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# Taboos and Primitivism: James Frazer, H.G. Wells, and the Intersection of Anthropology and Science Fiction

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Taboos and Primitivism: James Frazer, H.G. Wells, and the Intersection of Anthropology  
and Science Fiction

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
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by

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In the following excerpt from H.G. Wells's four volume historical narrative, *The Outline of History* (1919), Wells observes a ritual sacrifice through multiple lenses, demonstrating how an anthropological perspective can convey to the reader a sense of objectivity:

Away beyond the dawn of history, 3,000 or 4,000 years ago, one thinks of the Wiltshire uplands in the twilight of a midsummer day's morning. The torches pale in the growing light. One has a dim apprehension of a procession through the avenue of stone, of priests, perhaps fantastically dressed with skins and horns and horrible painted masks—not the robed and bearded dignitaries our artists represent the Druids to have been—of chiefs in skins adorned with necklaces of teeth and bearing skins and axes, their great heads of hair held up with pins of bone, of women in skins or flaxen robes, of a great peering crowd of shock-headed men and naked children...And amidst the throng march the appointed human victims, submissive, helpless, staring towards the distant smoking altar at which they are to die—that the harvests may be good and the tribe increase.

To that had life progressed 3,000 or 4,000 years ago from its starting-place in the slime of tidal beaches. (Wells 135-136)

The scene ends with an abrupt break in the narrative, at which point Wells employs an alternate frame of reference. His close-up view of human culture widens in scope; measured on a cosmic scale of time, against the evolution of terrestrial life, this transient moment in human history dwindles to a microscopic point in the universe. By fluctuating between modes of viewing, Wells strikes a balance between both lenses, and enables the reader to approach a standpoint of objectivity.

Corresponding with each lens is a distinct narrative mode. Wells renders the microscopic viewpoint in mythic imagery, transporting his reader “away beyond the dawn of history” to an alternative conception of reality in which time and space are indefinite. The ambiguity of the setting creates a sense of timelessness for the reader, while details such as the “twilight of the midsummer day’s morning,” or the “fantastically dressed” Druids evoke an aura of mysticism. The narrative builds as we take notice of the torches, the “avenue of stone,” and the creeping dawn, before Wells turns our gaze to the humans of the scene. His depiction of prehistoric man incorporates many of the stereotypes of contemporary “savages” prevalent in the early twentieth century, from the “horrible painted masks” to the “necklaces of teeth.” With a throng of men, women and “naked children” as his characters, Wells demonstrates his mythopoeic imagination in this fictional rendition of history. He relies on the mythic archetype of a ritual scene to probe the underlying ideology that informs human behavior, which, in this scenario, he ascribes to motives as fundamental as the success of a harvest or the health of a tribe. As the focus of the entire narrative, these most basic human needs demonstrate the anthropocentric bias of a narrow lens.

Wells combats this anthropocentrism, however, by shifting to a telescopic lens, through which he situates this example of culture in the context of “progress.” Used in tandem with history, the term “progress” implies linear, positivistic development, directed towards a teleological end. This conception of historical development is the essence of stadial history, a historiographical model popular among anthropologists and historians in the late nineteenth century. Stadial history traces the course of human social evolution through a series of stages, though which all civilizations must, and do, progress

in the same sequence. Lending credence to the theory in the Victorian era was evidence of technological progress lying just beneath the Earth's surface: in the mid-nineteenth century, archaeologists had begun systematically uncovering buried artifacts that demonstrated a gradual advance towards more and more complex tools and weaponry<sup>1</sup>. Stadial history was thus the premise upon which Wells wrote *The Outline of History*. As Wells explicates in the Introduction to *Outline*, his text is structured as “one continuous narrative,” justified by the theory that “history is no exception amongst the sciences; as the gaps fill in, the outline simplifies; as the outlook broadens, the clustering multitude of details dissolves into general laws” (Wells vi). Broadening his “outlook” in order to view the ritual scene on a cosmic scale, Wells employs stadial history as his second narrative form, grafting a sense of order in the final two lines of the passage onto the surreal ambiguity of the preceding scene.

Darko Suvin, preeminent critic of science fiction characterized the structure of a Wellsian narrative as the “mutation of scientific into aesthetic cognition,” by which science and art become unified (Alkon 44). Wells's presentation of primitive ritual in *The Outline of History* illustrates Suvin's argument in his alternation between mythopoeic and scientific narratives, and the juxtaposition of opposing viewpoints, in a style that bears striking similarities to the writing of another literary giant of the fin de siècle, the anthropologist James G. Frazer. In 1890, thirty years prior to the release of *The Outline of History*, Frazer had permanently altered the Victorian consciousness with the publication of *The Golden Bough*, a study in comparative religion that traces the “evolution of human thought” to a common origin (Frazer 324). Encyclopedic in length and breadth of

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<sup>1</sup> Kuper, Adam. *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion*. London; New York: Routledge, 1988.

information, *The Golden Bough* offered Victorian readers insight into the exotic rituals of “primitive societies,” from the Akikuya of East Africa to the Zapotecs of Mexico (429). No corner of the globe escaped Frazer’s scrutiny; by 1920, *The Golden Bough* had swollen from two volumes to twelve. Yet despite its length, *The Golden Bough* remained accessible for any reader. Centered on the story of a Roman cult, Frazer interweaves vivid prose with the discourse of Victorian anthropology, creating a narrative that functions like a suspense plot. Like the ancient rites that constitute this narrative, Frazer’s use of mythic imagery inspires a sense of mysticism that lend a distinctly literary feel to an otherwise informative text. Yet always, a subtle irony emerges to undermine the scene’s mythic quality, and reveal the narrator’s detachment from this point in time and space. Consider the following excerpt from Frazer on the Aztecs, whose religion compelled them to choose one boy to represent their highest deity in a ritual sacrifice:

Eagle down was gummed to his head and white cock’s feathers were stuck in his hair, which dropped to his girdle. A wreath of flowers like roasted maize crowned his brows, and a garland of the same flowers passed over his shoulders and under his arm-pits. Golden ornaments hung from his nose, golden armlets adorned his arms, golden bells jingled on his legs at every step he took...On the last day the young man, attended by his wives and pages, embarked in a canoe covered with a royal canopy and was ferried across the lake to a spot where a little hill rose from the edge of the water...On reaching the summit he was seized and held down by the priests on his back upon a block of stone, while one of them cut open his breast, thrust his hand into the wound, and wrenching out his heart held it up in

sacrifice to the sun...Such was the regular end of the man who personated the greatest god of the Mexican pantheon. (Frazer 608-609)

The similarity of the two passages is conspicuous. In *The Outline of History*, Wells identifies Frazer as the “leading student of the derivation of sacraments from magic sacrifices,” whose insight into the “development of this association in the human mind” informed Wells’s concept of ritual sacrifices (Wells 131). But Wells borrows Frazer’s technique as well as his content. In Frazer’s passage, details of the boy’s hair and ornaments correspond to the masks and necklaces of Wells’s savages, suggesting the mysticism of both rites, and prolonging the narrative tension. In a horrifying climax, Frazer depicts the boy’s murder, but then abruptly removes himself from the narrative. The scene’s dénouement provides no catharsis; instead, Frazer switches out his lenses and shifts from a close-up of microscopic detail to a vantage point of comfortable distance. This same technique is evident at the jarring end to Wells’ ritual scene, when Wells forces the reader to consider the Wiltshire sacrifice and primordial life side by side. The writers both convey their detachment from the scene by their use of demonstrative pronouns: Wells points “to that” and Frazer to “such...end,” suggesting a gulf of separation between the narrator and the episode he describes. This separation provides a space to ask questions: has the course of human history been one of progress, or of stagnation? What has human culture produced of any value, relative to the passage of millennia?

In his quest for the meaning of the human condition, Wells found utility in Frazer’s anthropological perspective. This perspective is exemplified in the first passage, in which Wells takes his reader through a series of roles; from witness to the ritual, to

participant, to victim, before finally passing out of the narrative and speaking from an alternative, and presumably objective, point of view. From this external space, Wells can issue a resounding proclamation on humanity, speaking with the weariness and circumspection of someone viewing the whole of human history at once. This was the space occupied in the fin de siècle imagination by the Victorian anthropologist, a figure whose extraordinary powers of observation and empirical logic enabled him to approach any set of norms with the detached mindset of cultural relativism. At least, this was the figure of the Victorian anthropologist that James Frazer cut: surprised by nothing, skeptical of everything, combining absolute rationalism with keen intuition. Wells' indebtedness to Frazer is evidenced in his histories as well as his novels. The purpose of this project is to shed light on this influence and demonstrate the ways in which Frazer's anthropological perspective provided a useful template for Wells to organize the mythic and the scientific, creating space for the reader to objectively evaluate humanity's relationship with culture. If successful, this project will draw a firm connection between Frazer's attitude of detachment and cognitive estrangement, the literary device that Wells' developed into a hitherto unseen art form, the science fiction novel.

In his scientific romances, Wells thrusts his characters into unfamiliar environments, where they must reconstruct reality from an objective perspective unshaped by cultural dogma. Darko Suvin views this experience as one of cognitive estrangement, in which the estranged character confronts a "set normative system...with a point of view or look implying a new set of norms" (Suvin 6). Cognitive estrangement is the defining feature of the science fiction genre, which Suvin defines as "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interactions of

estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (8). Suvin acknowledges that superficially, this definition of estrangement appears to unite science fiction and myth into one genre. However, as Suvin contends, myths assume humanity is locked in a fixed state, while SF rejects the absolute, and "sees the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore subject to a *cognitive* view" (7). This self-aware subjectivity is a characteristic which Wells himself recognized: in "An Experiment in Illustration," published for *Strand Magazine* in 1920, Wells states that an SF story is meant to elicit the "valid realization of some disregarded possibility in such a way as to comment on the false securities and fatuous self-satisfaction of everyday life" (Suvin 209). The purpose of science fiction, then, is to subvert traditional views of everyday life. This distinguishes science fiction from the 19<sup>th</sup> century British novel, which in Wells' eyes "was produced in an atmosphere of security for the entertainment of secure people who liked to feel established and safe for good" (Bergonzi 196).

Estrangement defines the narrative structure of Wells' scientific romances, which follow a familiar template: a white, middle-aged male protagonist leaves the familiarity of nineteenth century England to arrive, alone, in the midst of an utterly foreign cultural climate. His new environment can be spatially or temporally distant, or both; of greater significance is the cognitive estrangement the narrator experiences as he ploddingly tries to grasp and adjust to a new set of cultural norms. Such was the task, at least, for the protagonist of *The Time Machine*. Published in 1895, Wells' first novel chronicles the adventures of a narrator known only as the Time Traveler, whose powers of deductive reasoning eventually unravel the mysteries of humanity in the year 802,701 A.D. Told in

retrospect, the Time Traveler's story begins and ends in the parlor of his London townhouse, creating a convenient juxtaposition between the Time Traveler's original context and the Wellsian otherworld of 802,701. The novel begins prior to his departure, when the Time Traveler invites a group of friends to his home to announce the viability of traveling in the fourth dimension. His first words are exhortative, as he urges his guests, who hail from a variety of respectable professions, to dispense with their accustomed patterns of thinking: "You must follow me carefully. I shall have to controvert one or two ideas that are almost universally accepted" (2). "Controverting" the norm is thus an established grounding for his voyage before the Time Traveler even departs. His instructions are directed at the novel's readers as well, who must also unshackle their minds from doubt before proceeding. By challenging his guests' ingrained precepts, the Time Traveler compels his companions to gauge reality objectively, rather than through the lens of the Victorian bourgeoisie.

It's a lesson he adheres to faithfully later on, when he lands among Morlocks and Eloi. Immediately upon his arrival in 802,701, the Time Traveler experiences a disconcerting sensation of estrangement. For him, estrangement corresponds to feeling "naked in a strange world," a vulnerability that "a bird may feel in the clear air, knowing the hawk wings above and will swoop" (44). The experience of estrangement is so alien to his unproblematic British existence that the Time Traveler compares it to life as a different species. Moreover, the experience is distinctly uncomfortable. The Time Traveler fears for his safety, recognizing that compared to the advancements of future society he may come off as "some old-world savage animal, only the more dreadful and disgusting for our common likeness" (44). Comparing himself against an alternate,

presumably more progressive culture indicates the Time Traveler's anthropological perspective; in this scenario, however, the British gentleman does not expect the comparison to be in his favor. As the Time Traveler becomes more accustomed to the future, his old certainties begin to crumble, a process that accelerates when he believes he has lost the time machine and is therefore trapped. Estrangement now involves a sense of finality, and he describes feeling "hopelessly cut off from my own kind—a strange animal in an unknown world" (54). As this new phrasing suggests, it is no longer the world that is strange, but he himself.

The narrator in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) is separated from his familiar surroundings by distance, rather than time, but his sense of estrangement is no less complete. His break with familiarity occurs abruptly: shipwrecked off the coast of Peru, Edward Prendrick succumbs to dehydration and delirium after days adrift in a lifeboat, before regaining consciousness aboard a new vessel, the *Ipecacuanha*. Like the time machine, the *Ipecacuanha* conveys the narrator to a point of even further estrangement, and its characteristics are similarly fantastic. The ship bears animals as its only cargo, is atrociously filthy, and the only human Prendrick sees on deck is a "gaunt and silent sailor" (14). Prendrick's sense of isolation is increased when he meets a creature with the most "repulsive and extraordinary face," leaving him "astonished beyond measure" (14). By the time Prendrick arrives on Moreau's island, he is weak, emotionally drained, and primed to experience cognitive estrangement, as he himself admits: "The reader will perhaps understand that at first everything was so strange about me, and my position was the outcome of such unexpected adventures, that I had no discernment of the relative strangeness of this or that thing about me" (31). Emphasized here is Prendrick's general

perception of “strangeness;” although his five senses are not impaired, Prendrick’s abrupt immersion into a new environment has reduced his sensitivity to established norms. The flippancy with which he dismisses “this or that thing” further implies his detachment from his surroundings.

Though cognitive estrangement is a term unique to the science fiction genre, the experience of estrangement in the literary tradition has roots in the “Fantastic Voyage,” which Jonathan Swift popularized in 1726 with *Gulliver’s Travels*.<sup>2</sup> *Swiss Family Robinson* added a moralistic bent to the genre in 1812, and in 1863, Jules Verne began the first of a fifty-four novel series collectively titled the *Voyages Extraordinaires*.<sup>3</sup> By the time Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* appeared in 1882, journeys to distant lands were a standard motif of the nineteenth-century adventure romance. Adding to and informing this canon of fiction were the non-fiction counterparts: as British imperialism reached its zenith, travelogues and missionary reports from all over the Empire fascinated readers with tales of foreign shores and savage tribes. These tales reached the ears and eyes of scholars as well as citizens, and made their way into the new academic field of anthropology. In 1890, a Cambridge scholar with an anthropological bent named James George Frazer consolidated these reports into the first two volumes of *The Golden Bough*. It was a watershed moment for anthropology, and for British culture. Detailing religious customs ranging from Classical antiquity to European peasantry to the shores of Africa and Asia, Frazer argued that the same underlying principles could be discerned in religious beliefs the world over, regardless of culture. Yet despite its encyclopedic-like

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<sup>2</sup> Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Alkon, Paul K. *Science Fiction Before 1900: Imagination Discovers Technology*. New York : Toronto : New York: Twayne, 1994.

breadth, *The Golden Bough* remained exceptionally readable because of its narrative structure. Like the travelogues upon which he grounded his theories, Frazer framed *The Golden Bough* as an adventure tale. He painted a portrait of savages roaming untamed jungles, of missionaries witnessing gruesome rites, of exploration and danger and travel, and the response of his readership confirmed that they themselves felt stirred. Adding to this effect was his language. Frazer directly addresses his readers in the attitude of fellow travelers, such as at the end of Chapter 1 when he expands the scope of his survey from Lake Nemi to the world at large:

It will be long and laborious, but may possess something of the interest and charm of a voyage of discovery, in which we shall visit many strange foreign lands, with strange foreign peoples, and still stranger customs. The wind is in the shrouds: we shake out our sails to it, and leave the coast of Italy behind us for a time. (21)

As Frazer makes clear to his reader, this is a journey into the “strange.” He concludes the third edition of *The Golden Bough* similarly, in the voice of a returning traveler: “Our long voyage of discovery is over, and our bark has dropped her weary sails in port at last. Once more we take the road to Nemi” (808). The reader turns the final page with the sense that she herself has experienced a spectacular journey. After accompanying Frazer across the globe and analyzing the structure and conventions of innumerable foreign cultures, the reader is safely restored to her familiar surroundings. The Frazerian critic Mary Beard notes that like the Virgilian branch alluded to in the title, which guided Aeneas into the underworld, “Frazer's *Golden Bough* took the reader into the Other and then brought him or her safely back out again” (Beard 222). This immersion into the Other, however, is much like the experience of reading science fiction, in that both

produce the sensation of cognitive estrangement. Wells and Frazer both employ a narrative structure that encourages the reader to acclimate to a new set of norms, with the intention that acclimation will lead to greater awareness of cultural relativism.

Cognitive estrangement is not an end itself, but a means to an end. As a literary device, its effect is to make the reader sensitive to a general relativism. Isolated from tradition and estranged from cultural context, the self can objectively view its relationship to the Other without the constraints imposed by ideology. Understanding the link between anthropology and science fiction sheds light on why Wells, a man who studied the “hard sciences” under biologist T.H. Huxley, would be interested in Frazer. George Slusser and Eric Rabkin frame the link between disciplines in their introduction to *Aliens: The Anthropology of Science Fiction*: “*Anthropos* is man, anthropology the study of man. The alien, however, is something else: *alius*, other than. But other than what? Obviously man...It is through learning to relate to the alien that man has learned to study himself” (Slusser vii). In the two examples of Wellsian science fiction that this project addresses, the protagonist grapples with an “alien” culture; *The Time Machine* features a non-human in the form of the Eloi and Morlocks, while *The Island of Dr. Moreau* depicts the Beast Folk. These two types of non-humans provide a point of comparison for Wells’ protagonists to evaluate themselves, in the same way that Frazer and the Victorian anthropologists looked to other cultures in an attempt to understand their own. A similar cognitive process of comparison is central to both disciplines.

As two distinct disciplines interested in similar cognitive processes, anthropology and science fiction emerged out of the scientific movement of the mid-nineteenth century, which transformed the pursuit of knowledge in Western Europe and,

emphasizing the value of empirical methodology, imposing more rigorous standards of research and experimentation. In fields like biology, chemistry, or astronomy, scholars could depend on experimentation and replication to lend legitimacy to their results, but the logic of empiricism was more difficult to incorporate into the social sciences. Early anthropologists and ethnographers instead relied on the comparative method, which Frazer described in glowing terms as “a product of that unparalleled analytic or scientific activity which in the course of the present century has enlarged enormously the boundaries of knowledge” (Hyman 198). One of the earliest Victorian anthropologists engaged in this method was Edward Burnett Tylor, the highly respected Reader in Anthropology at Oxford University. Tylor advocated the need to improve the anthropological method, in order to overcome “a certain not unkindly hesitancy on the part of men engaged in the precise operations of mathematics, physics, chemistry [and] biology to admit that the problems of anthropology are amenable to scientific treatment” (Stocking 4). Yet despite his endorsement of the “scientific treatment,” Tylor’s comparative study of religion was largely incompatible with empirical logic or statistics, which Tylor dismissed as “a difficulty ever present in such investigations” (Stocking 10). Tylor instead drew conclusions by reading ethnographic reports of exotic cultural traditions and identifying “adhesions,” his term for the patterns that flouted “the ordinary law of chance distribution” (5). In 1871, these adhesions found their way into Tylor’s book, *Primitive Culture*, which, nearly twenty years later, James Frazer would read while on vacation in Spain.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Stocking, George W. *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888-1951*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1995. Print.

Frazer modeled his approach after Tylor, using the comparative method to form broad generalizations among diverse cultures based off of secondhand information. Often, this involved accepting uncritically the eyewitness accounts of missionaries or sea traders, ferried in from the most distant outposts of the British Empire. As his critics have long noted, Frazer's self-avowed appreciation for the scientific method is inconsistent with the reality of his research. The critic John Vickery mediates this discrepancy by explaining that, for Frazer, science "was perhaps less a refined methodology than a general temper and stance toward the nature of knowledge and the conditions of ignorance" (Vickery 6). Robert Fraser takes Vickery's justification a step further in the introduction to his 1994 edition of *The Golden Bough*, in which he argues that because "all anthropological accounting of whatever kind partakes of a variety of personal testimony," anthropology is "inevitably a branch of literature" (Fraser xxxii).

In keeping with the theory of stadial history, Frazer compared between cultures as a method of detecting large, overarching patterns governing the development of civilization. He does this in *The Golden Bough* by structuring the text as a narrative. To create a sense of continuity, Frazer knew his tale must originate from a platform, upon which all of his anecdotal evidence could intersect. He found this intersection in a text by Pausanias, which recounted the bizarre customs of a Roman cult situated in the forests along Lake Nemi. There, in a sacred grove, a priest of Diana stood guard over a certain tree, compelled to wait for the day that a fugitive slave might appear to wrest his title from him in a match of deadly combat. The ritual of the King of the Wood was observed, Frazer alleges, "down to the decline of Rome," yet the rite's brutality seemed, to Frazer, "to transport us at once from civilization to savagery" (Fraser 11). Surely, he reasoned,

this savage tradition could be attributed to some earlier age, and persisted as a “survival.” For, as Frazer points out in his introduction, “Recent researches into the early history of man have revealed the essential similarity with which, under many superficial differences, the human mind has elaborated its first crude philosophy of life” (12). This “essential similarity” is the basic premise upon which *The Golden Bough* operates. Frazer goes on to outline how, through a sequence of inferences, he will eventually confirm his original hypothesis:

Accordingly, if we can show that a barbarous custom, like that of the priesthood of Nemi, has existed elsewhere; if we can detect the motives which led to its institution; and if we can prove that these motives have operated widely, perhaps universally, in human society, producing in varied circumstances a variety of institutions specifically different but generically alike; if we can show, lastly, that these very motives, with some of their derivative institutions, were actually at work in classical antiquity; then we may fairly infer that at a remoter age the same motives gave birth to the priesthood of Nemi.

And thus Frazer begins his exploration into the development of ideology, on the pretext of identifying certain universal “motives,” or rational processes, that lead to specific human behaviors.

Like Frazer, Wells wrote *The Outline of History* under the assumption that one can consolidate all of human history into a universal narrative. His introduction reads like an echo of Frazer’s, in which he contends that “History is no exception amongst the sciences; as the gaps fill in, the outline simplifies; as the outlook broadens, the clustering multitude of details dissolves into general laws” (Wells vi). Both Frazer and Wells sought

a pseudo-empirical approach to social science, and both anchor their attempts in a Darwinian belief in “one general record” that is both linear and positivistic in its progression (vi). Moreover, neither makes any effort to conceal his agenda; in the obituary he wrote for William Robertson Smith, Frazer explains that comparative anthropology “calls for a reconsideration of the speculative basis of ethics as well as of theology” (Hyman 199). Wells speaks to the same cultural fixations as Frazer when he says, “Our internal policies and our economic and social ideas are profoundly vitiated at present by wrong and fantastic ideas of the origin and historical relationship of social classes” (Wells viii). Here, Wells is invoking the notion of survivals that first stirred Frazer to action. His interest in the origin of social constructs is motivated by a desire to purge his culture of its eidolons of the past, just as Frazer explored the origin of anachronistic superstition.

In order to understand these vestiges of an ancient past, Frazer borrowed from Tylor’s system of classification, by which Tylor charted “real tribes and nations, past and present” along a single scale of cultural development, which he defined as the “absence or presence, high or low development, of the industrial arts, especially metal-working, manufacture of implements and vessels, agriculture, architecture, &c, the extent of scientific knowledge, the definiteness of moral principles, the condition of religious belief and ceremony, the degree of social and political organization, and so forth” (Tylor 26). Whereas Tylor’s historical model follows three stages of cultural development progressing from savagery to barbarism to civilization, Frazer classified societies according to their belief systems, the laws governing each society’s “association of ideas” that consequently determine its position along the stadial continuum. Frazer explains his

logic in simple terms in *The Golden Bough*: “Just as on the material side of human culture there has everywhere been an Age of Stone, so on the intellectual side there has everywhere been an Age of Magic” (53). Some civilizations may progress at a faster rate than others, however, a disparity that explains what the Victorian age perceived as a developmental inequality between races.

Members of Victorian society were fascinated by the concept of primitivism. The anthropological historian Adam Kuper details a multitude of reasons for this cultural fixation in his book, *The Invention of Primitive Society*. One reason was the advent of anthropology, which arose contemporaneously with evolutionary biology and British imperialism. It is common for historians nowadays to relate the beginnings of anthropology as a tale of double vision: one eye was trained on the present, the other on the past, and the difference between the two was labeled “progress.” At least, this characterization applies to the first wave of anthropologists emerging in the late nineteenth century, whose theories were bound up in notions of a positivistic, linear pattern of social evolution guiding human society towards ever-greater advances. In order to advance, however, one must have an initial starting point. At one time or another, a form of human society must have developed “first.” And so the idea that all of human civilization can be traced back to its moment of conception took root in the earliest anthropological frameworks. The concept of primitivism was thus constructed around a pedagogic illusion, the so-called primitive society.

Wells presents three visions of primitive societies in *The Time Machine* and *Island of Dr. Moreau*, with the Eloi, Morlock, and Beast Folk. In *The Time Machine*, Wells frames the Eloi and Morlocks in a stark dichotomy, with a sunlit civilization above

concealing a menacing netherworld below. This contrast recalls Frazer's metaphor in the first volume of *The Golden Bough*, when he conceives the gradations of cultural development as a "solid layer of savagery beneath the surface of society," comparing civilization to a "thin crust which at any moment may be rent by the subterranean forces slumbering below" (54). In the future civilization of Wells' imagining, we see the consequences that ensue when Frazer's words take on a literal meaning, and this subterranean threat emerges from below.

Lurking beneath the superficial beauty of the Eloi paradise, the Morlocks represent the only threat to aboveground life, thereby illustrating the danger which thinly veiled savagery poses for civilization. Crucial to this depiction is the fact that the Morlocks are cannibals, a trait typically ascribed to savages in the tradition of Victorian primitivism. Yet if the Morlocks figure as savages in *The Time Machine*, the Eloi do not provide a strong contrast. Uncurious and indolent, the Eloi serve as poor representatives of civilization. Instead, the Eloi function as another representation of primitivism, one that illustrates the misguided associations of ideas that Frazer ascribes to "savage philosophy." The principle motive for the Eloi's behavior is their fear of the Morlocks. Protecting the Eloi from this real danger is a set of taboos, which, by prohibiting any explicit or implicit reference to Morlock existence, serve to perpetuate the Eloi's helplessness.

The concept of the taboo became a permanent fixture in the nineteenth-century British imagination, initially entering Victorian society as *tabu*, in reference to a Polynesian custom Captain Cook observed in Tahiti during his third journey around the world. As Cook's ship log explains, the word taboo was "used to express anything

sacred, or eminent, or devoted” (Adler 113). As early as 1826, Sir Walter Scott demonstrated the ease with which taboo entered popular discourse: “The conversation is seldom excellent among official people. So many topics are what Otahaitians call *Taboo*” (Steiner 113). While Frazer was not the first to introduce the taboo to his countrymen, it was he who demonstrated to his Victorian contemporaries that taboo creation is evident in all cultures, and furthermore, that this system of enforcing prohibitions is innate to the human cognitive process.

For Frazer, taboos are vestiges of the early years of a society, when it was still trapped in the Age of Magic, the first stage in his conception of stadial history. Magic is based on principles in the same way science is, but these principles are incorrect, and are derived from savages “misapplications of the association of ideas” (Frazer 27). Frazer summarizes the underlying basis of magical laws as the false assumption that “things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy, the impulse being transmitted from one to the other by means of what we may conceive as a kind of invisible ether, not unlike that which is postulated by modern science for a precisely similar purpose, namely, to explain how things can physically affect each other through a space that appears to be empty” (27). Yet though the premise upon which magic is based is incorrect, Frazer duly notes that savage rituals adhere to these principles with “logical consistency, and that the “fundamental conception”(35) of magic is “identical with that of modern science; underlying the whole system is a faith, implicit but real and firm, in the order and uniformity of nature”(45).

Magical processes are governed by two separate laws, the Law of Similarity and the Law of Contagion. The Law of Similarity regulates homeopathic magic, and operates

under the assumption that if one wishes to achieve a desired effect upon an object, then one may do so by achieving the same effect upon a similar object. An example of this would be the logic behind voodoo dolls. The second law, conversely, functions upon the idea that the properties of one object may be transferred to a second through contact, just as a disease spreads from one person to the next. This law governs the development of taboos, by which sacred objects or people were tabooed because their sanctity was seen as a source of power, and power, like an electric current, can be dangerous to anything that comes in contact with it. To combat this, taboos serve a prohibitive function: by forbidding contact with objects of power, the taboo insulates its magical energy and prevents it from transferring to another object. Objects of power can be persons or activities, sacred or abhorrent—the quality of the object’s magical energy is not important. As Robert Frazer explains in his edition of *The Golden Bough*, “the emperor of Japan was secluded from the world, but so were homicides. ‘Taboo,’ like the Latin word *sacer* which Frazer regarded as a conceptual synonym for it, therefore meant both sacred and profane” (Frazer xxiii). In either case, certain actions, behaviors, and even words must be avoided to preserve the self’s wholeness. Establishing a taboo is thus akin to marking a boundary around the soul. The effect of this boundary is a rigid distinction between the self and the external world; in this way, taboos exercise profound control over one’s cultural identity, informing each member of a society what constitutes his or her self, and what absolutely does not. Explicating the underlying misconception of taboos, Frazer states, “if the supposed evil necessarily followed a breach of taboo, the taboo would not be a taboo but a precept of morality and common sense” (Frazer 32). By virtue of its definition, the rules governing a prohibition do not correspond with natural

law. Tabooed objects in Eloi society follow this pattern. When the Time Traveler gestures towards the White Sphinx, indicating to the Eloi his wish to open it, they react with “horror and repugnance” (Wells 53). His gesture acknowledges the statue’s inner sanctum, which in itself is an acknowledgement of the Morlocks’ existence. In accordance with the Law of Contact, as Frazer defines it, touching the Sphinx invokes the power of sympathetic magic, defiling the body of whoever touches it by creating a bond of “sympathy” between the person and the object. The Time Traveler defiles himself by hammering upon the Sphinx, and the resulting impurity of his body is reflected in the Eloi’s subsequent aversion to him. They watch him “furtively,” unwilling to acknowledge him directly, and avoid him in the palace for two days, presumably until his contagion wears off. Even speaking of the Morlocks has the same contaminating effect. Weena refuses to answer the Time Traveler’s questions, “shiver[ing] as though the topic were unendurable” (71). Implicit reference to the Morlocks is intolerable, yet this refusal to acknowledge reality circumscribes the Eloi into a space of silence, ignorance, and inaction. The frustration the Time Traveler feels when he runs up against this taboo corresponds with both Frazer and Wells’ contempt for what they perceived in Victorian society as survivals of a primitive past.

Yet although the Time Traveler violates the Eloi’s prohibition, he is nonetheless subject to its governance. When his first gesture towards the White Sphinx is met with revulsion, the Time Traveler admits to feeling inexplicably “ashamed” (53). His shame demonstrates the power of taboos over the individual, as well as his estrangement from his prior set of norms. Here, in his first brush with a foreign taboo, he succumbs to its pressure, before he even knows its cultural significance. Once he does make contact with

the Morlocks, the influence of the taboo is even greater. At this point in his narrative, however, he becomes markedly less reliable. He claims to “loath” the Morlocks “instinctively,” but at the same time acknowledges that his aversion is bolstered by his prior claims with the Eloi. In a concession to objectivity that savors strongly of Frazer, he admits his revulsion is “largely due to the sympathetic influence of the Eloi” (72). Sympathetic magic, that contagious force that must be controlled by charms and prohibitions, is responsible for infecting the Time Traveler with the Morlock taboo. He fears the contaminating effect of their touch, “shudder[ing] with horror to think how they already must have examined” him in his sleep (82). Despite the civilizing influences of education, despite his bracing claims that he is “differently constituted” and hails from the “ripe prime of the human race, when fear does not paralyze and mystery has lost its terrors,” the Time Traveler is still subject to a taboo imposed by a culture he does not even deign to deem human (82).

In contrast to the Eloi, the Morlocks obey no taboo system. No laws or prohibitions guide or restrain their behavior, which Wells conveys by their transgression of an almost universal taboo: cannibalism. As the Time Traveler admits to himself, man’s “prejudice against human flesh is no deep seated-instinct” (105). It is rather a prejudice imposed by culture—yet the most basic of prejudices which unites nearly every human culture. Wells thus employs the presence of taboos as an indicator of the Eloi’s vestigial humanity, contrasted with the Morlocks, whose lack of taboos suggests a complete departure from the human race. Once culture ceased to exert its normative pressure on the Morlocks, and ancient prohibitions fell away, “they turned to what old habit had hitherto forbidden” (105). The Morlocks’ internal disregard for fundamental taboos corresponds

outwardly in the invasiveness of their behavior. Morlocks prowl the Eloi palaces at nighttime, groping unconscious sleepers and examining their bodies. The Time Traveler reflects on this intrusion with horror, “shuddering” to think how they have already “examined” him. He shudders at the thought of Morlock caresses for the same reason that the Eloi do not touch the White Sphinx: Contact with an external object, by the laws of homeopathic magic, renders the subject tainted, and, if the object is evil, defiled. The Morlocks do not shy away from contact with Others, because their behavior is not restrained by taboos. They thus “clutch,” “pluck,” and “feel” the Time Traveler with freely moving fingers. There are no cultural fence-posts, no prohibitions limiting contact with the external, no physical boundaries that cannot be transgressed.

In *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, the taboo system reinforces the Beast people’s dread of Dr. Moreau’s vengeance, which they perceive as divine retribution. “Evil is he who breaks the Law,” the Sayer asserts at the gathering in the amphitheater, suggesting that for the Beasts, breaking a taboo is an act so perverse it literally defiles the perpetrator’s soul. He who breaks the Law is not a mere criminal, but, as Moreau calls the Leopard-Man, a “sinner” (88). Revered in this way, the Law extends and amplifies the scope of Moreau’s control, granting Moreau power over the Beasts’ souls as well as their bodies.

The relationship between soul and taboo as the Beast people conceive it bears striking resemblance to Chapter 11 of *The Golden Bough*, “The Perils of the Soul.” Explaining the purposes of taboo, Frazer states, “the precautions adopted by savages to secure [the soul’s safety] take the form of certain prohibitions or taboos, which are nothing but rules intended to ensure either the continued presence or the return of the soul” (153). Frazer elaborates upon this still further in Chapter 4 of Book IV, “The

External Soul,” in which he explains that the soul is often conceived of as a “concrete material thing of a definite bulk” (756). Existing an object of matter, the soul can therefore escape the body, but it can also be forcibly extracted. According to one of Frazer’s anecdotes in Chapter 11, a certain chief of considerable political as well as magical ability removes a criminal’s soul as punishment for refusing to confess. Additionally, Frazer teaches, “the soul is commonly supposed to escape by the natural openings of the body,” such as the eyes. Thus when the Leopard-Man breaks the taboo against eating meat, a prohibition which allegedly safeguards his soul from corruption, Moreau “look[s] into the eyes of the Leopard Man, and seem[s] to be dragging the very soul out of the creature” (91). The Beasts understand the soul as a physical object, which subsequently can suffer physical harm. Noting the parallel between the Beast Folk’s ideology and Frazer’s assertion, that “the conception of an external soul is one which has had a powerful hold on the minds of men at an early stage of history,” it is further demonstrated the extent to which Wells modeled his Beast Folk after the “early societies” of *The Golden Bough* (757). Prendrick uses this logic to his advantage in the wake of Moreau’s death, when the Beasts are questioning the validity of their belief system. Moreau’s body may be gone, Prendrick argues, yet Moreau “is *not* dead” (103). Although he has “cast away [his old body] because he ha[s] no more need of it,” his soul lives on: “He is...there...where he can watch you. You cannot see him. But he can see you. Fear the Law” (103). Prendrick capitalizes on the Beasts’ belief that the soul is an animate object. Moreau’s taboos are so deeply ingrained in the Beasts that despite evidence of his death, the Beasts’ belief system remains intact.

Wells viewed taboos as the foundation of every religion, and saw humans' affinity for establishing prohibitions further evidence that religion is derived from natural human thought. In this way, Wells speculated, cultures develop as well, as humans "systematize" their beliefs to "establish a common tradition of tabus of things forbidden and things unclean" (OOH 130). The process by which human thought gives birth to religion, and from there, constructs a culture, was powerfully suggestive for Wells. He described the relationship between culture and religion as follows:

The history of mankind henceforth is a history of more or less blind endeavors to conceive a common purpose in relation to which all men may live happily, and to create and develop a common consciousness and a common stock of knowledge which may serve and illuminate that purpose. (134)

The cynicism of Wells's statement corresponds with the tradition of dissolvent literature. The contrasting ideologies of the first and second halves of the nineteenth-century underlines the fact that religious decay was in part a reaction to the practices of Evangelical Christianity, which by the third decade was suffering a decline in church membership<sup>5</sup>. Serving as a further catalyst were the lecturers in scientific naturalism, men like T.H. Huxley and Herbert Spencer, who preached a newly found belief called agnosticism. These agnostic scientists gained further credibility as a result of a burgeoning interest in biblical history. William Robertson Smith, the man to whom Frazer dedicates *The Golden Bough*, came to fame in the 1880's from his essays on historical inaccuracies in the Old Testament. To the Victorian layperson, an influx of information seemed to flood in from all sides, creating a tension between science and religion that was difficult for Victorian intellectuals to reconcile. This perceived tension

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<sup>5</sup> *The Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*

was certainly not lost on Frazer himself. Robert Fraser, the editor of the 1994 *Golden Bough* abridgement, points to a notebook entry from 1885 that reveals Frazer's own ideological grievances: "In our own age as the progress of knowledge has been immense, so the breach between religion and science has widened; hence the number of people who are seen to be busily employed in endeavoring to fill up this breach" (Fraser xxv).

Frazer's discussion of the Age of Religion is the greatest source of controversy in *The Golden Bough*. His critics varied, and continue to vary, between denouncing him as the "arch-atheist," and complaining that his approach was too evasive (Downie 21). The changes Frazer made to each edition of *The Golden Bough* suggest that he too, was unsure of his own religious ideology. Theories on the crucifixion of Christ that he published in the 1915 twelve-volume edition were later elided from the 1922 abridgement, a project that he and his wife personally oversaw.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, Frazer introduces the Age of Religion with a note of appeasement in his narrative voice. He concedes that "there is probably no subject in the world about which opinions differ so much as the nature of religion, and to frame a definition of it which would satisfy every one must obviously be impossible" (46). Yet he plows on to argue that religion is innately adverse to the principles of science. If religion is "a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life" (46), then this assumes that the "course of nature is to some extent elastic or variable" (47). However, this assumption is "directly opposed to the principles of magic as well as of science, both of which assume that the processes of nature are rigid and invariable in their operation, and that they can as little be turned from their course by

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<sup>6</sup> Frazer, James G., and Robert Fraser. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion: A New Abridgement from the Second and Third Editions*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.

persuasion and entreaty as by threats and intimidation” (47). The progression from the Age of Magic to the Age of Religion was thus brought about by a recognition of mankind’s inability to control external events, and accompanied by a loss of personal agency, whereby man’s “old free bearing is exchanged for an attitude of lowliest prostration before the mysterious powers of the unseen” (57). From the mournful tone with which he envisions this transition between stages, and the negative comparison he draws between religion and magic and science, Frazer’s stance cannot be misconstrued. Yet it is important to note the absence of a third stage in his overview; having completed a summary of the Age of Religion, Frazer stops short without detailing the process by which the apex of civilization makes its transition into the Age of Science.

Frazer was thus no exception to the rule that writers of dissolvent literature both reflect and perpetuate a religious anxiety. As suggested by the controversy surrounding *The Golden Bough*, Frazer’s readers were not insensitive to the hint of scorn with which he depicts religious observance as a survival of primitive rituals. Magic and religion are portrayed as equally fallacious belief systems in *The Golden Bough*—a coexistence that, Frazer implies, casts shame on both type of observer. However one characterizes magic and religion, they both fall into the category of the “supernatural,” the “foundation of the rites and practices which can be called religious; and it is from the same belief that everything which may be called Magic and Witchcraft draws its origin” (50). As Frazer endeavors to prove through his “associations of ideas,” religion is the product of human thought. This aspect of Frazer’s theory is one that Wells would have found particularly compelling. For Frazer, all variations of supernatural beliefs share a common foundation, and generations of mankind have only added more and more layers of ideology to this

original firmament. Wells makes the point more forcefully in *Outline of History*, when he asserts, “Religion is something that has grown up with and through human association, and God has been and is still being discovered by man” (131). Underlying these layers of religious growth, then, must be vestiges of a more primitive past, one in which God has not yet been discovered. This is the type of world Wells envisions in *The Time Machine* and *Island of Dr. Moreau*, two novels that each offers a unique conception of religion. The effect of each conception is to further estrange the reader in an alien land, deprived of the comfort of religious continuity. Grouping Wells with the writers of dissolvent literature is therefore an apt classification. Unlike the writers of autobiography or essay, however, Frazer and Wells rely on the techniques of detachment and estrangement to suggest religious dissolution.

The future world of *The Time Machine* is empty of anything resembling religion or God. Though the Time Traveler makes no mention of this absence, Wells’ critics found it more conspicuous. One unsigned review, published in the *Spectator* on July 13, 1895, scoffed at the idea of a godless earth, contending, “We may expect with the utmost confidence that if the earth is still in existence in the year 802,701 AD, either the A.D. will mean a great deal more than it means now, or else its inhabitants will be neither Eloi nor Morlocks” (Geduld 9). This line of reasoning suggests that the reviewer missed Wells’ point, as an “utmost confidence” in any cultural belief is exactly what Wells endeavors to discredit. It is the same point the Time Traveler makes to his guests, when he warns them he will have to “controvert one or two ideas that are almost universally accepted” (2). Repeatedly throughout *Time Machine*, the protagonist calls on the reader to reject, or at least reevaluate, “universally accepted” cultural norms, either through

direct address like in the opening scene, or via his personal rationalizations about life in 802,701.

The relationship between ideology and civilization is even more ambiguous in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, which probes the development of taboos in the most rudimentary forms of society. To ensure their continuing humanness after leaving the House of Pain, Moreau sets down a set of rules for the Beast people to obey. These rules undergo a radical transformation outside of Moreau's lab. Through daily ritual, Moreau's prohibitions grow in stateliness until they form the very fabric of the Beast people's society, uniting the Beasts under a religious doctrine they refer to as "the Law." The Beasts' Law is significant not because it wields such power, but because this power develops autonomously. Moreau himself never set out to incite such devotion—he informs Prendrick with disdain that there exists "something they call the Law," and mocks how the Beasts "sing hymns about 'all thine'" (79). Moreau does not deliberately implant the Law into Beast culture; instead, Law and culture develop side by side. Through this representation, Wells is suggesting that religion is a social institution that develops arbitrarily in human societies, independent of external or supernatural interference. Yet Wells is also saying that, despite this lack of interference, religion arises because it is a fundamental process of cultural development. Humans naturally possess a religious impulse, and this impulse is what motivates groups of humans everywhere to conceive of an institution of religion. With its linear development, the Beasts' religious culture mirrors the track of Frazer's stadial theory, falling, according to Frazer's system of classification, into the category of primitive societies that exemplify the Age of Religion. In keeping with this classification, Wells' portrayal of Beast society contains

many Frazerian images, such as the priest, the Divine King, and the taboo, and from this society's dissolution, we can chart the progression man makes from the Age of Religion into the Age of Science.

So great is the Beasts reverence for the Law that a unique social niche is afforded to the "Sayer of the Law," a gray-haired Beast whose principal duty is to "sit in the darkness and say the Law" (70). "Here," the Sayer intones to Prendrick from his seat of power in a darkened hut, "come all that be new, to learn the Law" (70). Learning the Law is necessary for any new creature's initiation into the colony. The Sayer has another distinguished responsibility: he leads the recitation during group rituals, and when Moreau summons a gathering in the amphitheater, the Sayer alone is recognized individually. Both teacher and leader of Moreau's doctrine, the Sayer clearly represents the priest. It is during such ritual gatherings that we realize the Law is regarded more as a religion than a system of government. Consumed with religious emotion, the Beast Folk descend into near frenzy as they perform their rite, sweating and chanting with a "rhythmic fervor" that causes Prendrick to fear Moreau has "infected their dwarfed brains with a kind of deification of himself" (71). Prendrick's concern is appropriate: the Law indeed symbolizes "His will," the will of their Creator, whom the Beasts honor as a deity. In his depiction and function in the novel, Dr. Moreau mirrors Frazer's Divine King, a figure of archetypal significance to *The Golden Bough*. As Frazer defines this term, "in savage or barbarous society there are often found men to whom the superstition of their fellows ascribe a controlling influence over the general course of nature," who are "accordingly adored and treated as gods" (217). Beasts believe Moreau's power is absolute, as their chant illustrates:

*“His is the House of Pain.*

*His is the Hand that makes.*

*His is the Hand that wounds.*

*His is the Hand that heals*

*...His is the lightning-flash...His is the deep salt sea.” (59)*

To the Beast Folk’s imagination, Moreau’s power extends over all earthly phenomena. Their rituals also recall Frazer’s descriptions of “early societies,” who exhibit an “attitude of lowliest prostration before the mysterious powers of the unseen” (Frazer 57). Frazer goes on to say that “the divine person is a source of danger as well as of blessing; he must not only be guarded, he must also be guarded against” (173). Similarly, Moreau inspires both fear and awe in his supplicants. The Beasts avoid the House of Pain, remembering the torture they endured there, and, as Moreau relates to Prendrick, they “all dread this house and [him] (59).” Moreau’s isolation from his people resembles the Divine Kings of *Golden Bough*, who Frazer asserts must “live in a state of seclusion” to ensure others’ safety (166). In other ways as well, Moreau demonstrates Frazer’s argument that “human gods...are obliged to observe many rules to ensure their own safety and that of their people” (217). Moreau goes to great lengths to prevent the Beasts from ever seeing him in a position of vulnerability. When Prendrick requests that he and Montgomery put their hands up as they walk away from him, Montgomery flatly refuses, “with an explanatory nod over his shoulder” to indicate that the Beast Folk must not see them in a subordinate position (Wells 69). The burden of authority prevents the men from ever exhibiting “undignified” behavior, just as Frazer’s divine kings “must be so regulated that no act of his, voluntary or involuntary, may disarrange or upset the

established order of nature” (Frazer 134). Bound by this philosophy, Moreau and Montgomery are forced to wage a constant battle in order to retain their power. This battle is necessary, because as Frazer contends, “primitive peoples...believe that their safety and even that of the world is bound up with the life of one of these god-men” (228). This “savage philosophy” is indicative of a society living in the Age of Religion. Wells’s depiction of the Beast Folk illustrates this theory, while also presenting a scenario of what ramifications might ensue should this worldview crumble. Just like the “savages” of Frazer’s description, Wells’ Beast People organize their worldview around certain “Fixed Ideas,” which assert that “certain things [are] impossible, and certain things [are] not to be done” (80). These premises form the foundation of the Beast Folk’s reality, and are intended to reinforce Moreau and Montgomery’s authority. But when Beasts first question the validity of these ideas, we watch as they begin their rapid transition out of the Age of Religion and into the Age of Science. In this way, the Beast Folk mimic mankind’s natural progress along the lines presented in Frazer’s version of stadial history. The beginning of their enlightenment is illustrated in the dialogue between the Ape Man, the Satyr Man, and Montgomery, in which the Beasts remark upon the inconsistency between Prendrick’s physical vulnerability and ignorance, and their Fixed Ideas, which contend that men like Montgomery and Moreau are not subject to the same earthly laws that govern the Beasts. Speaking to Montgomery, the Satyr Man looks “curiously” at Prendrick and remarks, “Yesterday he bled and wept... You never bleed nor weep. The Master does not bleed nor weep” (86). This observation is another instance of blood’s special function in *Island of Dr. Moreau*. The taste of blood is enough to persuade the Beasts to forsake the Law—suggesting that animal instinct persists

despite efforts to suppress it—yet blood also sparks the Beasts powers of rationality. Blood ushers the Beasts into the Age of Science while simultaneously bringing about the collapse of their civilization. Regarding Prendrick, the sight of his blood forces the Beasts to reassess their conception of reality. Their quest for truth is thwarted by Montgomery, however, who responds to their comments with threats and impatience. Acting as obstacles to the Beasts' enlightenment, Moreau and Montgomery demonstrate how religion enforces a rigid version of reality, and how, wielded in the hands of a privileged minority, belief systems can serve as a means of oppressing the ignorant masses.

Despite Moreau's efforts, the Beast Folk are confronted with the hollowness of his Fixed Ideas upon his death, thus completing their accession into the Age of Science. In this way, Moreau symbolizes the Divine King in death as well as life. His death corresponds with Book II of *The Golden Bough*, "Killing the God," in which Frazer rationalizes the reasons for which "primitive peoples" are motivated to kill their deified leader. According to Frazer, divine kings must die an early and violent death so that their soul can be transferred to a successor at its prime, rather than after the soul has decayed from old age or disease. These measures are necessary to prevent the king's death from destabilizing the natural order. In *Island of Dr. Moreau*, however, we see the outcome that these measures intend to avert. The Beasts reveal the impact Moreau's death has upon their worldview to Prendrick, as they look to him for verification and ask "Is there a Law now?" (103). Fearing in this way the implications his death has upon their existence, the Beast Folk's uncertainty reflects the "savage philosophy" of Frazer's description as they struggle to revise their belief system. Prendrick's response to the situation, on the other hand, is a return to the narrative that Frazer outlined: he insists that Moreau's soul

remains in another form, thus sustaining the illusion while also using the exact rhetoric found in “Killing the God.” “He has changed his shape –he has changed his body,” Prendrick informs the Beast Folk, going on to claim that Moreau “cast away” his body “because he had no more need of it” (104). Prendrick’s argument is reliant upon Frazer’s logic that the divine king’s soul can be transferred to a “vigorous successor” (235). In this case, the vessel of choice for Moreau’s soul is Prendrick himself, who the Beast Folk elevate to the position of the new Divine King, calling him “Master” as they once called Moreau. The very plot of *Island of Dr. Moreau*, as these examples illustrate, is molded around one of the central tenets of *The Golden Bough*.

In stark contrast to Wells, T.S. Eliot read *The Golden Bough* as an affirmation of his Christian faith. Quoted as calling Frazer “unquestionably the greatest master,” Eliot acknowledged his debt to *The Golden Bough* explicitly in his notes accompanying *The Waste Land*. Lionel Kelly further illuminates Frazer’s influence on the poem in his essay, “‘What are the roots that clutch?’: Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*,” in which he argues that Eliot venerated Frazer as an “authority,” whose comparative framework served to substantiate his own religious conviction. Kelly’s analysis sheds light on how Eliot, a self-identified Christian, could find meaning in Frazer’s rationalist interpretation of human history. For while Frazer sets forth the universality of myths as evidence that religious development occurs everywhere in the same sequence, Eliot viewed the parallels between Christ and the Dying God trope as a sign of Christianity’s historical continuity. Kelly’s interpretation is in accordance with Vickery, who argues that in *The Waste Land*, Eliot invokes a “religious consciousness” in the minds of even the most primitive societies. For Eliot, *The Golden Bough*, which he

praised for “throwing its light on the obscurities of the soul from a different angle,” suggests an innate religious impulse, even in man’s earliest stages of cultural evolution (Vickery 236).

To demonstrate Frazer’s influence on popular imagination in the late Victorian era, one need only refer to contemporary press reports. Beginning with the publication of the first volume of *The Golden Bough* in 1890, journals ranging from *The Academy*, *The Nation*, *The Dial*, *The Edinburgh Review*, *The North American Review*, *The Athenaeum*, and *The Living Age* all carried critical reviews of Frazer’s work<sup>7</sup>. His fame only accelerated throughout his lifetime: In 1940, *The Golden Bough* competed with *Mein Kampf* for best-selling nonfiction book<sup>8</sup>, and in 1962, decades after Frazer’s death, Malinowski called *The Golden Bough* “a work known to every cultured man, a work which has exercised paramount influence over several branches of learning and has created new lines of scientific research” (Downie 57). Frazer was not isolated to a single demographic, however. His writing was accessible enough to serve as a liaison between Oxbridge academics and laypeople. Jane Harrison, a fellow classicist of Frazer’s at Cambridge, illustrates his pervasiveness with this anecdote: “A cultured policeman...said to me, ‘I used to believe everything they told me, but, thank God, I read *The Golden Bough*, and I’ve been a free-thinker ever since’”(Downie 64).

In a 1962 essay for *Varieties of Literary Experience*, the critic Lionel Kelly noted, “Perhaps no book has had so decisive an effect upon modern literature as Frazer’s” (Downie 64). Yet though many scholars have tracked Frazer’s cultural impact, far less

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<sup>7</sup> Downie, Robert Angus. *Frazer and The Golden Bough*. London: Gollancz, 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Beard, Mary. “Frazer, Leach, and Virgil: The Popularity (and Unpopularity) of the Golden Bough.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Apr., 1992), pp. 203-224.

attention has been devoted to Frazer's effect on literature. One literary critic engaged in this study, however, is John B. Vickery, who since the 1970's has studied the relationship between *The Golden Bough* and Modernist writers such as T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and W. B. Yeats. According to Vickery, these authors found inspiration in Frazer's discussion of myths and ritual, and saw myth creation as a powerful creative force in the human imagination. This perspective on myth and ritualism was only possible once anthropology and religion were framed in the context of scientific inquiry. Frazer was thus the herald of a new, empirical perspective of myth and ritualism, filling the void between academia and the popular imagination. Were it not for the influence of science, history, and an evolutionary vision of the past, Vickery argues, "myth would have remained an airy fancy with no social or psychological relevance to modern man" (Vickery 5). To many writers, myth fulfilled a "psychic need" in modern man, a need that thousands of years of civilization could not dampen. Myths therefore served a vital purpose, forming a bridge between the ancient savage and his oppressed, disillusioned descendants.

Further contributing to Vickery's legacy is Robert Fraser, editor of a recent abridgement from Oxford World Classics of the second and third editions, as well as *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination: Essays in Affinity and Influence*. In the latter text, Fraser presents a collection of critical essays that demonstrate Frazer's influence on writers like Joseph Conrad, John Buchan, and Wyndham Lewis, as well as the modernists cited above. Like Vickery, Fraser perceives a common discursive thread in these writers' literature evoking Frazer's conception of society in its primitive stages, and he traces how the mythic narratives recurrent in this collective body of literature are employed to

inspire in contemporary readers a sense of their own innate primitivism. While the objective of this paper pertains to Frazer's influence on Wells, the work of the aforementioned critics provides a model for how *The Golden Bough's* impact has been gauged in the past.

W.B. Yeats is credited as being the first modern writer to assimilate Frazerian material into his literature. His 1899 poem "The Valley of the Black Pig" draws upon the myth of the Corn-god, which Frazer explicates in a chapter entitled "The Corn-Spirit as an Animal" in Book II of *The Golden Bough*. Yeats cites specific pages of Book II as he compares the black pig of Celtic legend with "the boar that killed Adonis, the boar that killed Attis; and the pig embodiment of Typhon."<sup>9</sup> Clearly, Yeats is employing Frazer's material as well as his comparative method; far from being exclusive to one myth, Yeats presents the symbol of the boar as a universal trope with roots extending to diverse and distant lands. Alongside this summary of the Corn-Spirit is for how taboos arise: "The pig seems to have been originally a genius of the corn, and, seemingly because the too great power of their divinity makes divine things dangerous to mortals, its flesh was forbidden to many eastern nations." Yeats' rationale for the taboo's purpose relies upon Frazer's theory of prohibitions serving as insulators, separating mortals from the divine power that can jump, through contact, from person to person. Using equally Frazerian language, Yeats goes on to explain how the meaning of this taboo progressed from sacred to profane: "...but as the meaning of the prohibition was forgotten, abhorrence took the place of reverence, pigs and bears grew into types of evil, and were described as the enemies of the very gods they once typified." Here, Yeats situates the Corn-Spirit myth

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<sup>9</sup> *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Allt and Russell Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 809.

and accompanying taboo within an evolutionary perspective of human history, an approach he borrowed from Frazer. Vestiges of ancient superstition linger in modern societies, Yeats is implying, and cloud the judgment of its members.

Yet as the anthropological perspective indicates, ancient superstition can be offset by objectivity. The taboo against cannibalism is so ingrained in the Time Traveler himself that several days pass following his initial glimpse of the Morlocks' peculiar meat before he realizes its origin. His revelation occurs in a moment of keen insight during a spot of stargazing, when, using an anthropological perspective as his lens, he contrasts the "gravities of terrestrial life" against the "unfathomable distance" of the cosmos (70). As his thoughts wander, the Time Traveler marvels at the massive cosmic scale against which all of existence must be measured:

And during these few revolutions all the activity, all the traditions, the complex organizations, the nations, languages, literatures, aspirations, even the mere memory of Man as I knew him, had been swept out of existence. Instead were these frail creatures who had forgotten their high ancestry, and the white Things of which I went in terror. Then I thought of the Great Fear that was between the two species, and, for the first time, with a sudden shiver, came the clear

knowledge of what the meat I had seen might be. Yet it was too horrible! (71)

The movements of the cosmos dwarf the entire spectrum of human history. Inspired by this sense of relativism, the Time Traveler views the Eloi and Morlock in terms of species, rather than vestiges of his own culture. It is this at this moment, when any trace of cultural context has been overlooked, that the Time Traveler can at last grasp a concept as alien to him as cannibalism. Quick on the heels of his revelation, however, is a

returning notion of taboos. This instance demonstrates clearly how an anthropological perspective enhances recognition by eliminating the interference of cultural norms.

Hopelessly ensnared in their respective otherworlds, the odds appear low that either Prendrick or the Time Traveler will live to see England again. Just when their prospects seem bleakest, however, good fortune and a survivalist mentality conspire to ensure each man's safe return. The Time Traveler eludes the "clinging hands" of the Morlocks in one "last scramble" at the White Sphinx before being ferried off aboard his time machine, while Prendrick finds salvation in a corpse-filled lifeboat from the very ship that deserted him. The protagonists' abrupt removal from the otherworlds effectively concludes the inner narrative—an ending that recalls Wells and Frazer's descriptions of human sacrifices. Yet though the uncertainty of each man's position generates tension for the plot, this tension does not waver following their escapes, and persists, unabated, as each man attempts a transition back into his former cultural context. Their hasty departures deprive the inner narrative of a resolution; the otherworld is left behind abandoned and on the brink of collapse, permanently poised in a state of perpetual instability.

This final image of instability begs the question: does an anthropological perspective somehow prevent a narrative from achieving resolution? The answer is yes, when the focus of this perspective is a culture founded on Frazer's theories of primitivism and taboo. Taboos develop as a method for restricting people's behavior, thereby removing some of the guesswork from social interactions by ensuring a degree of predictability. Such predictability is reassuring; in a world of chaos and senseless events, taboos maintain the illusion that a pattern exists determining the order of events, creating

a sense of stability. In the worlds of Wells' imagination, however, taboo-breaking is inevitable, and produces total societal upheaval. The consequences of taboo violations suggest that taboos are a risky system for organizing society, and that, achieved in this way, stability is unsustainable.

Although Wells highlights the vulnerability of taboo systems, neither novel offers an alternative system for organizing society, a characteristic that distinguishes Wells' early scientific romances from the overt didacticism of *The Outline of History*. The problem, according to Wells, is that taboos are an integral structural element of civilization: viewed along a developmental scale, every society is a chaos of confusion feebly buttressed by its precepts and prohibitions, which arise, metastasize and become ingrained until they too are eventually discarded. *The Time Machine* ends with the anonymous narrator arguing a similar point, referring to the "growing pile of civilization" as "only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end" (90). The narrator's philosophy exhibits all the trademarks of an anthropological perspective, summarizing a topic as broad as the unilinear development of civilization with the detachment of an outside observer. His philosophy is also a concise rendering of stadial history, albeit with the addition of a final stage in which degeneration occurs. The only pattern governing society, the narrator suggests, is this senseless accumulation of social constructs, which can only end by way of total destruction.

This template for regressive societal development is what Wells suggests his reader use to fill in the blank left behind by his narrative's abrupt conclusion. We last glimpse our Wellsian otherworlds in the grips of this last stage of development, degeneration, the only form of conclusion a narrative can achieve when it is observed

through the lens of the anthropologist. The Time Traveler acknowledges his role as eyewitness to regression when he muses on the stadial history of Eloi society in the millennia preceding his visit, at which point “the balanced civilization that was at last attained” reached its “zenith,” before deliquescing to become what he sees in 801,702 as the “sunset of mankind” (63)(50). Our protagonist observes the arc of civilization even better from the vantage point of his time machine. On both legs of the journey, stadial history is enacted before his eyes. The progress he observes en route to 801,702, with “great and splendid architecture rising” about him, contrasts with the terrifying visions of further distant futurity, of a “desolate beach” (43)(85). Measured against the passage of innumerable millennia, the age of humankind dwindles to a microscopic point on an infinitely long timescale.

Comparing human history against the cosmos reminds the reader of that old chestnut, cultural relativism. The anthropological perspective provides the lens through which cultural relativism is brought into focus, functioning as both a telescope to view the cosmos, or a microscope to take in every minute detail of human existence. This flexibility is significant to Wells’ purposes. During a night in the forest, the telescopic lens helps the Time Traveler escape his present troubles by directing his gaze skyward: “Looking at these stars suddenly dwarfed my own troubles and all the gravities of terrestrial life. I thought of their unfathomable distance, and the slow inevitable drift of their movements out of the unknown past into the unknown future” (71). A telescopic lens effectively removes the Time traveler from his dangerous predicament, and stifles his sense of space and time; detachment becomes a source of comfort.

In *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, Prendrick experiences a similar sense of detachment when he trains a microscopic lens on the Beast folk. Observing their petty struggles, Prendrick views Beast culture as “the whole balance of human life in miniature, the whole interplay of instinct, reason, and fate, in its simplest form” (167). Prendrick’s revelation does not offer him any solace, however; through this lens, human existence is enshrouded in an “aimless wantonness” (167). And yet, the oscillation between large and small lenses produces varying insights into the same subject, further emphasizing how a flexible perspective can make the viewer aware of his own relativism.

Yet as both novels demonstrate, once one is restored to his original context, awareness is not as useful, and an anthropological perspective becomes a handicap. Each protagonist suffers an uneasy transition from his Wellsian otherworld back to British quotidian, and finds himself unable to remove the lens of objectivity as he perceives his external world. What once was familiar is now foreign; what once was alien is now commonplace. The Time Traveler articulates this inverted dichotomy back in his sitting room, as he relates his adventures to a cluster of dubious companions: “I know that all of this will be absolutely incredible to you. To me the one incredible thing is that I am here tonight in this old familiar room” (87). The verbal distinction between him and them, between “to you” and “to me,” is an acknowledgment of the disparity between his and their perspectives. Time Traveler knowingly stands in opposition to his friends. Yet as he soon discovers, clashing perspectives can generate internal dissonance. Restored to his former context, the combined pressures of “this room and you and the atmosphere of every day” cast into doubt the validity of his memories. Struggling to recollect his experience among the Eloi with clarity, he questions his perception of reality, and is

grieved to discover that his new perspective cannot be aligned with his old environment: “They say life is a dream, a precious poor dream at times—but I can’t stand another that won’t fit. It’s madness” (88). The effects of estrangement linger on, forcing the Time Traveler to choose between insanity and denial if he wishes to resume his former life.

Prendrick, too, never sheds a sense of estrangement from his surroundings upon returning home to England. Unable to remove an anthropological lens, he feels detached from the social and cultural milieu, and perceives his fellow men with punishing objectivity. From his detached standpoint, Prendrick feels acutely aware of the similarities between contemporary society and the Beast Folk, leading him to fear that here in England, “the degradation of the Islanders will be played over again on a larger scale” (205). Informing Prendrick’s consideration of different “scales” is his sense of cultural relativism, which employs multiple frames of reference for the purpose of comparison. Thus, using language that echoes of the Beast Folk, Prendrick remarks on the “prowling women” and “furtive craving men” he passes on the city streets, none of whom he believes possess the “calm authority of a reasonable soul” (205). In the unflattering light of cultural relativism, civilized and primitive societies are rendered with equivalent impartiality, and so Prendrick interprets a preacher as “gibber[ing] Big Thinks even as the Ape Man had done” (206). Regardless of context, an anthropological perspective observes the same basic elements underlying every culture.

Yet an anthropological perspective comes at a heavy cost; sensitive to the flaws of his old environment, Prendrick “withdraw[s] [himself] from the confusion of cities and multitudes,” and devotes his attentions instead to the study of chemistry and astronomy (207). His self-seclusion indicates that he has surrendered a participatory role within any

cultural context. Isolated from society, Prendrick exists solely as a lens, expanding and contracting to accommodate different frames of reference—hence his investment in chemistry, which measures the microscopic, alongside astronomy, a study scaled against the infinite. Prendrick’s separation from public life suggests that an objective perspective corresponds with a negation of the self: an anthropological perspective possesses a mirror-like quality that reflects back the object of scrutiny, while its impervious surface resists penetration from the constraints or obligations of a norm-injunctive society. This portrait of a detached viewer is reminiscent of Frazer’s vision of the ideal anthropologist, who observes with the “openness of a mind unwarped by preconceived notions and foreign conclusions” (xxx). Yet the termination of Prendrick and the Time Traveler’s narratives illustrates the impossibility of Frazer’s ideal. No observer can ever exist in a vacuum; the observer must be present in the context, and yet detachment by definition requires severing ties with any cultural institution. The only way by which Wells could end either narrative on a note of authenticity was with this evasive technique, in which the two protagonists avoid reconciling perspective with culture.

Though self-segregation is a welcome recourse for the detached character, Wells is careful to note that the outer group can enforce isolation as well, in the form of social ostracism. Prendrick and the Time Traveler cannot readjust to their social environments, and their refusal to comply with social norms drives a wedge between them and their peers. The inner narratives are met with arrant disbelief in the outer framework of each novel. Realizing that “no one would believe [him],” Prendrick learns to refrain from disclosing the facts of his yearlong hiatus for fear of being thought insane (204). The Time Traveler’s tale is met with equal skepticism. His audience of well-heeled

professionals refuses to countenance a phenomenon as unfamiliar as time travel. While the Medical Man advises his friend to abstain from overwork, the Editor voices stronger opposition, and dismisses the whole tale as a “gaudy lie” (89). Coupled with their lukewarm response to the Time Traveler’s first demonstration in the opening scene, the audience’s uncompromising skepticism demonstrates a general resistance to the unfamiliar. In their eyes, time travel represents a violation of natural law, which, if true, threatens to dismantle the group’s present conception of reality. By proposing an alternative framework for imagining natural law, the Time Traveler represents an irreconcilable conflict of perspectives. The only way to suppress this threat is to deny its existence; hence the “absolute silence” with which the group follows their host back from the laboratory, and their subsequent mass exodus from the home (89). Out of this episode emerges the idea that society resists crediting an anthropological perspective, for fear of what its objective lens might reflect back, should the society itself come under the microscope.

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