

The Impact of Anthropocentrism on Natural Environment from the Perspective of Margaret Atwood

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ABSTRACT Normally labeled as a nationalist and feminist, Atwood is also a scholar with keen ecological consciousness. For the contemporary readers, the realistic significance of studying Atwood's attitude towards the impact of anthropocentrism on natural Environment is to awake the ecological consciousness, generate the feelings of awe and enlightenment as well as promote a more ecological lifestyle that humans live harmoniously with nature. Atwood's great concern is over the deterioration of nature. She shows her opposition's attitude towards anthropocentrism through the vivid depiction of the narrator's simple animal-like lifestyle. For Atwood, humans must abandon the conquest of nature and return to the embrace of the earth-mother. In this regard, she takes advantage of literature as a tool to warn the readers against possibly fatal deviations. By applying Atwood's attitudes towards anthropocentrism, the authors of this paper aim to analyze the deleterious effects of anthropocentrism on natural environment in *Oryx* and *Crake*.

INTRODUCTION

By telling this story, Atwood aims to make the reader feel uncomfortable about the contemporary path that we human beings are taking regarding our scientific experiments and careless exploitation. She aims to warn people about their own actions, as she tries to make them come to the realization that there are awful consequences for our behavior as species on earth beside other species. The novel tells the story of mankind's failure as a result of a worldwide epidemic widespread of a virus deliberately caused by the idealistic scientist Crake.

The story is told from a third-person's point of view, through the eyes of Snowman, the last known survivor of the human race. Atwood provides us with Snowman's memories, contemplations and snatches of long-gone conversations in order to construct a cinematic picture of what happened before this global catastrophe, while at the same time telling us the tale of Snowman's current situation, the Crakers' adjustment to a real and unbounded environment, and how the future looks for mankind.

Due to the fact that her fiction has always been informative, Atwood (2003) in *Oryx* and

Crake tries to make the readers to be informed and amused mutually. *Oryx* and *Crake* is set in a twenty-first century background. It tackles mostly environmental questions such as global warming, pollution, over-population, social inequalities in relation to the environment, the alteration and depletion of natural resources, and bio-engineering in a world ruled by technocrats and dominated by capitalistic interests. The novel comes as a warning against the directions our society is taking and the choices it is making in relation to ecology. In this way she has used literature as a device to warn the readers against the possibility of fatal disaster.

The grand issue which is going to be assessed here is that both human and nature have been living together for a long age. But focusing on the post human condition one can see that due to careless and intentional actions and reactions of human being to nature, it seems that nature has become a little hostile to humanity which is clearly pictured in *Oryx* and *Crake*.

This study seeks to map out all the traces and signs of the centrality on both human beings and nature in the novel by referring to the quotations from the text of the novel and finally it will take a look at the dystopian world which is created by human scientific experiments leading to the destruction of nature and ecosystems.

METHODOLOGY

Atwood's prominent novel, *Oryx* and *Crake* is the representation of an imaginary life in the future, maybe a dystopian or utopian society. In

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this novel, human being is in danger of nature's hostility because he has been hostile to nature. The literary study of eco-criticism focuses on the study of nature in human being's life. One of the considerable elements in this theory is focused on the influence of human existence in nature.

The entity of this existence has been always dangerous for nature; because human's actions have made many injuries and damages to the cycle of nature specifically and to the earth generally. Unconscious man once will be conscious that he understands that natural disasters have been a reaction or reflection of his hostile actions to nature.

Eco-criticism tries to make a parallel standpoint between nature and human being and in this way overtakes from Anthropocentrism in nature. This research by studying Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* which is about humans and quasi human creatures in a super real world, tries to show how human being tries to live in a world that once nature was so influential in it. This research also tries to focus on nature overtaking Anthropocentrism in the novel.

Literature Review

Ku (2006) in an Paper titled "*Of Monster and Man: Transgenics and Transgression in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake*", focuses on an inquiry into the fine boundary between human and monster in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. First, he tackles the singularity of the human form and the anthropocentric hierarchy between human and other species.

In as much as the pigeons and the Crakers resemble human beings in corporeality and prove more adaptive to the post-apocalyptic wasteland. Then he focuses on Crake's scientific manipulation in terms of ethical transgressions. And finally he reads Snowman's storytelling as a "left-over" tale in contrast to Robinson Crusoe's 'survivor' legend.

Paula López Rúa (2005) in an paper titled "*The Manipulative Power of Word-formation Devices in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake*" states that apart from speculating about a series of issues open to debate, such as the dark side of progress and globalization or the conflict between science and morality, *Oryx and Crake* offer a feasible insight into the state of the English language in the near future as far as the development of the lexicon is concerned. In the light of

Foucault's theories of power, knowledge and discourse, this paper approaches the novel from a linguistic perspective and undertakes an analysis of lexical innovation which comprises fields of interest, devices, motivations and users.

Grayson Cooke (2006) in a paper titled "*Techniques and the Human at Zero-Hour: Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake*" says that Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is a dystopic and satirical fable set in the aftermath of a biotechnological apocalypse (p. 105). He refers to a number of myths or archetypes in the research. He adds that *Oryx and Crake* is a text that mobilizes such a vast array of futurological speculations and mythological and literary archetypes.

Kerskens and Maufort (2007) focus on deception as a postcolonial strategy in Margaret Atwood's novels. They elaborate deception as a survival strategy in *Surfacing* and give attention to the issue of subversion in Atwood's *Trilogy: Life before Man, Bodily Harm, and The Handmaid's Tale*. They focus on Hybridization and Colonization in *Oryx and Crake*.

They personally regard Atwood as an author who situates herself at the crossroad between various traditions: the feminist, the nationalist, the postmodern, and, one might argue the post-colonial. They believe that Atwood's repeated refusal to be classified as a member of a particular tradition might well be attributed to the fact that she actually draws elements from each of them. Her novels such as *The Edible Woman* or *Lady Oracle*, and most of her poetry collections, among which the famous *Power Politics*, display overt feminist overtones.

Huang (2009) in his thesis "*Reading Biotechnology: Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake*" investigates the representation of biotechnology in *Oryx and Crake*. In addition to situating this novel in the modern context of the boom of biotechnological findings and modernity, he argues that this novel highlights the urgent issue of current manipulation of biotechnology and calls for further manipulation and participation in the making of science policy. He emphasizes several episodes of economical exploitations by the biotech giants and their strategies to manipulate science. He finally provides a critical stance and witness to the practice of science.

SCIENCE AND NATURE

It can be regarded that Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* focuses on the contemporary social and

political issues and it is concerned with the world and the human race largely, as opposed to most of her novels that focus on a specific place instead. In this way she puts human beings in a didactic way, as Glothfelty (1996) states, on the beginning of two roads: one that is continuing on the current blind path which leads to extinction or choosing an adaptation in our current route in an effort to reach a more global ethic in order to keep our planet and the environment alive through activities in the sciences (p. 14).

One of the main scientific considerations that Atwood is trying to warn us of and make aware those who are unaware of it, is that despite our ability to change the genetic construction of living things that man cannot change the evolutionary processes. Scientists these days in spite of their efforts cannot change and adapt the genetically modified organisms through reproductive processes and the scientists remain in the dark about the possible and plausible implications of genetic changes.

The perfect example of this activity can be regarded as the description of some animals which are produced genetically by human beings in developed laboratories as pigeons and other animals' genetically production in *Oryx* and *Crake*. The purpose of making them is to provide mankind with extra organs at the time of need:

The goal of the pigeon project was to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host, organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by opportunistic microbes and viruses (Atwood 2003: 25). Pigeons are genetically modified pigs that are changed to be able to grow five or six kidneys at a time (p. 26), and are injected with both a rapid-maturity gene (p. 25) in order to force up their productivity and pieces of human neocortex tissue (p. 63) to ensure that the organs will not be rejected by the human host body.

In this way the human being by intruding and changing the mechanism of the body of genetically produced animals and make a change in the structure of the environmental creatures and natural order of life try to make some tissues and other parts of the human body in the body of genetically made animals in order to be used at the time of need and crucial moments.

The name 'pigeon' already hints at the fact that they have undergone such dramatic genetic changes that they can no longer be regarded as

real pigs. Not only is this useful in distinguishing them from regular pigs, it also helps to make the organ donor less pig-like, thus partly eradicating the feeling that there is something shameful for the receivers in receiving a pig's heart. Due to their commercial value, these pigeons have begun to play a crucial role in human medical and commercial project in the pre-apocalyptic world of *Oryx* and *Crake*.

After the outbreak of the JUVE-virus as expressed in the novel, the pigeons managed to break out of the laboratory and started to live freely on the earth and try quickly to adapt to their new environment. Not only are they described as having become "strikingly smart" (Atwood 2003: 126), "cunning" (p. 319) and having gained exceptionally "long memories" (p. 275), they have also tasted human flesh and have become a real threat to human survival as we can see whenever snowman tries to go far in order to find food or things he is afraid of their attacks and prevalent threat.

Extremely successful in their ecological adaptation, Atwood believes that "if they'd had fingers, they'd have ruled the world" (p. 314). And there is even more. Not only does the pigeons eating of flesh signal an evolution in an unforeseen direction, they have also physically adapted in the function of their new choice of food. Whereas Snowman initially doubts whether he really saw a pigeon with small tusks (p. 43), he later is horribly confronted with the fact that the pigeons have become "team players" with "sharp tusks" (p. 314), thus signaling not only impressive mental progression, but also an evolutionary leap on a physical level.

This causes a kind of threat to the position of a human being on earth. As a higher perspective, we can see that these animals which are regarded as nature are moving forward in expanding their territory and degrade the power of human beings and his centrality.

Apart from the implied warning that scientific creations may turn against mankind, the pigeons also function as an ecological risk of transgenic organisms. Like the pigeons, other transgenic organisms in *Oryx* and *Crake* have proven to have an unanticipated effect on the ecology, for example the luminous green rabbits that escaped their cages and started breeding with the wild rabbit population which resulted in their "population spiral[ing] out of control" (p. 241), leading to a severe trouble not only for human

beings, but also for the species beneath them in the food chain (p. 110).

Another example is the rampage of the wolvoogs, a splice between wolves and dogs that was created to serve as security dogs. Despite the scientists' certainty that "they won't get out" (Atwood 2003: 241-242), they eventually did and exterminated other canine species in no time (p. 110). A final illustration found in *Oryx and Crake*, are the bobkittens, a smaller version of the bobcat that was created to eliminate undomesticated cats in order to "improve the almost non-existent song-bird population, but soon after these bobkittens were set free in nature they also got out of control in their turn" (p. 193). This mention of the near-extinction of song-birds is in line with the warning Atwood is trying to convey concerning the unpredictability of foreign organisms polluting our ecological system.

Genetic Adaptations and the Loss of Humanity

By the developments in the field of science discovery, genetic adaptations have become a considerable issue and entered our daily lives. However, the presence of these changes in the structure of genes not only made our lives easier, but also it was regarded as a threat to human life. Through the genetic alterations that have become possible today, the borders between human and non-human, between animal and machine, have become increasingly blurred.

Despite the fact that in the majority of cultures the combining of species which was condemned by some institutes and religious institutions, it is now a widespread element in contemporary science that many scientists are doing their experiments and increase their knowledge in this regard. Atwood in her novel wants to show that not only does genetic alterations and simulation eradicate the border between mankind and the animals, but it also leads to the loss of our humanity as such.

Concerning our relation to animals, Ryder (1990) provides a thought-provoking idea in his essay "Pigs Will Fly" when he asks the following: "How many human genes make a sufficiently human creature to have human rights in the eyes of the law? How many human genes can you give a humanized pig before you feel obliged to send it to school rather than to the slaughterhouse?" (Wheale and McNally 1988: 190)

By implanting animals with human genes and neocortex tissue, we rid them of their identity as purely animal and bring them closer to the level of an entity similar to human beings. Apart from the danger of unforeseen evolutionary changes, this may also lead to a needed re-evaluation of the position of animals in society. Some scientists claim that in order to enhance the animals' situation, there can be no moral opposition to genetically altering animals that serve nutritional ends.

Atwood ironically inscribes this "No Brain, No Pain" (Atwood 2003: 245) motif in *Oryx and Crake*, as one of the leading scientists of the Chickie Nob project states that the chickens' suffering is humanly alleviated because of the removal of the neurons that activate pain, ensuring that "the animal-welfare freaks will not be able to say a thing" (p. 238). The irony here is that these animals are not brought closer to an elevated state assuming that the removal of pain could be seen as "elevated" out of human ethics, but are turned into brainless machines with greater productivity instead.

This is the second and even more threatening danger that Atwood is trying to warn us about. Due to the endless possibilities of mixing together different organisms and the ecological dominance of these new creatures, all human and animal life is plausible and may in the long run even be reduced to nothing more than biological machines.

This mechanization of nature is bound to result in the mechanization of ourselves, our sentiments, judgments, fears and dreams and it distorts not only our experience of the world, but also eradicating the capacity to relate to other animals, our own bodies and other human beings. In doing so, man would become scarily close to a hybrid of machine and organism. When comparing a genuine human with a human who is made through genetically grown tissues and body parts in the body of other altered animals, one cannot conclude that the latter is in many ways superior.

Nevertheless, in light of the impending loss of humanity as such, the fusions between man, animal and machine can also teach us a great deal about not being a man. This is presented in a severely ironic way in *Oryx and Crake*, as the specific physical characteristics that characterize us as being human are ridiculed, as they are depicted as "a cripple" (p. 181), something "deformed" (p. 48), when compared together.

The Symbolism of Anthropocentrism and Eco-criticism

We can see man in a technologically developed age in which he is free to expand and extend his knowledge and do whatever experiments exist on genes to reach to necessary organs in the future. The centrality of human being is depicted by the main characters as Oryx, Jimmy, who later changed his names to Snowman after the destruction of human beings by a virus and Crake whose destiny is depicted in a post era condition after a huge destruction of the world due to the wide spreading of a virus. In this way these characters and their activities and experiments which are also depicted in a game which involves destructive themes can be symbolic throughout the novel.

Crake is clearly a scientist whose ability in human knowledge, math and genetics are considerable. He is a member of a society which are chosen as an elite and are categorized as high rank people who are divided from public or ordinary one and he is living in such a place which is built separately for more security in that specific era. Jimmy is somehow the same as Crake but he is master in arts education and his literature and use of language is impressive in this novel. Throughout the novel we can see that it is clear that Crake's scientific character can be symbolically represented as the role of science and human being which by the use of science has destroyed the nature and the environment while the combination of the character of Jimmy and Oryx which is symbolically represented as a literate man who has been lived after the destruction and is regarded as a god for some post humans who are the new products of a scientific exploration. One can come to this conclusion that the purpose of Atwood in such a symbolic depiction is injecting this idea to the mind of readers that literature can be so influential in the prevention of this ecological disaster earlier by making human being aware of the post human condition.

This is exactly in parallel with the ideas of Glotfelty (1996) that says "revaluing nature oriented literature can help redirect us from ego-consciousness to 'eco-consciousness'" (p. 30). Because in this particular perspective, words can be used in different ways, however, this interpretation is a subjective one. Jimmy, as a character, is shown as the symbol of literature in this novel.

Literature then can be interpreted as being a necessary tool to show the destruction of the human race by been misused many times in this novel by showing the words that are syntactically wrong. For example, the word 'pigoons' which referred to hybridized animals that have been given human DNA can be understood by the reader as the symbol of a potential danger to ecology as we understand it at the present time. The pigoons and the Crakers allegorically warn the readers against possible twists given to humankind:

'Humanity' is no longer a monolithic and homogeneous appellation as in homo sapiens (man, the knower) or homo faber (man, the tool-maker). Instead, it becomes a collective, heterogeneous term that encompasses 'numbers people' and 'word people' before the plague, and afterward the bioengineered and non-bioengineered beings. Thus conceived, the (human) self/other (non-human) divide is in effect reversed: the genographer Crake and his superhuman Crakers now take priority as the favored human subjects on this side of the grand 'self'; the non-bioengineered Snowman, even if more 'human' in the traditional (organic) sense, now becomes the 'other' (KU 2006: 166).

In this way, the notion of human being is shown through the symbolization of the main characters and their activities through the notion of game which is played by them in the novel. Jimmy, as it was stated can be regarded as 'synonymous' with literature. First, he can be symbolized as an influential agent in the destruction of the pre-apocalypse ecology, which means the beforehand situation of a human being in the world, and also can be regarded as the 'savior' of the group of post-apocalypse remaining people who are introduced as Crakers in this knowledge and are vegetarian and the product of genetically changed human beings and they are living in harmony with the environment.

Computer games can have an impact in the shape of literature, and ecology. In this novel the fact that computer games are very familiar-looking to a futuristic society and have come to replace books as educational tools and this issue has direct consequences on ecology. Jimmy and Crake essentially spend many years sitting in front of computers, exploring three major subjects: sex, political issues, and video games. The type of games are symbol of ecological role playing in which the players determine the future of

the planet in artistic and environmental terms. The first, *Blood and Roses*, basically shows the forces of good and evil as being comparable to human and historical atrocities.

Apart from the fact that *Oryx and Crake* overtly deals with the notion of extinction, it can also be regarded as a request for the preservation of endangered species as well. The title of the book itself exposes the ecological disaster caused by disappearing species through its use of two wiped-out animals, other references such as the Extinction game, "an interactive biofreak masterlore game" (Atwood 2003: 92) focusing exclusively on extinct animals, only strengthen this claim and indeed is a symbol which is worth discussing here.

In this game which is played by the Jimmy and Crake in the novel, apart from merely signaling the problem of animal extinction, the adaptation of the names can also be read in another way, as it also shows the character's realization that the human being is also bound to the fate of these other creatures and may well also be on the road to extinction. Not only through worldwide eradication by the JUVE-virus, but also due to the vanishing of the human.

So we can see that the extinction and destruction of a human being in this game is in the hand of the players which ironically and symbolically means the self destruction through a wicked game. This game which is called 'Blood and Roses' was a trading game. The Blood side played with human atrocities for the counters, atrocities on a large scale in which individual rapes and murders were not considered and many people were wiped out through massacres, genocides, that sort of thing. In this game first Jimmy and Crake wants to play the war between two societies which can choose either:

"Crake would get fixated on a game, and would want to play it and play it and perfect his attack until he was sure he could win, nine times out of ten anyway. For a whole month they'd had to play Barbarian Stomp (See *If You Can Change History!*). One side had the cities and the riches and the other side had the hordes, [...] but you had to start out with the historical disposition of energies and go on from there, Rome versus the Visigoths, Ancient Egypt versus the Hyksos, Aztecs versus the Spaniards. That was a cute one, because it was the Aztecs who represented civilization, while the Spaniards were the barbarian hordes. You could customize the game

as long as you used real societies and tribes, and for a while Crake and Jimmy vied with each other to see who could come up with the most obscure pairing" (Atwood 2003: 87-88).

One issue concerning the study of anthropocentrism and eco-criticism is the danger in which human being is made for nature and vice versa. When nature and human beings are in a battle to survive and preserve themselves in the end, without any doubt human being for his survival can be hostile to human beings too.

This state which is natural in an endangered world has been an innate nature of man. In this novel, there are many traces of this hostility in different aspects. As an example, one can refer to the situation when Snowman and the Crakers are leaving the laboratory base to a safe place, whenever they confront somebody on their path who is contaminated with the virus, Snowman kills him or her:

"Five blocks from the main Compound gate, a man staggered out of a side street towards them. Stay where you are, Snowman yelled. The man came on, stumbled, fell. Snowman shot him. ... When they reached the peripheral wall, there was another one, a woman. She lurched abruptly out of the gatehouse, weeping, and grabbed at a child. Help me! She implored. Don't leave me here! Snowman shot her too" (Atwood 2003: 387-389).

We can see that at the time of virus breakout, when everything reaches to the end point. Crake kills Oryx and when Jimmy is faced with this situation, he will kill Crake by shooting. This dangerous situation can be a proof in this hypothesis: "He looked at Jimmy, a direct look, unsmiling." I'm counting on you, he said. Then he slit her throat. Jimmy shot him (Atwood 2003: 364).

Radio is a device that can be employed for making a communication with others and in this novel by the technological improvements we can see that they have designed the radio in a way that can trace the waves of other people in the near distance by adjusting the tune. When the lonely Snow man finds a radio, the first thing that comes to his mind is that to adjust the tunes and frequencies in order to find if there is another person nearby or not. Although he is eager to do it first, but we can see that when he hears somebody's voice, he feels fearful and turns the radio off, because he is afraid of making communication and relationships with other human beings:

“White noise, more white noise, more white noise; He tries the AM bands, then the FM. Nothing. Just that sound, like the sound of starlight scratching its way through outer space: kkkkkkkk. He moves the dial slowly and carefully. Maybe there are other countries, distant countries, where the people may have escaped – New Zealand, Madagascar, Patagonia – places like that. Oh, talk to me, he prays. Say something. Say anything. Suddenly there’s an answer. It’s a voice, a human voice”.

Unfortunately, it’s speaking some language that sounds like Russian. Snowman can’t believe his ears. He’s not the only one then – someone else has made it through, someone of his own species. But this one isn’t much use to Snowman, he’s too far away. Then, faintly, a man’s voice: “Is anyone reading me? Anyone out there?, Do you read me? Over; Snowman fumbles with the buttons. How to send? He’s forgotten. Where is the fucker? I’m here! I’m here! He shouts. Back to receive nothing” (Atwood 2003: 299-300).

And finally we see that when Snowman comes back at the trip, and he sees three people who were sitting on the beach. Snowman wants to go and talk to them, but he is undetermined and waits in a way that the writer makes suspense for the reader. However, according to the hints and traces followed in the story, we see that he will not go to contact with them:

He should say something to them, though. Leave them with a few words to remember. Better, some practical advice, he should say he might not be coming back (p. 403). All these depictions show the inability and weakness of human beings on earth not only in relationship with nature and other human being but also as a lack of knowledge in this regard and enhancing the centrality of his position.

CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood puts human being in a didactic way on the beginning of two roads: one

that is continuing on the current blind path which leads to extinction or choosing an adaptation in our current route in an effort to reach a more global ethic in order to keep our planet and the environment alive through activities in the sciences. Thus, we should acknowledge the limitations, expose them and criticize them. When the cognition of human beings’ limitations becomes a mirror to man’s survival and development, we will not lose confidence to the uncertain future. Today most of us are aware that human activities have the greatest effect on environment and ecology. Yet, with the emergence of the ability to control the fate of less advanced human beings and environmental and ecological factors, man has consciously chosen to ignore the great responsibility that emerges with accumulation of great power (Atwood 2003: 23).

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