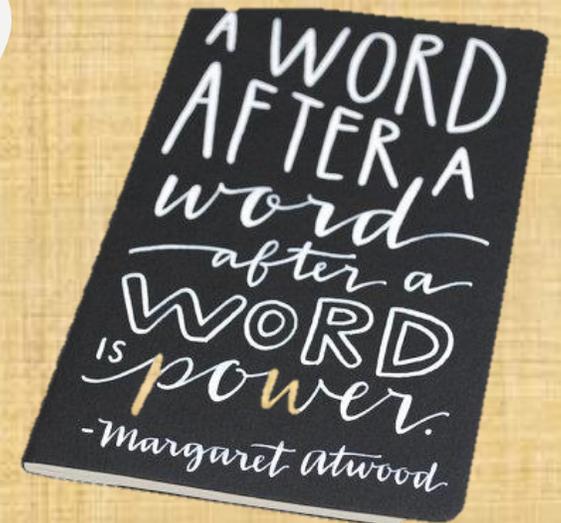


"The threat to the planet
is us.
It's actually not a threat
to the planet -
it's a threat to us. "



ENG 4200:
MARGARET ATWOOD
POETRY & FICTION
DR. HOPE JENNINGS



**UNIT FOUR: ENVIRONMENTALISM AND
POSTHUMANISM IN SPECULATIVE FICTION**

ENVIRONMENTALISM

- *Environmentalism* denotes a [social movement](#) that seeks to influence the political process by lobbying, activism, and education in order to protect natural resources and [ecosystems](#).
- In various ways (for example, grassroots activism and protests), environmentalists and [environmental organizations](#) seek to give the natural world a stronger voice in human affairs.
- In general terms, environmentalists advocate the [sustainable](#) management of resources, and the protection (and restoration, when necessary) of the [natural environment](#) through changes in public policy and individual behavior.
- In its recognition of humanity as a participant in ecosystems, the movement is centered around [ecology](#), [health](#), and [human rights](#).
 - Wikipedia, “Environmentalism”



**Personal
responsibility**

**Innovation and
regulation**

**Radical change
of world system**

ATWOOD & ENVIRONMENTALISM

- In her 2012 introduction to *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), Margaret Atwood notes that the current popularity of “end-of-the-world scenarios” speaks to a cultural obsession with “survival stories” that manifest our “fear” of the “irreparable and self-inflicted disaster” of climate change (vi, xi).
- Atwood’s own work, especially her *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013), has been classified as “cli-fi,” or climate fiction; and Atwood herself has endorsed cli-fi as an apt term for characterizing the theme of survival in contemporary dystopian fictions, which she finds are “more likely to take place in a challenging landscape that no longer resembles the hospitable planet we’ve taken for granted.”
- In multiple interviews and essays, Atwood has frequently identified climate change as the primary threat to humans, nonhumans, and their shared environments. ... in fact, [she] prefers to use the phrase “everything change” instead of “climate change” when identifying the present threat to planetary life.
- She argues that, on the one hand, this phrase more accurately encompasses the extent as well as complexity of the causes of devastating environmental changes; on the other hand, she finds that “everything change” better captures the urgency of the crisis at hand, since the “effects [of climate change] are not happening in some dim, distant future. They are happening now.”

– Hope Jennings, “Encounters with the Wilderness”

ATWOOD & ENVIRONMENTALISM

- According to Shannon Hengen, Atwood's environmentalism is linked to questions of what it means to be human, as interdependent with other species and the natural world around us: "Being human to Atwood clearly implies acceptance of the whole range of our physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual state. To deny or splice out any of that state is to amputate the self as it has been known so far, and to stress nature perilously" – and to ignore "a sense of shared space" often "contributes to our dehumanization" (74)
- For Atwood, "Nature" is only malevolent "when we believe we must conquer it"; her work often stresses a need to accept "what ties us to nature and what produces the successes and excesses of culture, including science" – that we are naturalcultural or biocultural creatures: "we exist between nature and culture, and that we can escape neither" (Hengen 75-76)
- Atwood's environmentalism asks us to acknowledge our capacity for vulnerability and destructiveness, to explore where compassion, faith and mercy may act as antidotes; and to balance and accept how we "affect and our affected by the larger environment in which we evolve" – all of which emphasizes our "interconnectedness" and that to deny any part of our natures, or that we are a part of nature, leads to our own destruction (Hengen 83-84)

ATWOOD & ENVIRONMENTALISM

- Atwood's work often highlights the need to critique suspect proposals of environmental sustainability that don't attempt to address the underlying issues or causes of environmental destruction—such as “green capitalism,” or, anthropocentric paradigms—which fail to offer an ecological framework that truly accepts and practices the understanding of “what ‘truly sustains us’—our ‘kinship’ with the non-human world” (730).
- Most ecocritical frameworks argue that “the roots of the ecological crisis are to be found in a failure of the imagination, and that literary studies—the human imagination being their home turf—therefore have an important role to play in understanding and overcoming this crisis” (730).
- Atwood exposes the flaw in those ecocriticisms that argue for perception as the root of ethical behavior, or, “the *ecological imperative*: humans ought to acknowledge (to properly perceive) that they are a part of nature and behave accordingly”—rather, “humans *ought* to behave like a part of nature because they *are* a part of nature” (731).
 - Hannes Bergthaller, “Housebreaking the Human Animal”

Atwood's environmentalism "posits a politics of the posthuman that is associated with [ecofeminist] new materialist thinkers, who argue for more ecological frameworks that engage with the multiple ways in which all lifeforms, organic and inorganic, human or otherwise, exist in a network of entangled relations and agencies" (Jennings, "Anthropocene Feminism").

Traditional Humanism

- Emphasizes the power of individual human mind.
- Privileges "rational" thought over embodied emotion.
- Values individual autonomy / agency
- Draws strong binary distinctions between humans/technologies and humans/animals.
- Positions white male as the archetypal "human"

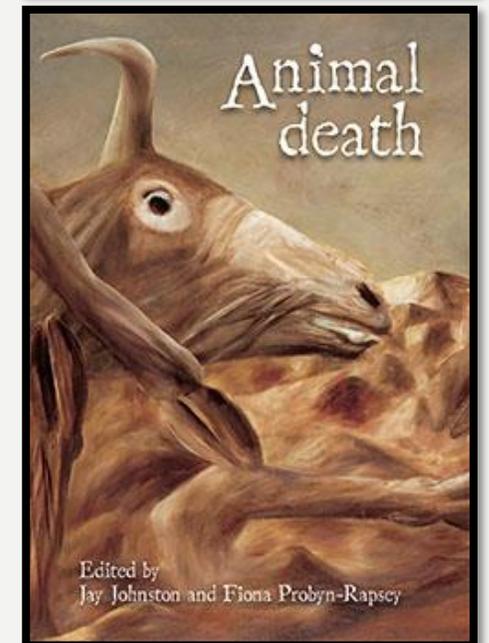
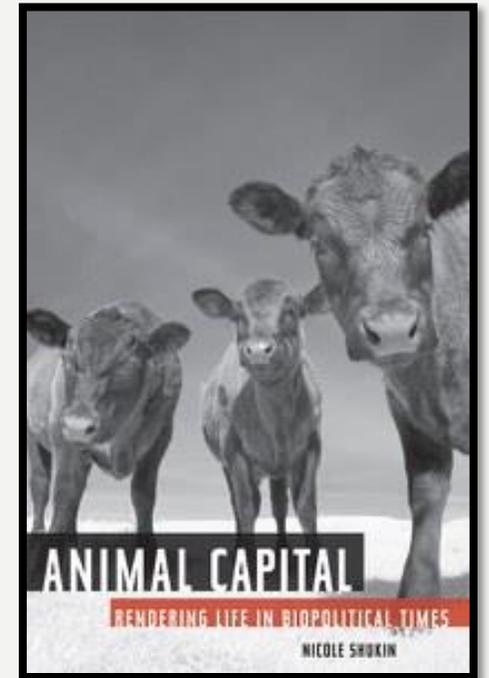
POSTHUMANISM (meaning "after [humanism](#)" or "beyond humanism") is a complicated term with several definitions, but primarily encompasses cultural or philosophical theories that are critical of traditional humanism and traditional ideas about humanity and the [human condition](#) in order to:

- challenge the foundational assumptions of [humanism](#) and its legacy;
- question the historical notions of "human" and "human nature", often eschewing typical notions of human subjectivity and embodiment;
- move beyond archaic concepts of "[human nature](#)" to develop ones that constantly adapt to contemporary [technoscientific](#) knowledge; and,
- examine the ethical implications of expanding the circle of moral concern to nonhumans and extending subjectivities beyond the human species.

– Wikipedia, "Posthumanism"

POSTHUMANISM & ANIMALS

- Posthumanism's ethical concern for nonhuman life is aligned with those environmentalisms and ecocriticisms that are focused on addressing animal rights, endangered species, and mass extinction of species.
- As we've seen in much of her poetry, and will explore further in *Oryx & Crake* and the three selected short pieces from *The Tent*, Atwood is especially invested in highlighting the abuses of animals in factory farming and bio-genetic technologies, as well as the destruction of vital habitats and migratory patterns and subsequent mass species die-offs due to global warming, climate change, and a long history of colonialist, industrialist, and capitalist practices.
- According to Kathleen Vogt, Atwood's pervasive focus on animals, living and dead, is part of her environmentalism, which argues for interconnectedness and accepting "that our space is shared space"—for Atwood, "there is no healing or health in a world without animals or where animals are treated like objects, and that there can be joy in the land where animals and humans meet" (179, 182)



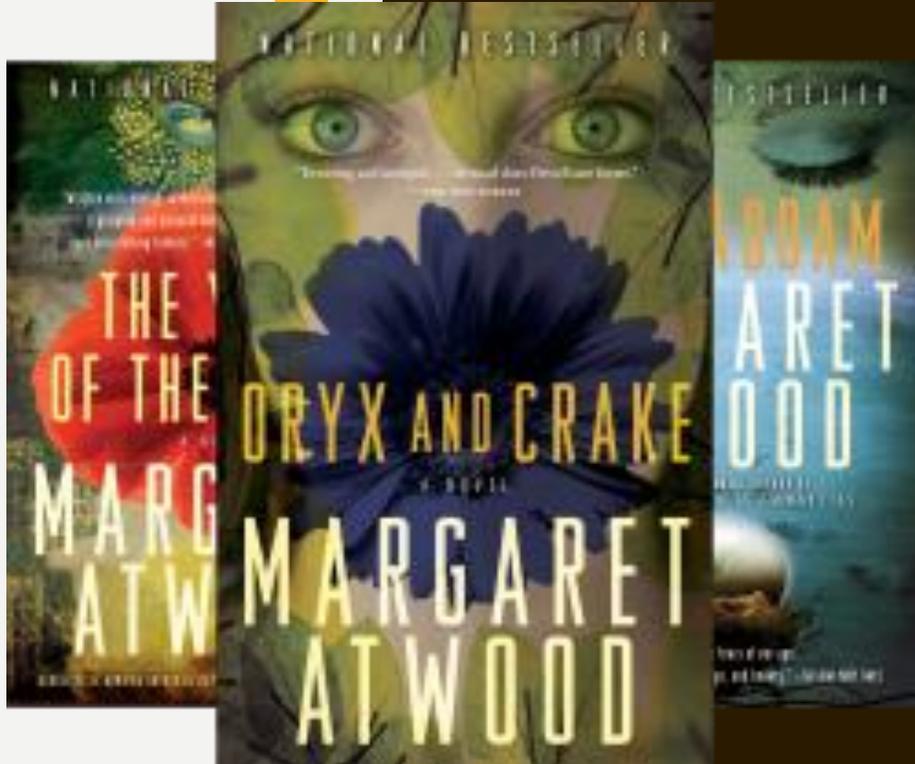
SPECULATIVE FICTION

- Atwood says that she does not write science fiction; rather, because her “futuristic” novels simply explore or extrapolate on current real-world technologies and science, her work is better understood if read under the broader umbrella term of speculative fiction.
- Similarly, Gerry Canavan notes that Atwood’s dystopic narratives are often as much about the past and present as they are the future: “In the end the *pre-apocalyptic* landscape [of *Oryx & Crake*] turns out to be much worse than the post-apocalyptic, built as it is upon a nightmare of murder, rape, exploitation, and theft that is, as we know too well, the actually existing, entirely *nonfictional* history of European expansion” (141).
- Coomi S. Vevaina also notes that through her exploration of the past (via speculative fiction), “Atwood seeks to make her readers aware of our present state and lead us into the future with the hope that we will learn to act responsibly in ways that will make our rapidly shrinking and increasingly threatened world a better place for ourselves and generations to come” (97).

“USTOPIA” & COUNTERAPOCALYPSE

- Just as she rejects calling her work science fiction, Atwood does not consider her MaddAddam novels to be “apocalyptic” because, she claims, “in a true apocalypse everything on Earth is destroyed” whereas “the only element that’s annihilated” in her work “is the human race, or most of it” (*Worlds* 93).
- Atwood prefers, instead, to classify the novels as “ustopian,” a term she uses to indicate how utopia and dystopia “each contains a latent version of the other” (66).
- Likewise, by remaining open to the despair and hope of apocalypse, by respecting how apocalyptic narrative ... can instigate either social dissolution or social justice, we can read the MaddAddam trilogy as counterapocalyptic texts.
- Counterapocalypse is a term coined by ecofeminist theologian Catherine Keller and is similar to Atwood’s notion of “ustopia”—both approaches “contain” the genres that the texts work against while also encompassing “both mappable locations and states of mind” (*Worlds* 75).
 - Jennings, “Anthropocene Feminism”

ORYX & CRAKE



MARGARET ATWOOD'S NOVEL ORYX AND CRAKE (2003) TAKES PLACE IN A FUTURE WORLD WHERE SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENTS AND GENETIC EXPERIMENTATION ARE THE FOCUS OF SOCIETY. HUMAN OBSESSION WITH SCIENCE ULTIMATELY ALLOWS THE ETHICALLY BLIND IDEALIST CRAKE TO DESTROY HUMAN SOCIETY.

Oryx and Crake is the first book in Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy



According to J. Brooks Bouson, the *MaddAddam* trilogy can be read “as a form of environmental consciousness-raising”—as a best-selling author with a global readership, Atwood uses her apocalyptic/speculative fictions to urge “readers to think the unthinkable”; she sees her work driven by a “moral imperative” and “believes in the transformative—and ethical—potential of imaginative literature” in its capacity “to prod readers to meaningful political thought and action” (23)



LITERARY ALLUSIONS

- *Oryx and Crake* alludes to various post-apocalyptic survivalist “Last Man” narratives, such as Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*.
- Atwood is also just as interested in exploring apocalyptic “new world” or utopian narratives, in which the world is destroyed and cleansed of all its old evils, allowing humans to “begin anew.”



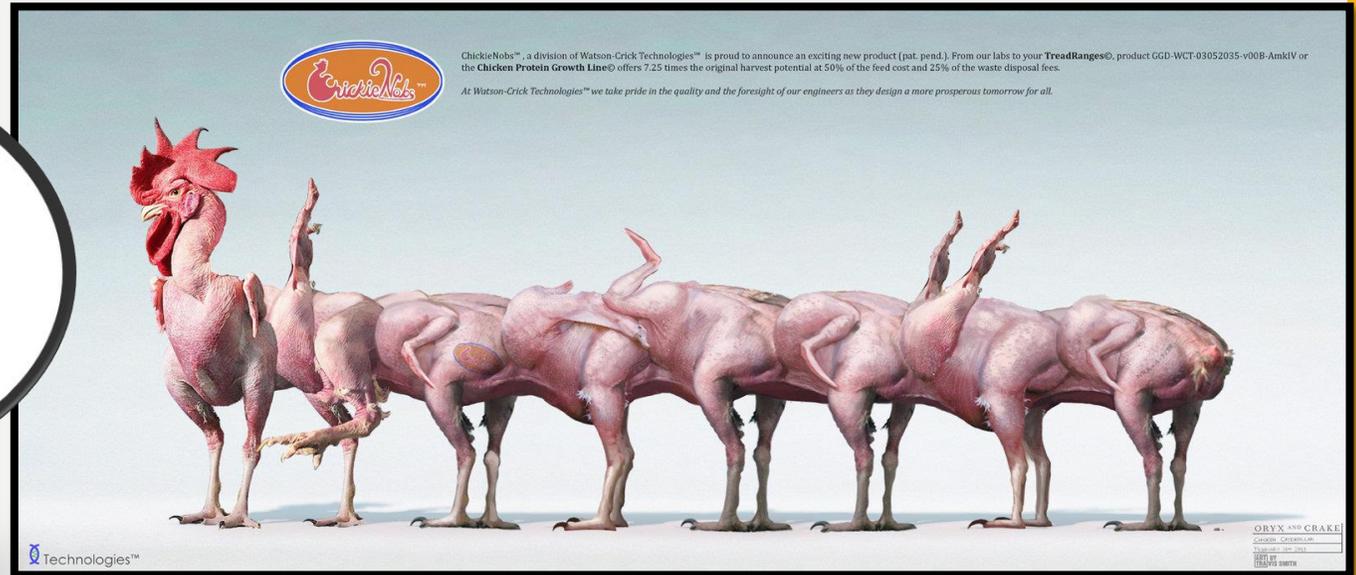
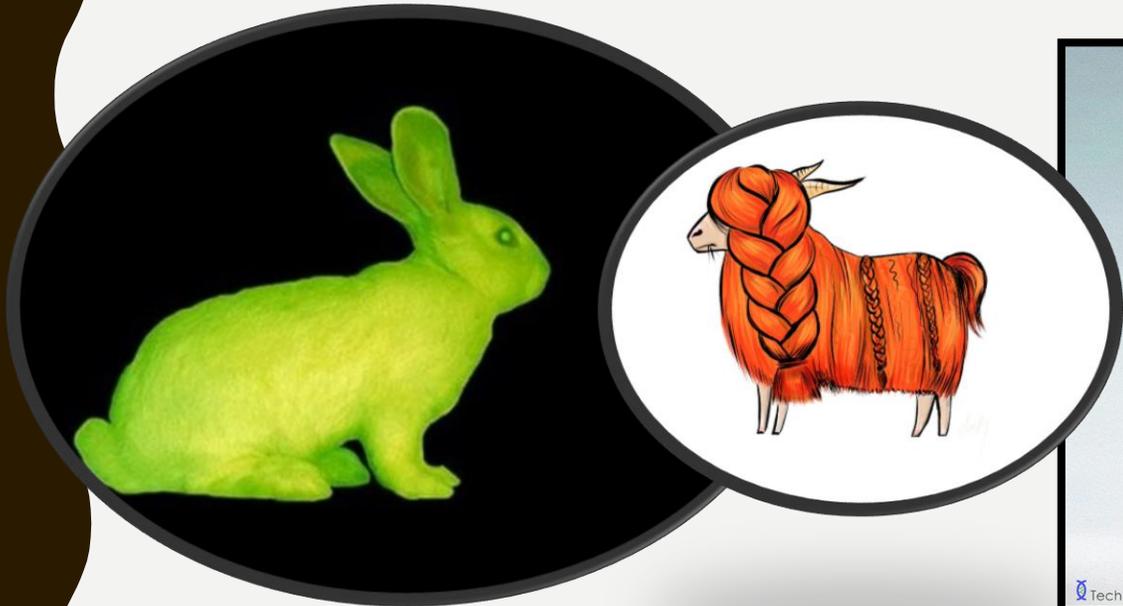
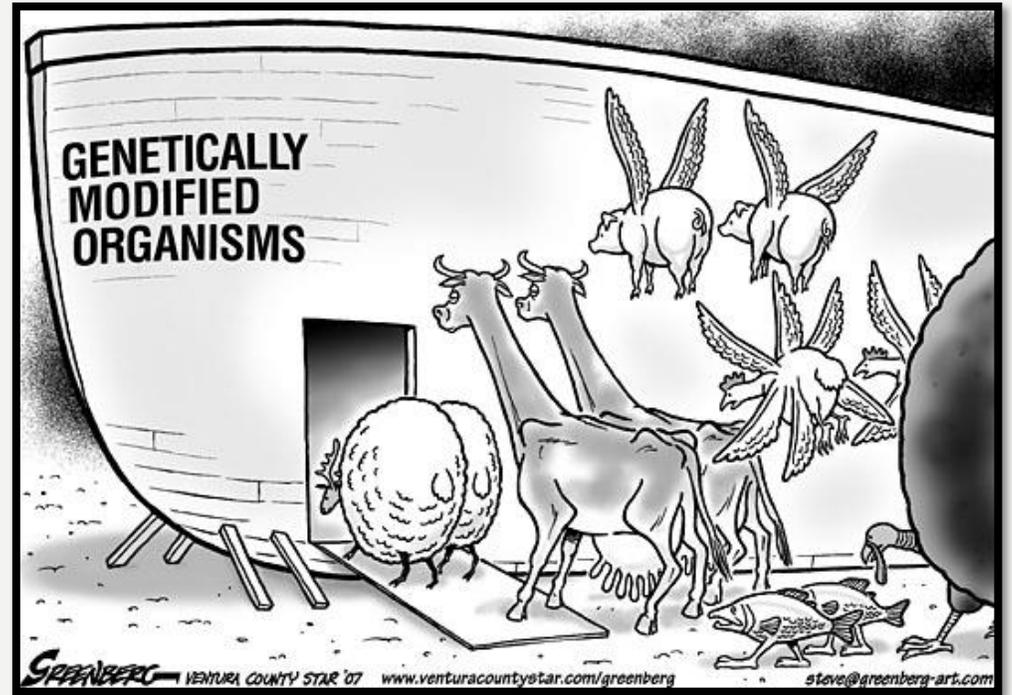
- “Paradise,” the bioengineering project at the center of the novel, is clearly an allusion to Paradise, the first home of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. The name MaddAddam also refers to the Biblical Adam. However, Genesis tells the story of the creation of humans, whereas *Oryx and Crake* is the story of humankind's demise.
- As the only known human survivor, Jimmy/Snowman is forced into a more “primitive” existence; for instance, he has grown accustomed to life without clothes or shoes. Is his nakedness a symbol of a return to innocence, or does it represent a regression to “savage” life?
- Atwood leaves this question open and somewhat ambiguous, especially in the context of the Crakers, or, the Children of Crake.



THE CRAKERS

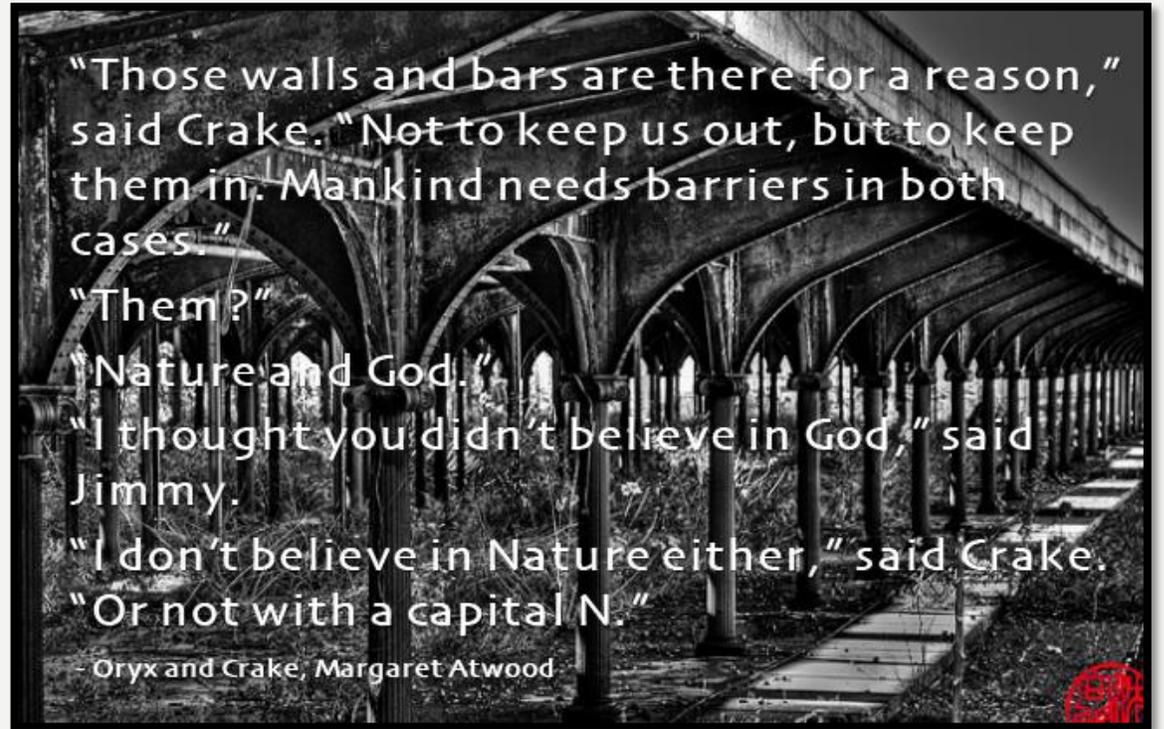
Genetically engineered by Crake and the Paradise scientists; they are intended to be an “improvement” upon humans by eliminating all the “destructive features ... responsible for the world’s current illnesses”—racism, hierarchy, territoriality, religion, and patriarchy (*Oryx* 305).

- Their bodies are immune to disease, and they have been engineered to eat plant material and then create fecal matters that can be re-digested.
- They do not need to wear clothes or build houses, because they are perfectly adjusted to their habitat.
- They grow from infants to adults rapidly and die when they reach the age of thirty.
- They cannot distinguish skin color, so there is no chance of racism developing among them.
- They go into heat at regular intervals, so there is no sexual torment or possession for the Crakers.
- They are neither hunters nor farmers, so they have no territorial drive.



THEMES

- **Corporate Power:** megacorporations have replaced government and exist separately from the rest of the world as gated compounds for employees; each compound is a distinct locale, but they share a legion of CorpSeCorps agents (security forces); they employ science and marketing techniques that make the public powerless consumers, dependent on their products.
- **Hierarchy:** society is economically and socially stratified between the compounds and the pleeblands; sciences are valued more than humanities and the arts; consequently, emotion and feeling gives way to emotionless and unethical logic and science.
- **Parental Responsibility:** parents play important roles in helping to define the characters of their offspring in *Oryx and Crake*; many of the characters are abandoned as children, which might be read as analogous to how humans have abandoned their responsibilities to the environment and nonhumans; or, the abuses of authority in the name of religion, greed, or science.



POINT OF VIEW & STRUCTURE



- The novel is told from the third-person point of view, but limited to what is in Jimmy/Snowman's mind. The narrator guides the reader through the action of the story using Jimmy's thoughts as well as bits of dialogue that Jimmy remembers from conversations with the other characters.
- Jimmy seems to have a reliable memory but jumps between topics and time periods, which makes for a piecemeal narrative that keeps the reader wondering what exactly has happened in Jimmy's recent history.
- The novel comprises fifteen sections, and each section has several subsections. The subsections bear titles that identify important nouns from the passages that follow.
- The narration jumps between times and settings throughout the fifteen sections, realistically mimicking the way a man's brain would jump about as he tried to sort through a jumble of thoughts in the aftermath of great personal and world crisis.



SETTING

The “frame” setting for the novel is a wildlife refuge near the seashore, where Jimmy has brought the Crakers so that they can have an endless supply of greens to eat and he can be sustained on fish; although this setting is emptied of humans, the remnants of civilization wash ashore with the tides to remind Jimmy of the way life used to be.

- Much of the flashback action takes place in corporate compounds—OrganInc and HelthWyzer—where Jimmy lived as a child and teenager.
- Two contrasting settings are the universities that Jimmy and Crake attend: the decrepit Martha Graham Academy (for arts and humanities) and the posh Watson-Crick Institute (for STEM).
- The final setting for the novel is the RejoovenEsence compound, which includes an overgrown central park, the remains of a typical suburban family dwelling, and the Paradise offices and a bio-bubble, which originally serves as the Crakers’ habitat.

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