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## Havens and Horrors: The Island Landscape

Eight years after the first printing of Amerigo Vespucci's chronicles of the New World, Sir Thomas More circulated a fiction called *Utopia*, his fantasy of a perfect society carved out of the sheer potential of wilderness. It was the theoretical counterpoint to the legal, aristocratic, and monarchical system that encumbered English life in the early sixteenth century. More set his utopia in America on a large crescent-shaped island with hundreds of miles of harbored coast and niches for wisely governed city-states dispersed throughout the territory. With many of the features that have come to distinguish literary utopian communities from the ones in which we live—nonhierarchy, land stewardship, usufruct, pleasant labor, craft rather than industry, free will and choice within wise civic guidelines, and the absence of jealousy and rancor—More blazed a path that later writers like William Morris (*News from Nowhere*, 1890), B. F. Skinner (*Walden Two*, 1948), and Aldous Huxley (*Island*, 1962) would follow toward the unrealized ideals of their respective ages. *Utopia* means nowhere, and its geographical placement on an island is inextricable from connotations of isolation, remoteness, fantasy, alternative reality, substitution, inversion, doubling, and mutating, all of which can take radically positive or negative forms.

In July 2011, a crazed Norwegian man adopted the false identity of a policeman and boated to the island of Utoya, where the governing labor party's children were attending a summer camp. For 90 minutes, he shot campers mercilessly and indiscriminately before he was apprehended by Norwegian Special Forces. Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg lamented that Utoya was "my childhood paradise that yesterday was

transformed into Hell" ("Begging"). The alternative reality of utopian Utoya, island of the summering youths, was with a madman's rampage flipped to a horror scene that will long mark that spot as desecrated, a haunted place. In analyses of the police response, Norwegian authorities were criticized for the slow intervention. It became clear that despite Utoya's proximity to the capital city Oslo (only 40 kilometers), it was the camp's isolation across 500 meters of Lake Tyrifjorden that slowed the authorities, the first of whom were swamped in a leaky boat. Utoya was not like the mainland half a kilometer away. It was a utopia designated for pleasure and growth that lapsed into a dystopia where victims had no way to defend themselves from the predatory gunman. This island scenario has often been the conceit of horror films, but rarely does it emerge with such ghoulish clarity in our real world. Life does, at times, imitate art. That danger intensifies as unstable individuals emulate fictional horror plots to pursue their own demented visions of heroism.

In their bipolarity, islands are an ideal figure of thought for studying extremes of pleasure and horror in literature, film, and television. Islands are metonyms for modes of fantasy thinking where extremes that diverge from the mainland quotidian may take hold. Islands' clear circumscription and limited scope make them microcosms: small worlds that can be further down-scaled to the level of the human body or even the cranium, and up-scaled to the level of continents and the globe. They lend themselves to fiction because they are the ideal ground for thought experiments in human behavior, as in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, but islands provide more than fictional grounds for alternative realities.

Though *terroir* is an agricultural term, it might also apply to the character of islands that are unique in species composition and other serendipities of evolutionary ecology. They are biologically dynamic spaces with empirical significance. Their alternative modes provide case studies that inform ecology, evolution, psychology, and sociology. This essay will explore islands by looking at how their eco-evolutionary significance facilitates the psychological thriller effect in fiction, often with a teasing proximity between comedy and horror, utopia and dystopia. My analysis will draw from literature including Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (c. 1611), Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939), and Crichton's *The Lost World* (1995). I'll also consider islands in television programs *Gilligan's Island* (1964–67) and *Lost* (2004–10). Though this list is nowhere near exhaustive, it represents the diverse ways in which island fictions stimulate emotive opposites using embedded scientific conceits of evolution and ecology.

The gap between mainland and island species was greatly complicated by European exploration and colonialism. Oceanic islands were havens for sailors, and their itinerant landings changed the islands' biological communities as sailors introduced domestic species both for their convenience and by accident. We now call such introduced types invasive species. Islands were the first experimental plots to show environmental degradation at the hands of colonists and their cohort of introduced species. Though the microbes, fungi, and pests such as rats were accidental baggage, the European ships also brought goats, horses, beasts of burden, and the full complement of Western staple crops. Islands were also used for intensive cultivation of native species: exotic fruits, spices, and medicines were increasingly in demand in Europe. Small isolated islands such as Mauritius in the Indian Ocean and St. Helena in the South Atlantic, which in precolonial times were protected by a thick skin of mature forest, were denuded and converted to pasture and farmland. Conversions from this state of wilderness to a combed, controlled, and productive system of agriculture were instrumental to colonial ideology and the Enlightenment desire to improve nature by taming it. These directed changes constituted a symbolic shift from the wild island toward the cultivated garden. The two converse symbols found a home in the colonial conscience: the island itself served as a suggestive metonym for many systems (the entire world, self-regulating nature, monarchical society, national economy), and the garden embodied a controlled network of productive species owing its existence to educated and hard-working colonists (Grove 14). They carried redemptive potential at the religious level as a scattered series of possible new Edens, so the original wild dystopian state of an island might be worked toward the utopian garden.

Colonial islands offered the first semi-controlled laboratories to ecological science. They were most instructive when their systems reacted drastically to the disequilibria introduced by colonial cultivation. Ironically, human energy directed specifically at "improving" nature from an untamed state toward a Biblical garden, pious as well as economical labor, was the sort of artificial control that often replaced one scheme of wilderness with another, more frightening one: deforestation, runoff, soil impoverishment, and the extirpation of native species at the tooth and claw of invasive ones.

Islands, by their isolation and small area, tend toward two diverging evolutionary conditions. In the first scenario, they are havens: species-poor spaces with low competition pressure and high resource availability. This relaxed habitat crafts endemic species that lack defenses, including weapons, speed, agility, and wariness. In the haven scenario, a few lucky colonizers settle into many open niches and enjoy a relaxed existence mostly free from competition. In evolutionary history, these infrequent acts of colonization are usually happenstances of oceanic currents and hurricanes. Their chance nature explains why isolated oceanic islands so often possess a unique and unrepresentative sample of mainland species, and island life forms rapidly diverge from their ancestors because evolution occurs faster in small populations. Endemic species often show a high degree of adaptation to a particular kind of food source, such as the array of beak shapes tailored to individual finch species in the Galapagos archipelago. The island's isolation is a great protective moat from the roiling larger world.

The second scenario is less paradisiacal. The limited niche space and isolation make islands high-stress environments where there is keen predation pressure and resource competition. The low populations and limited gene pools on islands make species especially vulnerable to environmental changes such as extreme weather and new species introductions. Island biogeography has benefitted from these natural laboratories because they demonstrate how small populations with limited gene pools rapidly evolve (due to selection pressures and random drift) to become specialized to their unique environment, and how their dominion on the island can so rapidly be endangered by invasive species and natural disasters. When conditions become unfavorable on islands, there is no retreat to kindlier hinterlands — there is only adaptation within very limited parameters, or extinction. Unstable conditions are, we might say, horror scenarios for vulnerable island species.

Haven-to-horror is often a continuum in evolutionary history. The extinct Dodo bird is a classic example of how haven islands can flip over to horrorscapes. The Dodo was a flightless bird endemic to the

Scholars in the humanities may use evolutionary ecology and island biogeography to elucidate our strange fascination with islands in literary fiction. Haven islands are blank slates that beg for the marooned protagonist to re-write his social or personal history more favorably and to find latent talents, as we see in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gilligan's Island*. They are comedic lands of second chances, controlled utopias with adequate *Survivor* challenges to keep episodic plots on the move. Even utopias may occasionally have stormy horizons and shadowy retreats where fear teases comedic complacency and the audience is excited with the sense of shallow danger.

On the other hand, horror islands are mysteriously occupied by some unknown other—a figure of blind terror that gradually becomes a catalyst of horror. Protagonists compete with this other for limited space, resources, control, and the mere right to exist without victimization. On horror islands, villainous fauna is presented to the audience first as unknown, then as violent, unpredictable, and master of the terrain. The conceit of island isolation flips from idyllic protection from a corrupt mainland to complete vulnerability in a fearsome alternative reality. The initial comedy of survival itself drains into terror, the “what IS there out there?” and finally into horror once the true nature of the island emerges. At its best effect, the island is more than an exotic stage hosting the drama; it is a character of its own. Notably, in both ecological history and in fiction, the underdog protagonist with whom the audience sympathizes can be either native to the island or the new arrival. It all depends on who commands the narrative arc.