of the anthropocentric hierarchy: "when Darwinism explains that we are animals, descended from earlier species, the picture that says we are not animals, that we sit high on the Great Chain of Being, beneath God and angels but above animals, takes a hit." (Flanagan 36) As lay science writers negotiated and explored the implications of the Darwinian revision of human origins, they increasingly cast *Homo sapiens* as a species to be studied, like any other – a 'naked ape' whose cultural activities must be explained in terms of adaptive function. In the wake of this paradigm shift, many theorists throughout the humanities recognised a need to reaffirm the relevance of their fields. Thus art and culture have been repositioned as biological necessities, and Literary Darwinism has been developed to verify literary texts as documentary artefacts of evolved human behaviours. However, while the humanities have attempted to re-establish their own relevance, literary texts have inscribed wider societal fears associated with evolutionary biology. These fears stem in large part from the revision of the anthropocentric hierarchy; however they also equate the very *knowledge* of human origins to a kind of Biblical-hubristic transgression.

This thesis examines how, in light of the decline of humanism, literary texts have connected Darwinism to notions of a Biblical 'fall of man.' Part One explores how Darwinian theory became such a potent source for literary authors. The metaphorical value of natural selection is discussed, and a brief history is given of the lay science texts which teased out the implications of Darwinian theory for the humanities. The application of Darwinism in literary criticism is also discussed, and the limitations of Literary Darwinism are sketched out. In Part Two, a modified Literary Darwinist approach is applied to three pairs of novels. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and *Brave New World* are read as 'mad scientist' narratives in which over-empowered scientists bring about a diminished human society by tampering with human biology. *Lord of the Flies* and *Galapagos* are examined as expressions of the fear of reversed evolution and explorations the innate animalism of the human beast.

Finally, *Oryx and Crake* and *Genesis* are read as combinations of the mad scientist and devolution fears which use both as springboards to speculate about a future posthuman age. For all six novels, particular attention is paid to the employment of Biblical rhetoric and the use of the Judeo-Christian creation narrative as an allegorical framework by which to imply that the Biblical 'Fall of Man' and the Darwinian 'Descent of Man' are inextricably linked.