

BREAKING NEW BARRIERS:
A STUDY OF HOW NATURAL BOUNDARIES USURP DIVINE BOUNDARIES IN
MODERN POST-APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

By
COLIN FRANCISCO PEDRON

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree

With Honors in
English

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

DECEMBER 2016

Approved by:

Dr. John Paul Hurh

Department of English

Abstract

In recent years, science fiction novelists have increasingly focused on how humanity spells its own doom. This raises the question of what human decisions result in such disaster. My research operates under the premise that authors tend to point to broken boundaries as the root cause of human self-destruction. Human defiance of divine barriers has been a portent of doom in western literature since biblical times. In science fiction, however, we find a more secular iteration of this parable. In God's stead, Nature fills in. This research argues that natural boundaries currently fill the same role that divine boundaries did in prior eras.

This project performs a close study of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* in order to demonstrate this concept. Atwood depicts a society overrun with both nihilism and human hubris. While not entirely neglecting the old notion of divine boundaries, Atwood creates a world in which natural boundaries now largely determine human safety. On the other hand, the violation of these boundaries leads to inevitable self-destruction.

“Why is it he feels some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed? How much is too much, how far is too far?”

-Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, pg. 206

Introduction: The Rise of the Apocalyptic Narrative

Many groups throughout history have feared scientific advancement. Galileo was labeled a heretic by the Christian church for pointing to the Sun as the center of the solar system. Laborers in industrial England attempted to destroy new factory machines for fear of being replaced by them. Titans of the American railroad industry foresaw their doom in the automobile. Multiple religious groups discounted the advent of the field of evolutionary biology due to the challenge that it presented to their belief systems. Stories such as these were the reason that playwright Matthew Maeterlinck stated, “At every crossroads on the path that leads to the future, tradition has placed 10,000 men to guard the past.” Despite the protests of individuals and fringe groups, however, the benefits of scientific progress inevitably overwhelmed the dissenting parties in each of the above examples and in many more throughout history. Throughout history, scientific progress has become widely accepted as a benefit to society.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, however, scientific advancement began to affect vast swaths of humanity in short periods of time. When mechanical production blossomed, humanity lost entire generations to machine guns in the World Wars. When physicists split the atom, Japan saw the death of two cities in nuclear explosions. When factories harnessed the power of fossil fuels, glaciers began to diminish worldwide. Each major leap forward in science began to produce collateral damage in some other aspect of our existence. Our social tolerance of scientific advancement was wounded.

Out of this injury leapt the modern apocalypse novel. In this new narrative, humankind was the greatest existential threat to humanity. Gone were the traditional phobias exhibited in ancient apocalypse stories, such as the dread of the beast, the wariness of the elements, and the fear of God. With their zoos, people tamed the beast. With their power to raise and lower global temperatures, humans controlled the elements. And finally, with their ability to take thousands of lives at the drop of a bomb, humanity became God. This intoxicating power came hand-in-hand with paralyzing fear, and authors began to produce content reflecting what many assumed would be the inevitable outcome of continued scientific advancement. The old tale concerning the four horsemen, a sea of blood, and the righteous wrath of God¹ lost prominence as authors began to imagine humanity freezing to death in nuclear winter,² perishing under the calculated brutality of artificial intelligence,³ or consuming itself through virus-based zombies.⁴

One central trend of science fiction, as seen both in classics such as *Frankenstein*⁵ and in modern television shows such as *Black Mirror*,⁶ seems to be this: if humanity attempts to play God, it will fail. However, modern science fiction's secular trend causes the use of the word "God" to become increasingly elusive. We find instead that Nature often serves as a stand-in for God in modern apocalyptic science fiction novels. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is an excellent example of this, and her novel will serve as the main focus of this thesis. Atwood's cynical characters work within a dystopian, technocratic projection of modern society in order to create a new story of human transgression. Using the philosophy of nihilism as a general undercurrent, Atwood depicts a world in which humanity has washed away the secular bounds of

¹ *The Book of Revelations*, New King James Version

² *The Last Ship*, William Brinkley. 1988.

³ *The Terminator*, James Cameron. 1984.

⁴ *World War Z*, Max Brooks. 2006.

⁵ Written by Mary Shelley. 1818. A scientist learns to create life but unwittingly brings forth a monster.

⁶ Created by Charlie Brooker. 2011. A futuristic society deals with the social cost of technological progress.

nature in order to become its own undoing. Specifically, we find in *Oryx and Crake* that Nature supplants God as the arbiter of humanity's boundaries.

Chapter 1 - The Anthropocene paradox

A distinction has historically been made between Nature, God, and Humanity. In modern times, humans have given themselves the distinct honor of being included in the name of a new geological era, the Anthropocene (Amos). The *anthrop-* portion of this title conveys the idea that humans are the most critical part of global change. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 of this essay, this implies that humans somehow stand outside of the natural order of things. However, recent philosophy implies that this is train of thought is not necessarily true on a universal scale. An idea is becoming increasingly popular that we are as much a part of nature as any other Earth-grown species, and that it would be pretentious to think of ourselves as anything other than natural.

In this context, the argument has been made that humanity's destruction would be merely another cycle of nature. That is to say, the globe and the universe would continue to spin with or without us. This is the crux of the idea put forth by authors such as Timothy Morton⁷ in the modern field of thought known as *object-oriented ontology*. In context of the scale of the universe, human existence is not profound. Snowman seems to reflect this notion when, on a post-human planet, he makes the following observation: "After everything that's happened, how can the world still be so beautiful? Because it is." The passage continues with his observation that, "From the offshore towers come the avian shrieks and cries that sound like nothing human" (372). Through quotes and ideas such as these, the temporality of human life is placed in the

⁷ Author of *Hyperobjects*

context of universal constancy. Atwood seems to concur with Morton in this rather nihilistic viewpoint. Each of the authors would probably agree that humans have a delusion that, because they are sentient, they possess an intrinsic importance in the scheme of the universe.

Nonetheless, each author refutes this delusion repeatedly.

Despite humanity's damaging effect on Nature, it is eventually Nature that prevails. In Snowman's post-apocalyptic world, all human animosity is wiped out. Although this seems like the result of an outside force (i.e. Crake's bioweapon), the argument could be made that this is just a part of Nature's cycle. Nature certainly had no trouble resuming dominance in the novel following humanity's extinction. Snowman notes that, "The buildings that didn't burn or explode are still standing, though the botany is thrusting itself through every crack. Given time it will fissure the asphalt, topple the walls, push aside the roof. . . . It won't be long before all visible traces of human habitation will be gone" (221). This gradual elimination of human influence causes the earth to resume its function in spite of humanity's absence.

Throughout the story, all characters are plagued by Crake's doctrine of nihilism. As we will see in Chapter 4 of this essay, most characters share a pessimistic idea of humanity. Crake, however, takes this pessimism to the next level by playing God. Humanity's disruption of Nature contributes to the sense of nihilism in this novel. However, Crake's God complex allows him to take on the mantle of destroying humanity in a Flood-style act of annihilation.⁸ As such, Crake's actions intricately weave together the stories of God, Nature, and Humanity at once. Though humanity violates Nature's boundaries, humanity receives Crake's version of God's punishment as a result. In this way, we see echoes of ancient theological apocalypse narratives even in modern secular works of science fiction.

⁸ Chapters 6-9 in the Book of Genesis, King James Version

Chapter 2: The Violation of Divine Boundaries

In many cases, science fiction authors imagine that humanity destroys itself as a direct result of its own decisions. In Chapter 4 of this essay, we will see how Atwood paints a complete picture of the moral, ethical, and technological decisions of humanity and their consequences upon the species itself. In ancient apocalypse tales, such as the Bible, these decisions often violated divine barriers. Atwood follows Orwell's example in exempting religion from the narrative almost entirely. At face value, this would seem to imply that religion is unimportant to the narrative. However, a closer look reveals that the exemption of religion from Atwood's society is itself an important statement. Its stark absence suggests that Atwood is creating a setting that highlights the significance of human self-determination. Atwood's use of a secular, merit-based society as the backdrop to *Oryx and Crake* serves a very specific function in determining the actions of the characters. Her vision of the near future reflects our own society's current trust in itself as the highest power on the planet. Essentially, the absence of a deity clears the way for humans to create their own fate.

Furthermore, Atwood's novel is not entirely secular. The advent of agnosticism in modern literature is tempered with the fact that much, if not all, of western literature is founded in biblical ideology. As such, we still see biblical references, allusions, and parallels in select areas of Atwood's novel. Atwood depicts Crake as having a conflicted relationship with religion a handful of times throughout the course of the novel. His character is largely cynical and analytical. Nonetheless, he does reference God directly in several instances. His references are almost conspicuous in their rarity, and yet they are potent enough to be noteworthy in a study of his ideological motivations. One such reference occurs when Crake and Jimmy engage in this dialogue:

“Those walls and bars are there for a reason,” said Crake. “Not to keep us out, but to keep them in. Mankind needs barriers in both cases.”

“Them?”

“Nature and God.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in God,” said Jimmy.

“I don’t believe in Nature either,” said Crake. “Or not with a capital N.” (206)

This conversation implies that Crake is guided by the notion that loyalty to Nature and God (as opposed to nature and god) as deities is illogical. Instead, Crake chooses to acknowledge both God and Nature as forces that are present in the world, yet not important. Even before the reader finds out about his intended genocide, one finds that Crake has the inclination to disregard the traditional boundaries that humanity might encounter when confronting God or Nature.

Crake exhibits his connection to religion once again at a later point in the novel through his creation of the Paradise compound. Katherine Snyder points out the parallels that this compound has to the biblical Genesis story when she notes that

“The dome is a kind of man-made Eden, a highly controlled environment in which these new Adams and Eves were kept in an enforced state of innocence, cordoned off from all knowledge deemed by their human maker to be confusing, risky, or otherwise contaminating” (Snyder 475).

Crake’s creation of a modern Eden highlights a human-crafted Genesis story rather than that found in religious texts. As such, we might conclude that Crake both denies God and tries to supplant God.

Subsequently, we find that Crake’s refrigerator magnets (a recurring element in the novel) take on the same level of defiance against a divine creator. While observing the magnets

at Crake's house, Jimmy observes one that states, "Where God is, Man is not" (301). Although this statement is rather vague by itself, it gains clarity in the context of the rest of the novel. It seems to imply that God's presence precludes the flourishing of Man, and vice versa. Therefore, Crake seems to think that the very nature of his existence and activity as a human must exclude God from the equation.

An additional fridge magnet clarifies this sense of defiance even further. It states that, "To stay human is to break a limitation" (301). This implies that humanity is inherently oriented to defy certain limitations. However, it is unclear what exactly those limitations are and, more importantly, what controlling body sets those limitations. Given Crake's own prior statements, however, it seems clear that these governing bodies of limitation might be God, or Nature, or both.

These statements and actions all seem to dialogue with traditional western morality, which is largely founded upon Christian values. Most fascinating of all perhaps is the Crakers' gradual build towards deification of Oryx, Crake, and Snowman throughout the novel. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this essay, Crake attempts to remove all vestiges of human behavior that lead to division when creating the Crakers. However, the Crakers defy Crake's genetic engineering when they begin to fabricate deities. When making note of this behavior, Jimmy remarks that,

"Crake thought he'd done away with all that, eliminated what he called the G-spot in the brain. *God is a cluster of neurons*, he'd maintained. It had been a difficult problem, though: take out too much in that area and you got a zombie or a psychopath. But these people were neither" (157).

This passage shows us that the human spirit is bound with a fascination for the divine. Although Crake attempts to eliminate the boundary between the human and the divine by becoming a creator of secular creatures, the Crakers themselves ironically attempt to reconstruct this historically significant mentality.

Chapter 3: The Violation of Natural Boundaries

Our modern society's newfound concern for the global environment (e.g. the discussion around climate change) is largely based around humanity's existential concerns. The fact that we are a species dependent upon the earth (and not the other way around) raises the question of our self-interest. It could be argued that the concern for the earth is merely a natural consequence of humanity's concern for itself. Why else would we as a species be willing to abandon earth in search of new suitable habitats?⁹ This is reflected in recent news headlines, where we see a growing scientific consensus that we are now officially entering the Anthropocene, a new geological era that is both defined by humans and caused by humans (Amos). That is to say, humanity is now conceding that its activities have altered the planet on a geological scale. It could be said that much of humanity exhibits a truly *anthropocentric* mentality, which can be contrasted with *ecocentric* viewpoint idealized by those concerned with the intrinsic value of the environment.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* explores what it means to be human in the context of the end of our species. With the instruments of nihilism, genetically modified organisms, and artificial plagues, Atwood thoroughly tests the limits of humankind's intrinsic value. She does so by driving the reader to acknowledge that humanity's status as the most intelligent species does

⁹ A strong case was made by Steven Hawking, an influential physicist, for space colonization in early 2015

not necessarily make it all-important. In fact, Atwood degrades the presumed value of humanity to the point where it starts to seem like the least beneficial species on our planet. Rather than solely argue for the intrinsic value of nature, as many environmentalist novels do, Atwood instead attempts to degrade the value of humanity itself. She does so in a way that implies that our struggle for existence is not superior to any other species' struggle. Atwood demonstrates the ecocentric idea that the world can and will continue to exist without humanity.

This concept forces humans to evaluate their own purpose as a species. In the novel *Oryx and Crake*, many humans come up empty in their search. Consider this commentary made by one of the cynical artists that Jimmy, the protagonist, encounters during his childhood:

Human society . . . was a sort of monster, its main by-products being corpses and rubble. It never learned, it made the same cretinous mistakes over and over, trading short-term gain for long-term pain. It was like a giant slug eating its way relentlessly through all other bioforms on the planet, grinding up life on earth and shitting it out the backside in the form of pieces of manufactured and soon-to-be-obsolete plastic junk (243).

This dramatic analogy condemns the role of the human race on earth. More importantly, it shows us an instance of a speaker placing himself outside the perspective of his own species. That is to say, the artist speaks of the human race as if he is not an active member of it. By stepping outside of his species, the artist is able to disregard the value that human actions hold for humans.

Instead, this 'outsider' perspective compels him to critique human actions solely in terms of their damage to the planet.

In contrast to his artistic friends, Jimmy finds his fulfillment in human society. Later, when he becomes the presumed sole survivor of Crake's global bioattack, Jimmy finds that he is

lost without social structure. Atwood shows how his social dependence stands out in stark contrast to his best friend's cold nihilism. After Crake's nihilism prompts his destruction of both himself and most of humanity, Jimmy changes his name to Snowman. Snowman's subsequent longings for humanity represent the feelings of a layman with whom readers can relate, while Crake's actions represent the furthest extreme of a pessimistic worldview.

Oryx and Crake blurs the lines between humanity and nature further than many other post-apocalyptic novels. Prior to the apocalypse, humans begin acting like animals in the sense that they act frequently upon violent and carnal urges. Corporations create diseases in order to profit off the cures (211). Competing business interests utilize biological warfare against one another (19). Throughout the novel, Jimmy and Crake frequently view child porn and acts of bestiality. Atwood attempts to demonstrate that our society is ultimately very primitive in nature underneath all of its attempted high-mindedness. This idea contributes to the undercurrent of nihilism that runs throughout this novel among the protagonists. However, although the protagonists of this novel reject the value of the human character, they do not entirely forget it. In fact, while reflecting on the fall of society, Snowman laments:

When did the body first set out on its own adventures? Snowman thinks; after having ditched its old travelling companions, the mind and the soul, for whom it had once been considered a mere corrupt vessel or else a puppet acting out their dramas for them, or else bad company; leading the other two astray. It must have got tired of the soul's constant nagging and whining and the anxiety-driven intellectual web-spinning of the mind, distracting it whenever it was getting its teeth into something juicy or its fingers into something good. It had dumped the other two back there somewhere, leaving them stranded in some damp sanctuary

or stuffy lecture hall while it made a beeline for the topless bars, and it had dumped culture along with them: music and painting and poetry and plays.

Sublimation, all of it; nothing but sublimation, according to the body. Why not cut to the chase? (85)

Through this line of thought, Snowman seems to express regret at the loss of human high-mindedness. Humanity's primal nature overcomes its ideals. This abandonment of ideals seems to express the destruction of a natural human boundary. That is to say, high-mindedness had previously been the factor that humans felt separated them from the rest of nature. As will be seen in greater detail in Chapter 4, Atwood spends much time proving that humans have violated this natural barrier. Humans' barbaric actions towards one another represent a loss of humanity. Perhaps it is for this reason that Crake engineers a new breed of humanity to exist after the apocalypse that he creates.

Crakers

After the apocalypse, humanity all but vanishes, and the Crakers emerge. The Crakers, created by Crake in order to fulfill his own ideal for humanity, exhibit multiple animal-like traits. Unlike the pre-apocalyptic humans, however, the Crakers exhibit animalism not in morality but in physical characteristics. This is to say, the humans of Jimmy's world have animal-like violence toward one another, but the Crakers of Snowman's world literally become animal-like in their genetic code.

Atwood presents us with a species of human that has been ostensibly filtered of all of the imperfections of Homo sapiens. When viewing the Crakers (also known as Paradise people), Jimmy observes that,

“What had been altered here was nothing less than the ancient primate brain. Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesses. For instance, racism - or, as they referred to it in Paradise, pseudospeciation - had been eliminated in the model group, merely by switching the bonding mechanism: the Paradise people simply did not register skin colour (305).

After eliminating the root cause of racism, Crake attempts to cut out sectarianism. Jimmy goes on to note that,

Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it. Since they were neither hunters nor agriculturalists hungry for land, there was not territoriality: the king-of-the-castle hard-wiring that had plagued humanity had, in them, been unwired. . . . They ate nothing but leaves and grass and roots and a berry or two; thus their foods were plentiful and always available (305).

Each of these transformations is projected as a highly calculated excision of the roots of each potential social issue in the new people. Crake even attempts to remove sexual competitiveness in the new breed of humanity, as Jimmy notes when he states that “Their sexuality was not a constant torment to them, not a cloud of turbulent hormones: they came into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than man” (305). Crake attempts to pre-emptively eliminate every element that could ever cause one human to disagree with another.

However, one major complication eventually emerges concerning the Crakers. As seen in the most recent quotation, Jimmy begins to wonder whether this new breed even merits the label of “human.” There is undoubtedly an unsettling animalistic element in the new humans. In order

to further their own adaptability to their environment, they receive genetics pulled from species across the entire animal kingdom. This is especially evident in their ability to heal one another through their cat-like purring (156) and in their bovine-like consumption of their own feces (158). Interestingly, in Crake's attempt to remove the primality from human nature, he makes a breed that is more physically primal than ever. The creation of the Crakers seems to cross yet another natural human boundary.

Pigoons

On the opposite side of the spectrum of animal-human blending, we find the pigoon. Atwood presents us with the pigoon as the post-apocalyptic world's most discernable antagonist for Snowman. Pigoons are described as creatures used to grow human organs for harvest. Atwood's pigoons represent a tip-of-the-hat to Orwellian literature¹⁰ as well as an ominously accurate prediction of the future. Concerning the former point, we can find a parallel between Atwood's intelligent pigoons and the anthropomorphic pig-rulers depicted in Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Concerning the latter, one merely needs to browse today's headlines to find a BBC report on the possible future use of pigs for human organ growth.¹¹ Although Atwood may have created pigoons as mere satire when writing the novel, her ideas are already beginning to apply to the non-fictional world as well.

Pigoons and pigs become a recurring motif throughout *Oryx and Crake*. We first see pigs highlighted when Oryx describes her experience as a child slave. While she and other captive children are on the journey from one captor to another, they pause to relieve themselves in an open latrine. This humiliating experience is augmented by the presence of a pig across the latrine. The pig only "watched them while they squatted" (125). Rather than try to harm the

¹⁰ George Orwell's *Animal Farm* contains a satirical depiction of Stalinism in the animal hierarchy of a farm.

¹¹ Fergus Walsh, BBC. "US bid to grow human organs for transplant inside pigs"

children, it seems merely to empathize with them through shared circumstances. At this point in the novel, the pig serves as a reflection of the low value of a child slave. As such, it exhibits the degradation of human worth.

While initially depicted as the passive victims of human experimentation, pigoons eventually come to embody human wickedness itself. We see them doggedly pursue Snowman throughout his journey to the compound in the same way that his own past and humanity's past seem to ceaselessly pursue him as well. By association and by action, pigs become synonymous with human evil. When Jimmy is about to be attacked, he describes them in this way: "A brainy and omnivorous animal, the pigoon. Some of them may even have human neocortex tissue growing in their crafty, wicked heads" (235). Jimmy's description of pigoons' similarities to human nature continue when he later observes that, "if they'd had fingers they'd have ruled the world" (267). In many ways, the pigoons are a social critique of human behavior. Even more powerful, however, is the fact that humans intentionally create them. In this way, pigoons represent an additional natural boundary that humans seem to have intentionally violated.

Blended Identities

Perhaps what the Crakers and pigoons best represent is a compromise of humanity and nature. Humans becomes animal, and animals human. We see this same trope throughout other pieces of classic literature and modern film such as *Lord of the Flies*,¹² *The Island of Dr. Moreau*,¹³ and *Zootopia*.¹⁴ The implication is that this process of blending is unnatural. However, this raises an even more important question: What is considered "natural" behavior for

¹² Author: William Golding. 1954. This fictional novel shows how civilized children turn to violence when abandoned on an island.

¹³ Author: H. G. Wells. 1896. This fictional novel uses the emerging theory of atavism to show how animals might be turned to humans and later revert back to their animal nature.

¹⁴ Directors: Byron Howard, Rich Moore. 2016. This fictional film shows how civilized, anthropomorphic animals revert back to a carnivorous state

humanity? Atwood's answer to this question can be found in the unhealthy behaviors that she depicts in humanity throughout her novel's three timelines. These aberrant behaviors are what most powerfully break the natural boundaries of this novel.

Chapter 4: The Triple Narrative

In recent years, critical interest in *Oryx and Crake* has been largely focused on the sexual/psychological trauma exhibited by the novel's characters (Snyder), the power politics at play in the novel (Dominguez), or the question of transhuman/posthuman nature raised by the existence of the Crakers (Pordzik). My work highlights one area that has gone largely unexplored in this novel: the characters' struggles against both the theological and the secular. Through the triple timeline that exists in *Oryx and Crake*, we see the emergence of four central narratives. These narratives are representative of distinct facets of the human struggle against God and Nature. The narratives also document humanity's struggle against nihilistic thought. Tellingly, humanity is defeated in all cases.

Rather than exclusively view *Oryx and Crake* as a warning story about protecting the environment, one can also observe it to be a thorough evaluation of the value of human existence. *Oryx and Crake* is ultimately a tale of self-destruction, and Atwood highlights human character as being the most important factor in humanity's demise. Four central protagonists -- Jimmy, Oryx, Crake, and Snowman -- perform the function of representing human character in this novel. One timeline follows Jimmy, an idealistic wordsmith whose best friend, Crake, attempts to recreate the world through the elimination of humanity. Another follows the life of Oryx, a mutual lover of Jimmy and Crake who spends most of her childhood as a sex slave. The

third timeline documents the travails of Snowman, the post-apocalyptic alter ego of Jimmy and the presumed sole survivor of Crake's completed genocide.

The issue of human character is confronted from multiple angles in the novel. Crake and Snowman each seem to resign to the aimlessness and counter-productivity of human life. Oryx represents optimism and purity in the story while simultaneously becoming tarnished by the actions of those around her. Snowman's pre-apocalyptic self, Jimmy, stands apart from the other three with his stubborn brand of idealism. The principal characters' actions and reactions throughout the novel help to expose the true character of humanity as a whole. Each timeline in which these characters operate exhibits the violation of some kind of natural or divine boundary by humanity.

Timeline 1: The World Reflected in Oryx

Repeatedly, we see humanity violate its high-minded natural boundaries of basic morality through its violations of Oryx herself. Although Oryx is something of a chimera as an independent character, her actions and words consistently serve to highlight the moral and immoral decisions of those around her. At certain points in the story, Oryx's malleability and passiveness reflect the depravity of what is done to her. In other moments, her resilience and defiance exhibit the power of the human spirit. As an intermittent character with a flexible role, Oryx is well-suited to give us varying snapshots of the state of humanity throughout the course of the novel. Each of her roles, personalities, actions, and reactions reveals a different aspect of the human condition.

Oryx's character seems to transcend classic boundaries of time and space. Her timeline weaves in and out of the other narratives, and her personality is perhaps the most inscrutable of those presented in the story. This allows her to play an unusual and nearly mystical role in this

novel. Although the protagonists intersect with Oryx's timeline at several points throughout the novel, she is very rarely identifiable as a single physical entity. In childhood, she is one of a litany of pornographic images for Jimmy and Crake. In adulthood, she becomes a lover to both Jimmy and Crake, and yet she never seems to truly belong to either one of them. After her death, she transcends physical existence to become a ghostly part of Snowman's imagination and constant voice in his consciousness. Additionally, her personality is not easy to classify. Oryx alternately exhibits defiance, malleability, passiveness, and resilience at various points throughout the story.

In general, Oryx's brutal childhood story illustrates the cruelty of humanity. At a young age, she is sold into slavery for profit by her mother. After a harrowing journey through the human trafficking industry, she eventually becomes enveloped in the internet pornography business. Her captors manipulate her mentally and physically in the most brutal ways imaginable. However, the subtext demonstrates that her entire predicament results first and foremost from the demand placed on the industry by the viewers of child pornography. Through the casual internet browsing habits of protagonists such as Jimmy and Crake, the viewing of child pornography is shown to be commonplace in the world of *Oryx and Crake* (90). It is implied that, without the intense demand created by the viewers, child sex slavery would not be so prevalent. As such, Atwood demonstrates that a vast demographic of society is culpable for the cruelty that Oryx experiences.

Jimmy and Crake view pornographic images of children on a consistent basis throughout the novel. This leads to their first sighting of Oryx online, who haunts Jimmy by making looking directly into the camera during one of Jimmy and Crake's viewing sessions (91). Importantly, they rarely question whether their actions are moral or ethical. In Atwood's projection of the

future, live executions, exploitative pornography, bestiality, and snuff films propagate the internet. The only moment that Jimmy does doubt the rightness of his actions occurs when Oryx seems to make direct eye contact with him through the television screen (91). After that moment, however, Jimmy continues his behavior unabated. This near-complete absence of guilt on his part demonstrates the social normalization of exploitative behavior.

At several points in the novel, Jimmy reflects upon his viewing sessions of Oryx, executions, bestiality, and pornography in graphic detail. The casualness of his reflections stands out in sharp contrast to the brutal nature of their content:

So they'd roll a few joints and smoke them while watching the executions and the porn - the body parts moving around on the screen in slow motion, an underwater ballet of flesh and blood under stress, hard and soft joining and separation, groans and screams, close-ups of clenched eyes and clenched teeth, spurts of this or that. If you switched back and forth fast it all came to look like the same event.

Sometimes they'd have both things on at once, each on a different screen (85).

Atwood seems to place special emphasis on describing the carnal nature of the footage that Jimmy and Crake commonly view. Descriptions such as that above demonstrate the boys' desensitization to the brutality of what they are viewing. By displaying the boys' constant fascination with items such as murder, sex, and bestiality, the novel seems to remove the high-mindedness of humanity.

Oryx's presumed innocence highlights the cruelty of what is done to her throughout the novel. Overall, Oryx's presence seem to morally condemn the mother who sold her, the men who captured her, the boys who viewed her, and, by extension, the society that created all of them. By demoting humans to an animal level of carnal instinct, or rather, by revealing the

animal instinct within humans, Atwood discourages the notion that humanity holds some sort of superiority over the rest of nature.

Timeline 2: The Two-Tiered World of Jimmy

The social structure of the world of *Oryx and Crake* plays a large role in representing humanity's violation of ethical and theological boundaries. In her novel, Atwood constructs a world in which scientific prowess is the top determinant of social class. In this setting, American society consists of two distinct tiers. The intellectuals pertaining to the top socioeconomic class live in walled compounds. These are self-contained communities in which resources are plentiful, research is paramount, and direct interactions with the outside world are minimal. Those of lower socioeconomic status live outside the walled safety of the compounds in vast urban sprawls known derogatorily as *the pleeblands* (208). The pleebland occupants are only ever mentioned by the compound occupants in terms of how the former may be used, feared, or manipulated. Although Jimmy's story takes place primarily among the elites within various compounds, the vast majority of the rest of humanity is presumably contained within the impoverished pleeblands. In other words, Atwood envisions a fully realized American technocracy¹⁵ as the setting for the second timeline of *Oryx and Crake*. This technocracy plays an important function in the novel due to its potential to highlight extreme disparities in social class. The way in which the elites abuse the impoverished throughout the novel violates multiple ethical standards that human society currently holds. We see how personal interests take precedence over moral or religious interests to the point where humans will commit mass murder

¹⁵ government by technicians; specifically : management of society by technical experts – Merriam Webster

for corporate profit. The rejection of basic humane treatment of other people seems to represent the violation of a divine boundary.

Jimmy grows up in a world of boundless scientific advancement, especially in the field of biotechnology. Jimmy's world is presumably Atwood's extrapolation of the future of our own current world. Though it contains new structures, technologies, and socio-economic organization, Jimmy's dystopian society is intended to have an unsettling degree of resemblance to reality.

Jimmy imagines that books are one tool that humanity uses to elevate its worth as a species and, by extension, separate itself from Nature. As an eschewed wordsmith within a highly specialized community of compound-dwelling scientists, Jimmy stands alone as one of the sole proponents of arts and literature. Jimmy's defense of literature is depicted as desperate at times. While reflecting on his own course of education, he observes that, "What he was studying was considered – at the decision-making levels, the levels of real power – an archaic waste of time. Well then, he would pursue the superfluous as an end in itself. He would be its champion, its defender and preserver" (195). By Jimmy's own reckoning, literature is a defunct field that is not valued by his peers or his society. Nonetheless, Atwood seems to convey some sense of honor in Jimmy's esteem of literature amid a world of science-based power. Just as Guy Montag fights against the burning of books in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*,¹⁶ Jimmy refuses to accept the dismissal of literature by the rest of his society. Seemingly, Jimmy finds intrinsic value in the preservation of literature. Jimmy's defense of literature is eventually shown to be his attempt at the preservation of human history, intellect, and character. Atwood uses Jimmy's

¹⁶ Original publication date: 1953

literature-based idealism to counteract the science-based nihilism suggested by Jimmy's companion, Crake.

In sharp contrast to Jimmy, Crake disdains human exceptionalism. As a highly intelligent scientist within Jimmy's same timeline, Crake is an embodiment of the cynical and nihilistic thought that pervades this novel. The fact that he disdains human progress undermines the sense of separation from Nature that humans gain through their advancements. Through vague fridge magnets and depressing discourse, we find that the majority of Crake's resentment is directed at humanity itself. This same resentment of the human race is what eventually drives Crake to exterminate it. Although he carefully conceals his genocidal impulse until the final moment, it becomes clear throughout the novel that Crake nurtures an ever-evolving animosity towards his own species. He eventually adopts a highly nihilistic worldview (292). Unlike the other cynical characters of the story, however, Crake attempts to follow through on his worldview by physically enacting it. His nihilistic sentiment builds throughout the tale until it culminates in the destruction of the human race. That is to say, Crake fulfills his nihilism through human annihilation. Though his undertaking may seem like an extreme form of ecocentric behavior on one level, on another, we see that his simultaneous creation of the next generation of humans (the Crakers) points toward ultimately anthropocentric goals. Crake is interested in the survival of the human race, but he must destroy the current form of humanity to do so.

In the novel's final resolution, we see a blurring of the barrier of species mortality, the ultimate boundary that had previously separated humanity and Nature. In the climactic scene at the end of the novel, Jimmy uncovers Crake's plan to destroy humanity and then murders him because of it. Jimmy then almost immediately succumbs to the cold, scientific calculation so often practiced by the man he murdered. As he watches Crake's virus overtake the planet, Jimmy

somberly observes that, “the end of a species was taking place before his very eyes. Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species. How many legs does it have? *Homo sapiens* . . . joining the polar bear, the beluga whale, the onager, the burrowing owl, the long, long, list” (344). Jimmy’s emotional distance in this scene shows us that, just as the earth has been stripped of humanity, he has been stripped of his human character. Although the beginning of the tale shows us that Jimmy is filled with stubborn idealism, by the end of the novel we see that he has succumbed to cynicism as much as the rest of the characters. In his dark comment, he implies that humanity is no more than one extra link in the chain among the many species to exist and perish on earth throughout time.

Timeline 3: The Truth of Humanity According to Snowman

Snowman’s status as the sole survivor of a species extinction is a continual testament to the fact that humanity does not transcend Nature at all. In comparison to the other two, Snowman’s timeline is actually very limited in scope. His tale consists of a 5-day journey to restock his own supplies. The mission is fraught with mishaps and missteps on Snowman’s part, and he returns in a worse condition than that in which he departed. From the outset of the story, Snowman is woefully despondent, malnourished, and undersupplied. He is forced to cope with the idea that all of his former and future human connections are eliminated. This casts a shadow upon his own continued existence. It also adds a dark pallor to his continuous reflections upon the world of the past throughout the novel. He constantly evaluates and re-evaluates the significance of his former interpersonal interactions. Although he continues to survive physically, he loses sight of any value in his own life, even to the extent that he begins to think of himself as “a dead man” (359). Although the Earth remains, Snowman’s world has vanished.

Amid the toppled buildings, glowing rabbits, and crossbred human-animal species of Snowman's world, one begins to sense that scientific achievement and human high-mindedness did more harm to the world than good. Snowman is a hermit-like apocalypse survivor who exists in and travels throughout a world in ruins. Despite his vivid memories of a society at the pinnacle of scientific achievement, Snowman is left with nothing but piles of rubble and a heavily altered ecosystem. His only remaining companions are mutated animals and humans that were the products of genetic experiments. Through the struggles of Snowman, the sole post-apocalyptic protagonist of *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood shows us that human achievements are inherently worthless out of context.

Atwood shows us through Snowman that, without the scaffolding provided by society, individual humans are no more or less than primates attempting to survive. Snowman leads a rather beastly lifestyle and acts almost entirely out of self-preservation throughout *Oryx and Crake*. Although he comes from an educated past, his impulses, desires, and actions all reflect a primal worldview. Only when attempting to care for the Crakers or when reflecting upon his memories of the pre-apocalyptic world does Snowman seem to gain any sophistication in his thought processes. High-mindedness, goals, and ideals are all disposed of in a world containing just one human. Seemingly, the value that once was present in Snowman's existence was entirely dependent upon the concurrent existence of society. That is to say, Snowman's life was only meaningful in the context of other human lives.

This is not a new idea in our modern mentality. The impact of society on human worth is also reflected in a wide range of modern novels and films, such as the book *The Last Ship*¹⁷ or

¹⁷ Author: William Brinkley. 1998. A warship captain and his crew realize while at sea that they are among the sole survivors of a nuclear holocaust.

the film *Into the Wild*.¹⁸ According to this viewpoint, all human joy ultimately comes from shared experiences. Said another way, there is little possibility for fulfillment in a single human life when one loses the support of other people. In the same way, Snowman's former studies, acquaintances, and occupations all become worthless once there are no longer any other humans around to appreciate those achievements. Humans seem to find their value in one another.

In a rejection of the idealism that he exhibited prior to the apocalypse, Snowman follows Crake's path in undermining human exceptionalism. Snowman does so partly through his disparagement of self-help literature. One major part of Snowman's pre-apocalyptic life (i.e. his life as Jimmy) was the study of self-help literature. Snowman/Jimmy makes frequent references to the genre throughout the novel. After the apocalypse, however, Snowman does so in a manner that cynically undermines the entire concept of self-help. This is particularly noticeable when he reflects on the dichotomy between motivational speech and brutal reality. In one dramatic scene, Snowman calls attention to the inexorable decay of his own body. After recalling self-help lectures that call for one to "grow as a person," Snowman has an outburst in which he shouts, "I haven't grown as a person Look at me! I've shrunk! My brain is the size of a grape!" (237). At every turn, Snowman undercuts the optimism of the self-help writers by contrasting their advice with his own hopeless decline. Through this contrast, Atwood depicts the self-help genre as a grand deception. She gives the impression that the self-help genre is yet another form of misguided high-mindedness in humanity.

Through Snowman's rants, Atwood demonstrates that idealism is the most unrealistic concept contained in self-help literature. By contrasting idealism with Snowman's deplorable condition, she highlights the idea that this kind of optimism is inherently pointless. This point is

¹⁸ Director: Sean Penn. 2007. A college graduate tries and fails to find meaning in life through isolation.

further amplified when Snowman reflects, “What use are wisdom and maturity [to me] now?” (106). That is to say, all idealism is made meaningless in the face of the end of humanity. The post-apocalyptic world is used by Atwood as an ideal setting in which to deconstruct human hubris.

Despite humanity’s extermination, the negative consequences of its existence are shown to be inescapable in this novel. Throughout his post-apocalyptic journey, Snowman is doggedly pursued by bizarre elements of nature. Experimental creatures called pigoons actively hunt Snowman in his travels. Malicious weather, the implied result of climate change, constantly punishes Snowman in unpredictable ways. Hyperactive bacteria and viruses are a persistent danger to Snowman’s health. The implication is that each of these elements is derived from poor decisions on the part of humanity. Perhaps the most potent summary of the human relationship with Earth occurs when Jimmy observes that, “The tide of human desire, the desire for more and better, would overwhelm them. It would take control and drive events, as it had in every large change throughout history” (295). In this sense, the human drive becomes the most unnatural part of humanity.

Through Snowman’s story, the reader is led to question whether humanity’s self-destructive lifespan ever held any real value. In short, Snowman’s story is painted to be rather banal and directionless. Atwood depicts Snowman as a mediocre man halfheartedly trying to prolong his existence in a ruined world. This base reality of existence -- survival for survival’s sake -- is perfectly illustrated by Atwood’s limited story arc for Snowman in the third timeline. Furthermore, his story eventually clarifies that the fall of humanity is humanity’s own fault (and, to a lesser extent, Snowman’s fault as well). Snowman’s directionless arc and culpability for humanity’s demise each cause his existence to seem worthless.

Through the novel's dark themes and characters, Atwood drives at the idea that humanity, and especially human ideals, ultimately amount to nothing. Despite being relatively new as a modern philosophy, the concept of nihilism has been prevalent throughout Western literature in secular and religious texts alike. Perhaps this is why King Solomon exasperatedly states, "Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 2:11, KJV). We see constant reiterations throughout history of the idea that, although humankind attempts to transcend its mortality with high-mindedness, the inevitability of natural death overcomes all. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood paints death as the great equilibrator for all species coexisting on the planet.

Conclusion: Man's Role in the Universe

Oryx and Crake presents a sharp critique of the human treatment of the environment. It is noteworthy that Atwood chooses to use a biological weapon to destroy humanity in her story. In order to fully consider the implications of this, we must consider how this virus-based extinction story differs from other common apocalyptic narratives, such as the nuclear annihilation story,¹⁹ the malicious artificial intelligence story,²⁰ or the meteoroid destruction story.²¹ The key difference is that, while most other apocalypse narratives treat humans as self-sustaining, all-important beings, this virus-based extinction story highlights the inextricable connection that humanity has with Nature.

¹⁹ e.g. *The Last Ship* by William Brinkley

²⁰ e.g. *The Terminator* by James Cameron

²¹ e.g. *Armageddon* by Michael Bay

Although Atwood thoroughly disparages the worth of humanity throughout the novel, she also makes it clear that humans are highly effective creatures. Crake and his peers in the scientific community consistently exhibit the character traits of efficiency, pragmatism, and productivity. However, Atwood also suggests that these character traits do not have positive net outcomes in terms of the health of society or the health of the world overall. This idea challenges the stereotype that scientific advancement leads to the betterment of the earth. As a consequence of human ingenuity, both humanity and Nature are negatively impacted in *Oryx and Crake*. In short, *Oryx and Crake* challenges the concept that human progress is beneficial.

The blurring of the boundaries between Humanity, God, and Nature is a central theme of this novel and of other apocalyptic narratives like it. Humans break down natural barriers in science fiction, and we can see that this is a modern extension of the destruction of divine barriers seen in ancient apocalypse literature. Humans violate many moral, ethical, natural, and theological boundaries throughout *Oryx and Crake*. Crake, in his attempt to supplant God, carries the nihilism of the novel to the ultimate extreme. He blends categories by bestowing a biblical style of punishment upon humanity due to its violation of Nature's boundaries. As humanity falls deeper into both hubris and pessimism in apocalypse novels, we begin to see how authors would paint the destruction of humanity as an inevitable consequence.

Works Cited

Amos, Jonathan. "Geologists search for Anthropocene 'golden spike.'" *BBC News*, 30 August 2016. Web.

Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake: A Novel*. New York: Anchor, 2004. Print.

Domínguez, Pilar Cuder. *Atlantis* 29.1 (2007): 173-78. Web.

Snyder, Katherine V. "'Time to go': The post-apocalyptic and the Post-traumatic in Margaret Atwood's 'Oryx and Crake.'" *Studies in the Novel* 43.4 (2011): 470-89. Web.

Pordzik, Ralph. "The Posthuman Future of Man: Anthropocentrism and the Other of Technology in Anglo-American Science Fiction." *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2012), pp. 142-161. Web.