

Composite Monsters: *Island of Lost Souls* and *The Fly*

Bruce F. Kawin

The horror film genre has many types of monsters, but one of the most interesting is the composite monsters who are part-animal, part-human. In his book *Horror and the Horror Film*, Bruce F. Kawin, a professor of English and film studies at the University of Colorado, looks to horror

movies to explore our relationships with monsters. In this excerpt, he examines how in the fictional world of films, animal and human can be combined in horrible ways that nature never allows, giving us an opportunity to ask questions about ourselves and our potential to be monstrous as well as human.

One of the early uses of “monster” in English refers to an imaginary creature made up of the parts of two or more animals, one of which might be human. It can also refer to a malformed fetus, usually born dead and resembling several animals, or a mix between human and animal. Ancient mythology includes such composite creatures as the sphinx and the centaur. Film gives us the *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954, US), where the Gill Man, whose species has survived since the Devonian Age,⁹ has the characteristics of a man and a fish, and *The Fly* (Kurt Neumann, 1958, US), where a man has the head and arm of a fly, and a fly has the head and arm of a man—or the remake of *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986, Canada/US), where the man and the fly are completely integrated on a molecular level. These creatures raise the question of the definition of man, the species, which stands—as it is said in *The Creature Walks Among Us* (John Sherwood, 1956, US)—“between the jungle and the stars.” The horror of the monster, the challenge to human nature and the threat of a new category of life are found together in the dangerous mix.

It is part of the horror film’s job to tell us about our nature. The genre is charged with the investigation of all forms of life, from the natural to the unnatural, with a special interest in human nature, which it continually defines and redefines in relation to other kinds and ways of being.

Devonian Age: a geologic period dating from 416 million years ago; part of the Paleozoic Era, it is also known as the Age of Fishes.



The Gill Man (Ben Chapman) holds Kay Lawrence (Julie Adams) in *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954).

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It proposes a fable of who we are, often showing the image of our condition and our potential in a monster or in those who oppose it.

A composite creature, a combination of animal forms, the fruit of anything from mythology or surgery to genetic anomaly, disturbs our sense of the orderly classification of species—of the way things ought to be, much as the Frankenstein Monster displays life and death at once. These monsters are not human, yet they are not entirely some other animal. One of their most human characteristics is that they may find people sexually attractive. The Creature from the Black Lagoon (played by Ricou Browning in the water and Ben Chapman on land) is practically a romantic, so intensely does he concentrate on the only woman in each of the three films. When he carries the unconscious Kay (Julia Adams) into his grotto in *Black Lagoon*, it is expected, iconic (p. 100). Yet we do not consider them a human couple but see them as “the monster and the girl,” as the phrase went. With his gills and dormant lungs, with his webs and claw-like fingers, with his arms and legs and fins, the Creature is a fork in the road between marine and land life: the point at which his species stopped evolving millions of years ago.

Composites can be especially dangerous, for they may have the intelligence of humans or something like it. Cronenberg’s man-fly has all of his former intelligence along with an insect-like selfishness that perverts it. The Creature from the Black Lagoon has cunning and the ability to plan; he is almost a human opponent.

Island of Lost Souls (Erle C. Kenton, 1932, US) has creatures that describe themselves as “Not men, not beasts” but “things.” The film was loosely based on H. G. Wells’s novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau*—“loosely” because it added women to the story and changed the ending—but Wells had much the same monsters, and he had “the Law” and “the House of Pain.” Dr Moreau (Charles Laughton), a mad scientist who respects no moral or physical boundaries, takes animals into his laboratory, the House of Pain, and, after somehow altering their germ plasm, vivisects them. Sometimes (in the novel, often) he grafts several animals together—parts of a dog and a bear, for instance—and works on the results, cutting the animals into human form. It is horrible, and so are the screams. His assistant is a disgraced, drunken doctor, Montgomery (Arthur Hohl), who had probably been doing abortions, another forbidden operation, back in civilization. The humanoid beasts, the only inhabitants of the island aside from those in Moreau’s compound, have a village where they recite to each other the Law that Moreau has conditioned into them: “not to run on all fours,” for example. (“What is the Law?” Moreau ritually demands, cracking his whip. “Not to spill blood,” says the leader, the Sayer of the Law [Bela Lugosi], “that is the Law. Are we not

men?" "Are we not men?" the monsters chant in unison.) The Law keeps the monsters in line, and so does the ritual reminder, "His is the House of Pain."

Moreau has only two problems: the "stubborn beast flesh" keeps growing back—making it necessary to take the monsters back to the House of Pain—and he has a nosy, shipwrecked observer, Edward Parker (Richard Arlen). Before being abandoned on Moreau's island, Edward had telegraphed his fiancée, Ruth (Leila Hyams), when to expect him at the port where they were planning to marry. She and a local captain (Donahue, played by Paul Hurst) go to Moreau's island. In the meantime Moreau has decided to experiment with Edward, to see whether his prized creation, Lota, the Panther Woman (Kathleen Burke), who looks entirely human, will be attracted to a human male. She is. As mentioned before, neither she nor Ruth is in the novel. The movie has made sex, particularly the prospect of sex between species, an important element of the confrontation between human and monster. Explaining his experiments to Edward, Moreau asks, under creepy lighting, "Do you know what it means to feel like God?" This desire seems to be what was most feared about mad scientists and doctors in the 1930s and 40s, though they were still playing God much later, as in *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* (Tom Six, 2009, Netherlands), where a mad scientist cuts and stitches three people into a composite organism.

When Ruth and Donahue arrive, one of the monsters, the violent Ouran (Hans Steinke), is attracted to her. After a scene in which Ruth gets partly undressed for bed, Ouran pries away the bars on her bedroom window and comes through the opening as Ruth screams (this example of the bedroom-window scene is clearly about sex). Later, on Moreau's orders, Ouran strangles Donahue. Then Ouran tells the Sayer of the Law, "Law no more"—because Moreau told him to spill blood.

"Not men, not beasts. Part men, part beast — Things!"

The beast-men confront Moreau at his house, where he asks whether they have forgotten the House of Pain. The Sayer of the Law says, "You made us in the House of Pain. You made us things! Not men, not beasts. Part men, part beast—Things!"—and the monsters advance on the camera in one chilling shot after another. The monsters pursue Moreau into the House of Pain and cut him to pieces. Edward, Ruth and Montgomery escape, and Lota, the film's ritual sacrifice, is killed protecting them from Ouran. Fire consumes all of Moreau's work (the work of a mad scientist doesn't last). The final shot fades out on Edward and Ruth, as Montgomery rows their boat away from the fiery island. Now, having

passed through the horror phase of their relationship, which in this case has forced them to deal with the nature of life, and to undergo trials and perils proving themselves right for each other, they can marry.

Moreau is a mad scientist, and this could be called a mad-scientist picture, but its primary horror is centered in the monsters, composite “things” that clearly manifest, in their own terms, the threat that Moreau represents to the spontaneous course of evolution and to biology itself.

Understanding the Text

1. According to Kawin, what is the danger of the composite creature? Why does it pose such a threat?
2. What is the key difference between the 1958 version of *The Fly* and the 1986 version? Why is that difference important?
3. Why does Kawin refer to the Creature from the Black Lagoon (or the Gill Man) as “practically a romantic” (par. 3)?
4. Dr. Moreau, the mad scientist in *Island of Lost Souls*, says, “Do you know what it means to feel like God?” (par. 6). In what ways is Moreau like God? In what ways is he not?

Reflection and Response

5. Consider your own experience with monsters in films. Do you find humanoid horror monsters more frightening than animalistic ones? Why or why not? Why might filmmakers focus on half-human creatures instead of completely monstrous ones?
6. Note that H. G. Wells’s novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (the original source for *Island of Lost Souls*) has no women, but women were added in the movie. Kawin calls sex “an important element of the confrontation between human and monster” (par. 6). Why do you think women were added in the film? What role does sex play in movies about composite monsters?
7. In *Island of Lost Souls*, Dr. Moreau’s creations are trained in the Law, intended to make the creatures more human. However, the transformation of the creatures is never complete: “the ‘stubborn beast flesh’ keeps growing back” (par. 6). As a result, the creatures must continually undergo painful surgeries to retain the shapes Moreau wants them to have. How does this reflect a battle between nature and nurture? How is the inability to control the return of the natural flesh a sign of human limitations?

Making Connections

8. How do the composite monsters of movies differ from the composite monsters of the classical (and preclassical) era, such as the Minotaur, centaurs, sphinxes, and mermaids? You may wish to investigate other movies that feature composite monsters beyond the ones listed in Kawin’s article, including another movie version of H. G. Wells’s novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996), starring Marlon Brando.

9. Compare Kawin's article with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire" (p. 190). How does Cohen's thesis connect with Kawin's statement that "the prospect of sex between species [is] an important element of the confrontation between human and monster" (par. 6)? Explain your answer, drawing on additional selections from this book or other sources if necessary.