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Compare and contrast what H G Wells' 'The Island of Dr Moreau' and the Eugenics Society pamphlet from the early 1920s tell us about ideas on genetics and race in the early twentieth century.

Introduction (150 words)

1. Grab the reader's interest:

Genetically engineered food and 'designer babies' may seem like debates of the 21st century, but the discussion surrounding the ethics of adapting genetics has been present since the early 20th century.

Similarly, the contemporary debate over racial discrimination finds its roots far back in history.

'The Island of Dr Moreau' and the Eugenics Society pamphlet both reflect the views and debates held by those living in the twentieth century.

2. Narrow the topic to the question focus, and introduce terms that will be used, namely defining what is meant by genetics and race in the early twentieth century.

- The early twentieth century was a time when ideas about genetics and race were under intense debate and in constant development. This was particularly true in Britain, where the two texts in question – H.G. Wells' 'The Island of Dr Moreau' and the Eugenics Society pamphlet – were published.
- Rapid urbanisation was leading to public health problems and economic challenges to the state (Endersby, 65), world trade and colonialism were bringing Britain into frequent contact with unknown cultures, and there was a growing interest in historical scholarship and narratives of historical decline. These factors contributed greatly to a growing sense of anxiety among the population.
- Genetics, which is the scientific study of heredity, played an important role in the debates surrounding degeneration; social degeneration was an influential concept which arose during the European Enlightenment and suggested that civilisation might be in decline due to biological changes.
- Race is a concept whose meaning has continually changed over time. Today, there is an on-going debate over the degree to which racial categories are socially constructed. In different disciplines, such as Sociology, Anthropology and Biology, the term has been used to mean quite different things. Key to this essay is the strong historical links which exists between the concept of race and colonialism. In

particular, the Atlantic slave trade was one of the historical contexts which fed the notion that some human groups were superior to others.

3. Provide a thesis statement (which also informs the reader of the structure, main argument, and counter-argument)

This essay will begin by analysing the portrayal of genetics and race in the novel by H.G. Wells and the Eugenics Society pamphlet. This will be followed by a discussion of the key similarities and differences between the two texts. The aim is to demonstrate how the two texts represent somewhat differing views on genetics and race but together reflect a society concerned with a range of issues including degeneration, contact with other cultures, tension between science and faith and the economic costs of caring for the feeble.

Main body (1,200 words): build points, develop ideas, support the main claim

Section 1 (400 words): Analysis of how race and genetics are portrayed/dealt with in Wells' novel

- The novel represents many of the contemporary debates in early twentieth century about heredity and the ethics of scientifically altering human beings (what was being advocated by the Eugenics Education Society). The language of race is also incorporated into the novel e.g. "negroid", likening the beast folk to primitive people with lower "moral and intellectual priority" (Christensen, 586) → important for justifying the cruel and inhumane treatment of the slaves in the Atlantic slave trade.
- The use of the word "type" to refer to the animal folk also highlights the racial elements of the novel. ("type" was a term used by the influential anthropologist, Edwardy Tylor, to refer to stages of human development from "primitive" to "civilized" (Christensen, 586).
- Wells possibly making a critique of anthropology for its representation of other cultures - Beasts seem to be more 'human' and moral than human beings.
- The "Law" brings the animal society close to human society and blurs the boundaries between human and animal → touching on the anxiety present in society.
- Although not a historical document, the novel evokes many of the concerns and fears experienced by Wells' contemporary society. The arts and science have long been strongly linked (Wald and Clayton, 22, and Turney, 23)
- It could also be argued that the novel is equally relevant in today's society, as it appeals to deeply-rooted emotions and fundamental questions about what it means to be human.

Section 2 (400 words): Analysis of how race and genetics are portrayed/dealt with in the E.E.S. pamphlet

- The stance of the E.E.S. on genetics is very clear from the pamphlet. They believed that the root of most societal problems is hereditary, and therefore proposed intervention through voluntary and compulsory sterilisation (Wellcome Library, 3), as a way of enabling only the “superior types” (Wellcome Library, 2) to reproduce and strengthening the genetic stock of British society.
- No moral debate regarding the ethics of such interventions is given; in fact, the Society argues that it is the “greatest philanthropic agency in existence” (Wellcome Library, 2) since it helps to prevent human suffering.
- Not an explicit reference to race, but a indication of the belief that some humans are superior to others: “prevent the diminution of superior types or the multiplication of the inferior” (Wellcome Library, 2)
- Explicit reference to race and empire: “keeping in close touch with current legislation and executive action in order to intervene, either with objection or support, where the racial qualities of the empire may be affected.” (Wellcome Library, 2)
- Among the Foreign Societies affiliated with the E.E.S. are the Swedish Institute of Race Hygiene, Czecho-Slovak Race Hygiene Society and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Rassenhygiene.

Section 3 (400 words): A discussion of the key similarities and differences between the two texts, highlighting what they say about the ideas people had in the early 20th century about genetics and race

- Both Wells and Galton were strongly influenced by Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. E.g. Galton took inspiration from *On the Origin of Species* and developed his own theories on heredity and the improvement of the human race (Endersby, 70).
- In his essays and other writing, Wells critiques of the eugenics movement. According to Danahay, (469), Wells was not completely opposed to the eugenics movement or to violence towards animals, but rather considered all humans to have the potential of becoming an animal.

Conclusion (150 words): Re-emphasise the main claim

- While the stance of the Eugenics Education Society (E.E.S.) on genetics and eugenics is very clear, the attitude of H.G. Wells seems more mixed & complex.
- A more complex picture of the ethical dimensions is given by Wells in his novel.
- The different attitudes represented in the novel could be linked to the ethical debates held during the time of the publication of both texts (the novel and pamphlet) regarding the right to interfere with the reproductive rights of those seen as “inferior”, “feeble-minded” or “unfit”.
- In terms of race, there is a clear link between the various international eugenics societies and debates surrounding racial purity. Explicit and inexplicit references made to racial purity in the E.E.S. pamphlet

(hinting at the risks associated with mixing with other nations, especially those which formed part of the British Empire— suggests that part of their objective is to maintain the “racial qualities of the empire”,

- A similar fear of the Other is depicted in the *Island of Doctor Moreau*, where the Beast Folk are referred to in racial types. The association created between animals and foreign races could be read as a critique of how members of other societies are treated as lesser. On the other hand, some aspects of Wells’ novel represent the view that humans and animals are essentially different, as animals ultimately return to their natural behaviours, suggesting that the author shared the principal view of the E.E.S. that behaviours and attitudes are hereditary and cannot be altered.
- As a historical document, the pamphlet can be said to be representing the views of at least some in the early twentieth century, whereas caution is needed when making such claims about a literary text. However, it can be argued that Wells is one of many who have sought to explore ethical problems through fiction (Turney, 56); adaptations in different media (film etc.) have had strong influence on the imagination of scientists and scientific developments.

Bibliography

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