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Savagery and Animalistic Dispositions in *Between the Acts*

In June of 1939, it was evident to Englishmen and women that England would engage in another war. However, the attitude in regards to this impending war was much different than the initial attitude toward the approach of its predecessor, The Great War. As a result of The Great War, the conception of the civilized, progressive human race began to be replaced by a pessimistic view of the human race. Civilization was viewed as something that had somehow regressed into a primitive, even animalistic state. In her novel, *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf addresses this regression by drawing parallels between humans and animals as well as placing an emphasis on prehistory. Her characters in *Between the Acts* embody many animalistic traits and partake in conflict that embodies an uncivil quality. Furthermore, Mrs. Swithin, along with other characters in the novel, expresses an interest in prehistory and continually refers to prehistoric humans as savages, failing to notice the similarities that are brought to the forefront with each mentioning of them. Thus, the characters in the novel represent the failure of the human race to overcome its animalistic and ancestral instincts that lead to the conflicts in the novel and represent the looming conflict of World War II.

The novel opens with a scene in which animalistic conflict is immediately introduced, both through the nature of the conflict itself and the description of the characters who engage in

it. The reader is introduced to Mrs. Haines, “a goosefaced woman with eyes protruding as if they saw something to gobble in the gutter” (Woolf 3). The description of Mrs. Haines immediately draws a parallel between her appearance and that of a goose. However, Woolf’s description does more than liken Haines’s appearance unto that of a goose, but also hints at an animalistic disposition. Her eyes embody the act of scavenging for food, a basic, animal action. Her gooselike appearance is a direct contrast with the appearance of Isa, whose entrance into the room at Pointz Hall is described as that of “swan swimming its way” in (4). Mrs. Haines is aware of Isa’s attraction to her husband and fantasizes about “destroying” the emotion felt by her husband and Isa in the car on the way home “as a thrush pecks the wings off a butterfly” (5). Mrs. Haines’s description of the conflict that she will engage in embodies a strong sense of violence. However, Mrs. Haines does not directly confront Isa, her competition. Instead, she imagines what will happen in the future, therefore suppressing her anger. Her violent imagining is significant in that she uses animal conflict to represent the argument that she plans to engage in with her husband, demonstrating her own underlying animalistic disposition. The notion of an impending, violent conflict is one that appears again in the novel and serves to embody the feeling of the looming violence of World War II.

Along with introducing the notion of animalistic conflict amongst the characters in the novel, the first scene also introduces the use of animals to fill in the gaps of silence that so often occur in the novel. “Mrs. Haines...said affectedly: ‘What a subject to talk about on a night like this!’ Then there was silence; and a cow coughed; and that led her to say how odd it was, as a child, she had never feared cows” (3). This inability to function in a purely social, seemingly civilized environment, without the interjection of the cow demonstrates what Alex Zwerdling referred to as the “...continuity between the animal kingdom and the world of men” (225). The

humans in the novel cannot separate themselves from nature and thus their own animalistic tendencies.

Mrs. Swithin's preoccupation with *An Outline of History* highlights the idea of the characters in the novel, as well as the human race in general, being closely connected with their prehistoric past. Mrs. Swithin contemplates the:

rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated she understood by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, ... we descend. (7)

Mrs. Swithin's description of the human race's ancestors as "barking monsters" is noteworthy in two ways. The first is that Mrs. Swithin feels enough separation from the animals that the humans "presumably" descended from to call them monsters. She obviously feels that as humans evolved, the "monstrous" traits were cleansed from the race. Her description is also noteworthy in that it foreshadows the happenings in Europe during World War II. The continent will become less divided, in the sense that Hitler will try to take over all of Europe making all the countries part of Germany.

Mrs. Swithin references her knowledge that she has gained from reading *An Outline of History* in conversation with her brother and Isa. She says, "No sea at all between us and the continent. I was reading that in a book this morning" (21). Her reference prompts Isa to say "When we were savages" (21), which is ironic because, as stated before, "the continent" would again be somewhat united under Germany and if it was not already inhabited by savages, it

certainly would be during World War II. After her comment, Isa quickly remembers that “her dentist had told her that savages could perform very skillful operations on the brain” (21). Isa’s initial comment to Mrs. Swithin’s historical information is one that at first seems acceptable. However, when Isa recalls the historical information that her dentists related to her, the perception of what a savage is changes, leaving the reader to question, “What is a savage?” If a human could perform intricate brain operations and still be deemed a savage, then certainly the characters of *Between the Acts* could easily be deemed so, as well as the rest of the so-called civilized peoples of the world. This act of breaking down the binary between the savage and the civilized human is Woolf’s way of commenting on the human condition. Isa almost questions her own initial comment when she begins to remember what her dentist had told her. After being told about the savages performing brain surgery, the reader expects Isa to begin to question her own notion of savagery. However, she does not and even though Mrs. Swithin and Bart have also heard her contradicting statements, they do not seem to notice the inconsistency either. This naivety demonstrates on a deeper level the savage traits of the human characters in the play. Civilized humans are supposed to be able to analyze information and interpret it. However, the characters in the novel cannot, much like many modernists felt that the whole of the civilized human race could not. The characters in the novel cannot identify inconsistencies; rather, they take words at face value, never bothering to look beneath the surface at what is truly being said.

The binary between the civilized human and the savage is further blurred by Woolf throughout Miss La Trobe’s pageant. The pageant begins with Phyllis Jones who represents young England. However, her soliloquy has little effect on the audience. “Mrs. Manresa...smiled; but she felt as if her skin cracked when she smiled. There was a vast vacancy between her, the singing villagers, and the piping child” (54). The vacancy felt by Mrs. Manresa

and the rest of the audience is a result of the changed mindset of the people during this era. The past that is being reiterated to them through the play is one that they have undoubtedly been exposed to over and over again. Furthermore, the history of the play is one that focuses on literary periods. However, it has already been established that the human characters in this novel lack reason, and lack the skills to analyze and interpret information. Thus, they cannot appreciate the art of the play. Mrs. Manresa, once she understands the purpose of the play, worries about the time constraints as she names off the different reigns that she believes the play will cover. She knows the history of England well enough to estimate how much time Miss La Trobe will need to outline it in a pageant, but she is not interested in it. This historical play does not introduce anything new to the audience and does not at all examine anything savage or animalistic about human nature. Even though the characters in the play do not seem to be aware of their animalistic tendencies, they do show a preoccupation with the history of their evolution from their animal ancestors and “savage” ancestors. This interest demonstrates the characters’ attempt to assure themselves that they are separate from their ancestors. The characters feel that they are more evolved, even though their actions do not reflect as such.

During the intermission of the play, Giles displays a sense of animalistic and savage violence. He begins to walk to the Barn. As he does so, he first kicks “a flint yellow stone, a sharp stone, edged as if cut by a savage for an arrow. A barbaric stone; a pre-historic” (68). Again, the reader sees an interest displayed by a character in the pre-historic history of humans as well as yet another definition of what a savage must be. The flint that has been shaped for an arrow conveys a sense of violence. The arrow would have been used to hunt or for conflict purposes. The notion of the arrow being used for conflict purposes draws a close parallel with the savages and the people of England and all across Europe who are currently preparing for

another war. After encountering the arrow, Giles comes upon a snake “choked with a toad in its mouth” and proceeds to step on them. “The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him” (69). Giles’s outburst is one that demonstrates no thought, and no reason, only a yearning for relief. The reader has been aware of Giles’s frustration since his arrival at Pointz Hall. “And he came into the dining-room looking like a cricketer...though he was enraged. Had he not read, in the morning paper, in the train, that sixteen men had been shot, others prisoned, just over there, across the gulf, in the flat land which divided them from the continent?” (32). Giles’s rage stems from the manner in which the rest of his family is reacting to the war. They are busying themselves with pageants about the history of England when the future of England is at stake. He needs action, so he stomps on the toad and snake. However, Giles’s solution is to answer the violence between the toad and snake, something that is deemed “monstrous,” with unreasonable violence (69). This act can certainly be deemed as a savage action, again paralleling Giles with the savage who cut the arrow. Giles’s savagery is underscored by the fact that he feels no remorse for his actions and continues on to the barn. However, he is left with the stain of his actions on his white shoes.

As the audience reassembles for the second part of the pageant, Woolf gives the reader snatches of random conversations taking place amongst the audience, which highlight the question of whether or not the human race has evolved. The reader hears, “. . . Dressing up. That’s the great thing, dressing up . . . D’you think people change? Their clothes, of course . . . But I meant ourselves . . . Clearing out a cupboard, I found my father’s old top hat . . . But ourselves—do we change?” (83). Again, like with Isa’s moment earlier in the novel when she almost questions the definition of a savage, the speaker who asks the question is almost able to understand human nature and that it does not, in fact, change. However, the speaker’s question

goes unanswered. The person that he or she is having the conversation with does not grasp the concept of what the speaker is asking and begins to talk about his or her father's top hat. The same happens in another conversation that the reader is allowed to listen to. A speaker begins to discuss the plight of Jewish refugees by saying ". . . the Jews . . . People like ourselves, beginning life again . . . But it's always been the same . . . My old mother, who's over eighty can remember . . . Yes, she still reads without glasses" (84). Again, the reader has the feeling that the speaker is on the verge of some epiphany concerning the nature of the human race and how life has "always been the same," never progressing, when he or she is interrupted by someone changing the conversation to that of a lighter tone, demonstrating the inability of the audience to fully contemplate on the plight of the human race. Zwerdling remarks that, "By the time Woolf came to write *Between the Acts*, the concept of a gradual improvement in either history or in human relationships had been decisively rejected" (223). These snatches of conversation reflect that at least some of the characters are beginning to realize this, even if they are incapable of answering or fully understanding the weight of the questions they begin to ask.

Upon the conclusion of the first part of the skit, "Where There's a Will There's a Way," an occurrence similar to the almost realizations of Isa and the conversing audience members takes place in the audience when a voice cries out, "All that fuss about nothing!" (95). The initial tone of this remark is one of annoyance. However, when the crowd begins to laugh, the voice "stop[s]" (95). The reader no longer hears the voice speak, yet is told that the voice stops and that "the voice had seen" (95). Thus, it can be argued that the voice had come to symbolize the owner of the voice and that when the voice stops, it is the person who is actually stopping and seeing. The narrator goes on to say that "the voice had heard" (95), and that "Miss La Trobe behind her tree glowed with glory" (95). What the voice has seen or has heard is left ambiguous, but the

experience is enough to stun the voice or person into inactivity. It seems that the reader is finally able to witness an epiphany of one of the characters in the novel, even if the character is disembodied and nameless. The “fuss about nothing” reminds the reader, and perhaps the voice itself, about the trivial beginnings of The Great War along the impending war that will no doubt cause the same meaningless havoc in England as its predecessor. The idea that humanity does not progress, and that history does not change is therefore realized by the voice, if only for a moment. Miss La Trobe glows in glory at this realization and strives to continue the emotion. (Woolf 95). She shrieks at the chorus to sing louder, and for the first time since the play has begun, the chorus’s song is discernible, at least for a moment. The chorus’s song reiterates the consistency of human nature and the repetitiveness of its history in the lyrics, “Digging and delving . . . hedging and ditching, we pass . . . Summer and winter, autumn and spring return . . . All passes but we, all changes . . . but we forever remain the same” (95).

As the audience finally hears and begins to understand the meaning of the chorus’s song, the wind begins to blow loudly, and the “audience sat staring at the villagers, whose mouths opened, but no sound came” (96). The interruption of nature is interesting in this sense because there have been interruptions from the animals which have aided the humans. Harriet Blodgett points out that, “Nature may chance to help . . . , but it also blows away the words of the actors,” displaying the vulnerability of the human race to nature (28). Miss La Trobe begins to panic and the narrator tells us that “illusion had failed” (96). The idea of the failed illusion of the play embodies the feeling of the failed illusion of honor and nobility that was initially associated with The Great War. The novel *Between the Acts* represents an entire period in which people attempt to figure out what to do about a failed illusion. Miss La Trobe fears that the failed illusion of the play means death. However, Miss La Trobe’s failed illusion is saved when “the cows took up the



burden...In the very nick of time she lifted her . . . head and bellowed . . . From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow . . . It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment” (96). The presence of the “primeval voice” has been embodied by the repeated references to savagery and prehistoric history throughout the novel, and it is through their “primeval voice” that “cows annihilated the gap...and continued the emotion” (96), thus implying that illusions are the only thing that the progressive world can produce. Emotion comes from something prehistoric, something that has survived evolution and that humans share with the animals. Miss La Trobe exclaims, “Thank Heaven!” and the cows immediately “stopped; lowered their heads, and began browsing. Simultaneously the audience lowered their heads and read their programs” (96). Through this simultaneous action with the cattle, “the village audience loses its stretch of cultural "high ground" and encounters the prospect of humanity joining the herd” (Tromanhauser 67). The audience’s synchronization with the cattle signifies the continuity between animals and humans that Zwerdling refers to.

The ending of the novel encompasses the ending of the era as well. *Between the Acts* is commonly interpreted as being a metaphor representing the span of time between World War I and World War II. Giles and Isa are finally left alone together for the first time during the entire novel. The anger that both have suppressed, along with the pursuit of Mr. Haines and Mrs. Manresa, has lead up to this moment: the moment of impending conflict. “Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight...as the dog fox fights with the vixen” (Woolf 148). Here, again, a parallel is being drawn between the characters and animals. The fight that Giles is about to take part in with Isa is animalistic in nature. It is something that has become necessary for them. Then, as Isa lets her sewing drop, the reader is taken back into prehistoric times, thus completing the notion that nothing changes in history. “The house had lost its shelter.

It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among the rocks” (149). Although Woolf takes Isa and Giles back into prehistoric times, she also uses their conflict to represent current events by making their conflict the beginning of the play. “Then the curtain rose. They spoke” (149). Since the novel has acted as a metaphor for the era between World War I and World War II, one can assume that the beginning of the conflict between Isa and Giles, which is represented through the curtain rising, represents the beginning of World War II. Thus, by taking Isa and Giles back into prehistoric times and comparing their conflict to one that is animalistic in nature, while simultaneously using their conflict to represent the beginning of World War II, Woolf insinuates that the regression into savagery and animalistic behavior is complete at the beginning of World War II.

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