



The North Meridian Review

Manuscript 1141

"Was Thanos Right?": Mad Genius, Eugenics, and Popular Culture

BJ Bruther

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/thenorthmeridianreview>

“WAS THANOS RIGHT?": MAD GENIUS, EUGENICS, AND POPULAR CULTURE

BJ BRUTHER

“A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.”

-Joseph Stalin (attributed)

Currently some fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) maintain that the Mad Titan—Thanos—was correct in his destruction of 50 percent of the universe’s population of higher sentient beings with a single snap of his fingers. Thanos believed that a less populated universe would allow planets to heal themselves from sentient-made ecological damage and the remnant populations to make their worlds, utopias for the survivors. Thanos is a familiar figure, the mad genius on a mission, drawn from exemplars in nineteenth-century literature, popularized in early twentieth-century film and later mass-produced comics, reaching worldwide audiences through film today. Everyone has seen them or heard of them—Frankenstein, Jekyll, and Moreau—but many are unfamiliar with their roots in the cutting-edge science and social Darwinism of the nineteenth century.

Thanos and his brother Eros, both Titans, had been the only survivors of their people, a people who had destroyed themselves through heedless population growth and apocalyptic ecological damage to their planet. He determined that the universe needed to be freed from the unwise decisions of multitudes of higher sentient beings on planets. He believed that it was his task to create the circumstances through which each planet could correct itself from ongoing ecological damage because fewer higher sentient beings would be alive to affect the planet. He

hoped that the survivors would understand the necessity for the destruction of millions of their fellow beings, to build a better world. He recruited followers, built armies, and attacked thousands of planets over the years, butchering a minimum of 50 percent of their populations. His armies carved their way through the universe, leaving terrible destruction in their wake. On some planets, he spared a child of the slaughter, making that child a well-educated and trained tool in his ordained task. The task seemed endless—a never-ending slaughter. Thanos sought a more humane way to carry out his mission. He discovered that there were six gems or stones, each possessing a particular property, that could be used in a glove or gauntlet, enabling the user to carry out his deepest desire. He believed that with a single snap, he could erase 50 percent of the universe's higher sentient beings. His search for the stones brought him into contact with two opposing forces, the self-proclaimed Guardians of the Galaxy and the Avengers of Earth. Unfortunately, neither the Guardians nor the Avengers were able to prevent the mad Titan from completing his mission. Half of the higher sentient beings in the universe were snapped out of existence; to prevent a reversal of the snap, Thanos unilaterally destroyed the stones and the gauntlet. As he had hoped, many planets made a slow recovery from devastating ecological damage. However, he discovered that he was not a hero to the survivors, but a monster. As the snap removed individuals, vehicles fell from the sky; children were left without parents and vice versa; everything that depended on higher sentient direction, such as power plants, agricultural holdings, goods manufacturers, and medical care ceased operation leading to even more casualties of the snap. Some societies descended into violence, resulting in even more deaths. Some societies resorted to authoritarian measures to recover. As societies recovered, few of the survivors could forget their loved ones and others who had ceased to exist, and all blamed Thanos. Even Thanos was affected emotionally; he had sacrificed his favorite daughter, Gamora, the one being he loved on Vormir, so that he could possess

the Soul Stone. Unwilling to admit that he might have been wrong, Thanos considered resuming his genocidal mission, but Thor Odinson of the Avengers killed him.¹

Thanos was a social Darwinist. The core idea of this nineteenth-century misunderstanding of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution maintained that only the strong or the fittest survive, which was applied to the individual and the nation-state. Thanos applied this idea to individuals in the films, in particular to his adopted daughters, Gamora and Nebula. Gamora and Nebula were taken from their home planets, their parents murdered, and trained to be his weapons. He pitted his daughters against each other in mind games and physical combat. He rewarded the strongest, the victor, in the competitions with attention and favor. As for the loser, she suffered pain, as he removed what he perceived as her weakness and replaced it with cybernetics, effectively making her a cyborg and more powerful weapon. Gamora was his favorite, the child who was the strongest, whereas Nebula was the loser and a cyborg.²

When Peter Quill, a Ravager, purloined an infinity stone, Thanos sent his daughters and Ronan the Accuser (a Kree warlord) to seize it. Gamora reached the Ravager first, and attempted to get the stone, but she and several others were arrested on the planet Xandar. They found themselves incarcerated where they formed what they called the Guardians of the Galaxy, to retrieve the stone, make a little money, and thwart Thanos. The Guardians were Peter Quill (a Terran), Rocket (an enhanced cybernetic animal), Groot (a living tree), Drax the Destroyer (a survivor of his planet's genocide at the hands of Thanos), and, surprisingly, Gamora (who has decided that her father is wrong). Ronan and Nebula intervene, a conflict occurs, and the Guardians

¹ *The Avengers: Infinity War*, dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo (Marvel, 2018); *The Avengers: Endgame*, dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo (Marvel, 2019).

² *Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 1*, dir. James Gunn (Marvel, 2014).

win (Ronan is killed; Nebula vanishes into space). The stone is placed in the hands of the ruling elite of Xandar and locked away from Thanos.³

Unsurprisingly, the Guardians embark on their next adventures in which they come into conflict with two other mad geniuses—Ego, the living planet and the High Evolutionary. They are narcissists, believing that they are right, focused on their particular missions. Nothing will stand in their way. They are narcissists, like Thanos, and authoritarian rulers in their corner of the universe. However, each faces a “monster” of their own creation—Thanos, Nebula; Ego, Peter Quill; and the High Evolutionary, Rocket—who will bring about their destruction.

The archetypal mad genius, upon whom Thanos, Ego, and the High Evolutionary, are based is Victor Frankenstein, the creation of a young author, Mary Shelley in her 1818 novel, *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*. Victor Frankenstein longed to know “the physical secrets of the world.”⁴ As a child and later adult, Frankenstein admitted

the world was to me a secret which I desired to divine. Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature, gladness akin to rapture, as they were unfolded to me, are among the earliest sensations I can remember. . . It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn, and whether it was the outward substance of things, or the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man that occupied me, still my enquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or its in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world.⁵

He studied what he believed was science, books that his father condemned as rubbish, he read deeply, books on natural philosophy written by Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magus. He searched for the fabled “elixir of life,” the “philosopher’s stone,” only to discover new passions as he entered the university, galvanism and mathematics. He plunged into his studies of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mary Shelley. *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus* (1818; Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994), 19.

⁵ Ibid., 18–19.

natural philosophy chemistry, and mathematics for two years, guided by his mentors, Krempe and Waldman. Later, he added the study of anatomy, spending hours in autopsy rooms, believing he “must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body.”⁶ He sets aside his childish interests, as he saw them, embracing the new science. For nearly three years, he absents himself from his family and isolates himself from his fellow students and even his mentors. Nothing else mattered, but his project, “After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter.”⁷ Frankenstein embarked on his mission, a plan that he believed would make him a famous and renowned scientist, the creator of a new race of man. He haunted the graveyards and charnel-houses, collecting the raw material for his grand experiment. He built a human-like being of “gigantic stature, that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionally large . . . a new species would bless me as its creator and source.”⁸ One night, he creates life from the dead. His creation breathes and reaches out to him. Frankenstein suddenly views his creation as an ugly wretch: “yellow skin scarcely covers the work of mules and arteries beneath . . . watery eyes . . . shriveled complexion . . . straight black lips. . . luxurious black hair and pearly white teeth.”⁹ Horrified, Frankenstein runs away, collapsing in the street, and suffering from brain fever for several months. The creature vanishes into the night.

When his creation, hounded and tortured, reestablishes contact, Victor Frankenstein presumes that the creature, ugly and misshapen, is a terrible monster. He rejects it over and over, even as it seeks his help. He takes no responsibility for his creation. As the creature turns its anger on him, vowing vengeance, he sees himself, and himself only, as its target. He neglects to warn

⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁹ Ibid., 35.

any of his family and friends, even allowing a young woman to hang for the murder of his brother, William, rather than reveal its existence. He presumes that he “should be supposed mad, and this in itself would forever have chained my tongue.”¹⁰ Thanos, Ego, and the High Evolutionary share his narcissism. They convince themselves of their correctness—murder, coercion, and cruelty are their methods. They breed “monsters.” Unlike Thanos, however, who remains a social Darwinist, Ego, the Living Planet, and the High Evolutionary are eugenicists.

In the nineteenth century, scientists developed the idea of eugenics, which was based on the discoveries of Gregor Mendel (the laws of heredity) and Charles Darwin (natural selection) linking those ideas to an existing theory of degeneracy. They developed an elaborate scientific foundation for their theories, based on the collection of interviews, statistics, and genealogy to document the inherited nature of negative blood-borne traits such as feeble-mindedness, mental disability, and physical disability in extended families.¹¹

One of the more famous essays on degeneracy theory was Oscar C. McCulloch’s “The Tribe of Ishmael: A Study of Social Degradation,” based on his study of two poverty-stricken families in Indianapolis, Indiana. In his essay, he states clearly, as he talks of the life of minute organism, existing as a parasite on the crab, “A hereditary tendency I say, because some remote ancestor left its independent, self-helpful life, and began a parasitic, or pauper, life. . . This tendency to parasitism was transmitted to its descendants, until there is set up an irresistible hereditary tendency . . . stands in nature as a type of degradation through parasitism, or pauperism. I propose to trace the history of similar degradation in man.”¹² McCulloch was a pastor of the

¹⁰ Ibid., 136–37.

¹¹ Oscar McCulloch, “The Tribe of Ishmael: A Study of Social Degradation” in *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies, 1877–1919*, ed. Nicole Hahn Rafter (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 48–54.

¹² Ibid., 49.

Indianapolis Plymouth Church, and engaged in charitable activities directed at alleviating the poverty of Indianapolis residents. He coordinated these activities, and so interacted with families seeking or determined to need charity between 1879 and 1891. Although he had collected historical data for at least 250 families, he focused on thirty families descended from a man named Ben Ishmael in his essay. One of his sons, John, “married a half-breed woman, and came into Marion County, Indiana, about 1840. He was diseased, and could go no further. . . Since 1840, this family has had a pauper record. They have been in the almshouse, the House of Refuge, the Woman’s Reformatory, the penitentiaries, and have received continuous aid from the township. . . In this family history are murders, a large number of illegitimacies and of prostitutes. They are generally diseased. The children die young. They live by petty stealing, begging, ash-gathering. In summer they ‘gypsy’ or travel in wagons east or west. . . Strangely enough, they are not intemperate.”¹³ McCulloch blames John’s wife, the half-breed, for contaminating the family—her “wandering blood” and “the poison and the passion that probably came with her.” They were diseased, physically and mentally weak, and unfit for hard work. They depended upon the ample public charity available to them in Indianapolis, “thus encouraging them in this idle, wandering life, and in the propagation of similarly disposed children.”¹⁴ McCulloch despairs of changing the family’s life. He holds out only one hope: “(f)irst, we must close up official out-door relief. Second, we must check private and indiscriminate benevolence, or charity, falsely so called. Third, we must get hold of the children.”¹⁵

Studies of atavism and parasitism reach a critical mass in Gertrude C. Davenport’s study, “Hereditary Crime”, published in 1907, focusing on a Swiss family. Davenport details the history

¹³ Ibid., 50–51.

¹⁴ Ibid., 51.

¹⁵ Ibid., 54.

of the “Zeros” of Zand, a village in Switzerland—the history of an extended family of habitual criminals.

Magnificent are the scope and effectiveness of our organizations of charity, church, and state, for the repression of crime. They can cope, however, only with crimes that are the product of unfit environment by diminishing temptations or by strengthening the individual’s inhibitions. But even if they should succeed in eradicating all such crimes there would still remain those committed by habitual criminals—criminals who are bred . . .¹⁶

The villagers of Zand were “an industrious, economical, earnest, cautious, moral and temperate people.” However, one extended family was quite different, the “Zeros drank, wandered aimlessly from home, persisted in no occupation, and almost always married foreign women.”¹⁷ Davenport traces the descent of the family, or at least one branch of the family, into habitual criminality to the marriage of “Andreas Zero” to Ida Olga Lauter, a “woman (who) . . . was a blood relative of her husband but her blood was tainted with insanity.”¹⁸ One of her sons married a Lauter relative, and it was from that son who made a marriage with an Italian, “a woman of wandering and vicious disposition” who became “the cause of the permanent downfall of this branch of the Zeros.” When his son married a German vagabond, the fate of the family was sealed.¹⁹ All seven of their children were wanderers and drunkards, and their descendants, often illegitimate, weak-minded, unhealthy, and criminal, engaging in begging and robbery of all kinds, and even murder.²⁰ A Capuchin priest came to the village in 1861, encouraging the removal of poverty-stricken children from their families to place them in industrious and respectable homes. It was hoped that through proper exemplars and adequate education to change their lives. Davenport found “(A)ll the Zero children either ran way or were enticed away by their worthless kinsmen. It is clear, therefore, that the Zeros

¹⁶ Gertrude C. Davenport, “Hereditary Crime,” in *White Trash*, ed. Rafter, 67–68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 68–69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 69–70.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 70–71.

cannot be reclaimed by favorable environment. It is a matter of selective breeding, or better still of preventative breeding. . . Physical weakness is becoming more pronounced with each generation and infant mortality is great.”²¹ She believed that state intervention might not be necessary, as natural selection would eradicate the Zeros over time.

Additional studies simply reinforced McCulloch’s and Davenport’s findings. Elizabeth Kite, in her study of the Kallikak brothers in 1912, made extensive genealogical studies of the descendants of two brothers—one established an industrious and honest lineage; the other, a lineage of degenerate individuals and habitual criminals. She had determined that one son, a revolutionary war soldier, had married a “wayward girl” and their son, nicknamed the “Old Horror,” founded a line that lived in darkness: “a race of degenerates which, out of total of four hundred and eighty descendants, numbers in almshouse cases, in keepers of houses of prostitution, in inmates of reformatories and institutions for the feeble-minded, in criminals of various sorts and in feeble-minded not under state protection, 143 souls.”²² When children of their liaisons gravitated toward urban areas, they settled at “the bottom,” carrying on the vice-ridden lives of their progenitors.²³ Many of these individuals were of Germanic or Anglo-Saxon descent, living in the isolated regions of the United States (and Europe), cut off from the benefits of civilization. They were primitives—atavistic “throw-backs” or bestial degenerates, made so by intercourse with women labeled racially inferior. What followed publication of these and other studies was a thorough-going effort on the part of the progressive reformers and eugenicists in the United States to convince states to prevent those labeled feeble-minded, mentally ill, wayward individuals, and career criminals from producing children through legally mandated sterilization. The goal of these

²¹ Ibid., 73.

²² Elizabeth S. Kite. “Two Brothers” in *White Trash*, ed. Rafter, 76.

²³ Ibid., 76–77.

efforts was to purify the white race; sterilization had already been applied to those labeled racially inferior. Indiana, where McCulloch, had done early work on eugenics, passed the first eugenics-based sterilization law in the world in January 1907; it targeted individuals living within the state's asylums, poorhouses, and prisons. Other American states followed Indiana's lead.²⁴

As these ideas took hold in the scientific community, fiction writers popularized them. Two of these writers influenced the sequels to the first *Guardians of the Galaxy* film—Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Both Jekyll and Moreau sought to create perfected beings and perfected societies through physical changes to human and animal.²⁵

Degeneracy theory plays a role in the story of Dr. Henry Jekyll and his alter-ego, Edward Hyde. The tale opens with a terrifying story, “(W)ell, sir, the two ran into one another naturally enough at the corner; and then the horrible part of the thing, for the man trampled calmly over the child's body and left her screaming on the ground.”²⁶ As the witnesses approached the man and apprehended him, they all felt a strong irrational loathing of the man. None of them could put their finger on the why, but they felt “there is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. . . He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity”²⁷ The narrator is stunned to discover that the man had some connection to the esteemed and altruistic Dr. Henry Jekyll, for Hyde draws money from the good

²⁴ Edwin Black. *War against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003), 63–86; Elof Axel Carlson, “The Hoosier Connection: Compulsory Sterilization as Moral Hygiene,” *A Century of Eugenics: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era*, ed. Paul A Lombardo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 11–25; Jason S. Lantzer, “The Indiana Way of Eugenics: Sterilization Laws, 1907–74” *ibid.*, 26–44; Alexandra Minna Stern, “From Legislation to Lived Experience: Eugenic Sterilization in California and Indiana, 1907–79, *ibid.*, 95–116.

²⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886; New York: Bantam Classic, 2004); H. G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (New York: Random House, 1896).

²⁶ Stevenson. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 4.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 7.

doctor's account, to pay for the child's care, as long as they do not bring the police to his door. As the narrator makes Hyde's acquaintance, he describes the man as "pale and dwarfish" possessed of a "murderous mixture of timidity and boldness," "husky" with a "whispering and somewhat broken voice." He reiterates that anyone who came into contact with him felt "disgust, loathing, and fear."²⁸ Nearly a year passes before Hyde surfaces again. This time he comes to police notice. Unlike the trampled working-class child, his next victim is a well-known member of the London elite, Sir Danvers Carew. A respectable witness testified as to Hyde's actions.

And the next moment, with ape-like fury, he was trampling his victim under foot and hailing down a storm of blows under which the bones were audibly shattered . . . the stick with which the deed had been done, although it was of some rare and very tough and heavy wood had broken in the middle under the stress of the insensate cruelty.²⁹

Soon after this horrific event, the police are unable to trace Hyde. He disappears from public view. Jekyll's friends believe that the good doctor smuggled him out of England to some foreign shore. They are unable to explain his presence in the good doctor's life, assuming he was the product of some unsavory union in Jekyll's past. Jekyll himself guarantees that Hyde will never return, saying "No, I cannot say that I care what becomes of Hyde; I am quite done with him. I was thinking of my own character which this hateful business has rather exposed."³⁰ Like Victor Frankenstein, Jekyll, for all his charitable activities, is a classic narcissist. He thought nothing of giving the working-class child's parents money to prevent Hyde's arrest or about silencing his friends about his link to Carew's killer. His own reputation concerns him. He is desperate to hide the reality. Dr. Henry Jekyll is Edward Hyde. Edward Hyde is the result of an experiment. Jekyll believes that "man is not truly one, but truly two."³¹ He dreams of separating the two characters of man, the just

²⁸ Ibid., 15.

²⁹ Ibid., 23.

³⁰ Ibid., 29.

³¹ Ibid., 65.

and the unjust. He chooses himself as the experimental subject, what better subject could exist— an honorable man. He believes “the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely, on his upward path, doing the good things, in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of extraneous evil.”³² Jekyll believes that once he has separated the two natures that each will take a corporeal form, existing as two individuals, independent of each other. Jekyll purchases rare salts, combines them, and creates a drinkable potion. He drinks the potion, discovering that it does separate the two natures. However, they share the same body. Jekyll becomes Hyde, “I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought, in that moment, braced and lifted me like wine.”³³ He indulges the evil within him, going places and doing things that the upright Jekyll would never do, secure in the knowledge that drinking the potion will return him to the guise of Henry Jekyll. When Hyde butchers Sir Danvers Carew, Jekyll resolves never to allow Hyde his freedom, drinking the potion one last time to restore Jekyll. Everything goes back to normal for Jekyll. Until one night, when, much to Jekyll’s horror, Hyde manifests himself without the aid of the potion. Jekyll desperately re-creates his potion, so that he can banish Hyde once more. The potion fails him, leaving him to face the loss of his position in society and the disgrace of a murder conviction as Edward Hyde, so he commits suicide.³⁴

Although Dr. Henry Jekyll does not indulge himself with a breeding program, his idea of two characters or natures influences the story of Peter Quill and his biological father, Ego, the Living Planet, in *Guardians of the Galaxy, Volume 2*. Ego, a Celestial, wants to remake the universe

³²Ibid., 65–66.

³³Ibid., 67.

³⁴Ibid., 384–5, 67–70, 74, 83–84.

in his own image, but over eons, he has discovered that he cannot do it alone. He needs another Celestial, and so creates a breeding program. He journeys to thousands of planets, mates with sentient beings on those planets, all to create a child that has the Celestial gene. Once he creates that child, he believes that the two of them can create an Ego universe. Of course, once he uses that child, the child will be one with Ego. He sees his children as extensions of himself, not separate entities; they are Ego. He creates child after child, bringing them to himself, and as they mature, he tests them. None have the Celestial gene, so he exterminates them, and moves on to create more children. When he hears about Peter Quill and the Guardians of the Galaxy's encounter with an infinity stone, he thinks that he has found the child of his dreams. He remembers that he had paid a Ravager, to bring his offspring to his world, in particular a youngster, the child of a woman of Earth, Meredith Quill. In fact, it seems the Living Planet had developed feelings for the woman, visiting her more than once to impregnate her. She seems to have known that Ego was from the stars, for she called her son, "my little Star Lord." Rather than take the boy to his biological father, the Ravager adopts him. Peter Quill becomes an adult, a Ravager and an accomplished thief, calling himself "Star Lord." Ego decides to introduce himself to his son. He helps the Guardians, reveals himself to Peter who decides to journey to his biological father's home, hoping to build a relationship with the man. Blinded by his emotions, Peter Quill simply wants a father, whereas Ego wants a tool. Peter does not go alone, Gamora and Drax journey to Ego's home world where they encounter Mantis. Ego has a relationship with the young woman; she is an empath, capable of soothing his mind and body, taking away Ego's pain. Gradually, the truth is revealed; Mantis reveals the skeletons of Ego's exterminated children to Gamora. Ego reveals his plan to Peter Quill; he cannot imagine that Peter will reject his plan. He also tells Peter that it disturbed him, for he did have feelings for Meredith Quill, when he placed the cancer in her that killed her. Angered, Peter

fights his father. The Guardians, reunited, join him in the battle to destroy Ego. They succeed. Ego, the Living Planet, ceases to exist. Peter loses the powers that his Celestial gene had given him. He becomes Peter Quill, human.³⁵

James Gunn, the director of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films, links the third film directly to Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, saying "The High Evolutionary is one of my favourite Marvel villains. . . I've always been a big fan of [1932 film] *Island of Lost Souls*. He's like a space Doctor Moreau."³⁶ Rocket, the cybernetic animal-genius of the Guardians, is an escaped creation of the High Evolutionary; the High Evolutionary wants his experiment back. He wants to dismantle Rocket, to examine why, of all his experiments, Rocket became Rocket. When he comes for Rocket, the Guardians unite to protect a member of their found family. The High Evolutionary and his story owe much to Wells's short novel.

The novel is a found manuscript about the horrific adventure of one Edward Prendick, the only survivor of the ship *Lady Vain*, who was discovered drifting alone on a wrecked ship in the Pacific Ocean almost one year later. He returned to civilization, claiming to have lost all memory of what happened to him. Later his nephew found the manuscript in his uncle's papers, and publishes it as an adventure story.

After being rescued at sea, Prendick finds himself marooned on an island with two scientists, Doctors Montgomery and Moreau, who debate about his usefulness to their enterprise, a biological station. Prendick presumes that if he is not valuable to their project, he would be banished from the island, set adrift once more in the vast Pacific Ocean. He drops a name into their

³⁵ *Guardians of the Galaxy, Volume 2*, dir. James Gunn (Marvel, 2017).

³⁶ Ben Travis, *Empire*, posted on 06/04/2023, accessed on 14 July 2023.

<https://www.empireonline.com/movies/news/guardians-galaxy-vol-3-about-guardians-saving-themselves-james-gunn-exclusive/>

conversation about his science background, Huxley had been his mentor at the Royal College of Science. Moreau grudgingly accepts his pleas. Montgomery warns him about the island and its inhabitants. Prendick, for his part, has been alarmed by the servants on the island. They are somehow deformed and their eyes shine, not red at night, but green. He also thinks that he has heard the name Moreau before. As he interacts with one of the servants, he notes the man has a furry pointed ear. He remembers Moreau: “He had published some very astonishing facts in connection with the transfusion of blood, and in addition, was known to be doing valuable work on morbid growths. Then suddenly his career was closed. He had to leave England.”³⁷ His wanton cruelty to and mutilation of animals in his laboratory were exposed to the public in a sensational pamphlet, Prendick remembered reading it as a lad ten years before.³⁸ Puzzled Prendick watches the servants, he draws a terrible conclusion, “Could it be possible, I thought, that such a thing as the vivisection of men was possible? . . . Moreau had been vivisecting a human being . . . the memory of his works in the transfusion of blood recurred to me. These creatures I had seen were the victims of some hideous experiment!”³⁹ Prendick, once he sees the village of the Beast Men and hears the recitation of the Law, demands the truth from Moreau. Moreau states “Yes. These creatures you have seen are animals carven and wrought into new shapes. To that—to the study of plasticity of living forms—my life has been devoted. I have studied for years, gaining knowledge as I go. I see you look horrified, and yet I am telling you nothing new.”⁴⁰ He continues, “To this day I have never troubled about the ethics of the matter. The study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature.”⁴¹ Further, “I have been doing better, but somehow the things drift back

³⁷ Wells. *Island of Dr. Moreau*, 43.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 68–69.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

again, the stubborn beast flesh grows, day by day, back again.”⁴² Finally, he finishes, “It’s afterwards as I observe them that the persuasion fades. First one animal trait, then another creeps to the surface and stares out at me . . . But I will conquer yet. Each time I dip a living creature into the bath of burning pain, I say, this time I will burn out all the animal, this time I will make a rational creature of my own.”⁴³ Prendick notes that Moreau and Montgomery are careful to maintain a vegetarian diet for the creatures, fearing the taste of blood might have a negative effect on them. And the recitation of the law reinforces their human identity and deifies Moreau: “His is the House of Pain. His is the Hand that Makes. His is the Hand that Wounds. His is the Hand that Heals.”⁴⁴ It ends quickly for the three men; the only survivor is Prendick. He watches as the Beast Men revert back into animals, eventually he escapes the island. Prendick returns to civilized society, yet he “could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast People, animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls and that they would presently begin to revert, to show first this bestial mark then that. . . And I go in fear. I see faces keen and bright, others dull or dangerous, others unsteady, insincere; none that have the calm authority of a reasonable soul. I feel as though the animal was surging up through them; that presently the degradation of the Islanders will be played over again on a larger scale. . . it seemed that the preacher gibbered Big Thinks even the Ape Man had done.”⁴⁵

Unlike Moreau who seems to have created the Beast Men, simply because he could make them, and then establish a semblance of human society based upon the law, his deification, and the House of Pain; the High Evolutionary wants to create a perfect society; a society of peace in which he is worshiped as a creator-God. If his experiment fails, he simply destroys it. If his experiment

⁴² Ibid., 105.

⁴³ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 79–80.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 182–84.

exceeds beyond his wildest dreams, he seeks to capture it and dismantle it to understand what he did correctly. Counter-Earth is his failed experiment which he destroys; Rocket is his perfected being. He does not see his experiments as living, independent beings. They are simply experiments. Rocket becomes the monster that he cannot control, the Guardians, Rocket's found family, his enemies. They free his experiments—every higher sentient being and the abducted animals.⁴⁶

Although the current superhero films draw on deep wells of racism, misogyny and cutting-edge science from the scientific-adventure novels of the nineteenth century, the Guardians of the Galaxy trilogy provides an alternative reality. The self-proclaimed Guardians of the Galaxy share a past; they have all been affected by the decisions of the mad geniuses that they encounter in their adventures. Gamora would not be the assassin and warrior that she is without the training of Thanos; her sister Nebula would not be the cyborg that she is without the social Darwinism of Thanos. Peter Quill would not exist without the universe wide breeding program that Ego had created in his effort to create a child with a Celestial gene. Rocket, cybernetic genius would not exist without the breeding program of the High Evolutionary. However, each suffered because of these actions. Gamora and Nebula were treated as extensions of Thanos, servants of his genocidal program and victims of that program. Peter Quill was abducted from Earth and raised among what were essentially space pirates (Ravagers). Rocket was abducted from Earth along with other animals, suffered immense pain, and the loss of his first found family at the hands of the High Evolutionary. None of their creators saw their “children” as independent thinking beings; they were simply tools to be altered and discarded at will. The Guardians place themselves squarely in opposition to the actions of these authoritarian and narcissistic geniuses, advocating for the bodily and mental autonomy of the people, broadly interpreted, of the galaxy. In the world of the

⁴⁶ *Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 3*, dir. James Gunn (Marvel, 2023)

Guardians, individuals should have control over their own bodies and minds. They should not be sacrificed for the “greater good” or for some “perfected society.”