

# **Atwood's Speculative Dystopian Imagination: Inequality, Hierarchy, and Warped Ethics as Harbingers of Apocalypse in *Oryx and Crake***

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## **Abstract**

This article examines Margaret Atwood's imaginings of a pre-apocalyptic future in *Oryx and Crake* in order to discuss the root causes of the world's social and ecological ruination. Applying Murray Bookchin's theory of social ecology in its analysis, it argues that the major factors constituting a dystopian society and serving as harbingers of the apocalypse are diversiform inequality and deep-seated hierarchy. It specifically demonstrates how environmental destruction is profoundly connected with social problems arising from these two factors. Furthermore, the paper contends that such a society significantly influences the characters' worldview resulting in warped ethics. Finally, this dystopian landscape and its distorted ethics give birth to two kinds of people: one is Crake, a megalomaniac eugenicist who in his self-righteous attempt to create a better world almost obliterates the whole human race, and the other kind are those who acquiescently allow such incident to happen.

**Keywords:** Speculative fiction, Apocalyptic Fiction, Dystopia,  
Social Ecology, Science Fiction

From the beginning to the end of the novel, readers of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* may find themselves asking a myriad of questions, but one of the most discussed would definitely be along the lines of "who or what are the causes of the apocalypse that has befallen the human species?" Attempts at answering this ostensibly simplistic problem tend to point the finger at Crake, a genius transgenic scientist who is the mastermind behind a great disaster. However, doing so and merely stopping there would only amount to putting the responsibility of all humanity on a single person—which is convenient yet hardly justifiable. If Crake is indeed the treacherous criminal to the human race, then we ought to and must enquire further, as to what it is in our world that gives birth to such a figure as Crake, who unleashes a deathly apocalypse upon the earth. Such is Atwood's project as the author imagines a dystopian future exploring the possibilities of the human species as it is pitted against the end of the world because of its own actions. This is also in keeping with Atwood's lifelong ultimate interest in the issue of survival, evident since the 1972 publication of her book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, in which she puts forward that the theme central to Canadian literature is survival. The author's conviction continues to hold true especially in the present time as Atwood explains in her semi-memoir added in 2012 to *Survival* that now "on the global stage – a stage where weird weather caused by climate change is in the spotlight – there's the sense that we're clinging on by our fingernails" (2012, p. xii).

In her attempt to warn us of this impending doom and explore humanity's chance of survival, Atwood relies on speculative fiction and its potential to presage an apocalyptic future. Because Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* as a work of science fiction "explore[s] the outer reaches of the imagination by taking us boldly where no man has gone before, or indeed ever" (Atwood, 2014, p. 63), it enables author and reader alike to examine an eerily plausible ending of the world through the imaginative power of fiction. Atwood and a great number of scholars appear to agree on the significance and the capacity of science fiction, specifically dystopian and apocalyptic stories, to challenge readers' worldviews and even to influence the way they think and behave. Winstead (2017) contends that in the twenty-first century, speculative

fiction as a forecasting narrative contains the performative power that is conducive to the production of interdisciplinary knowledge. Buell (1995) suggests that the trope of an apocalypse, exclusive in the genre of science fiction, “is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (p. 285). Expanding on Buell’s notion, Canavan (2012) observes that “the apocalypse is the only thing in our time that seems to have the capacity to shake the foundations of the system and “jumpstart a history that now seems completely moribund—the only power left that could still create a renewed, free space in which another kind of life might be possible” (p. 139). Similarly, Snyder (2011) in her analysis of *Oryx and Crake* also remarks that “post-apocalyptic fictions such as *Oryx and Crake* enable us to witness the unwitnessable and to survive the unsurvivable” (p. 486). Indeed, such power comes with responsibility. Perhaps it is a great calling of writers such as Atwood to dispute Fukuyama’s (1989) defeatist claim that in the postmodern age such as now, human beings have arrived at a grim realization and with much certainty that the world cannot change for the better by writing and telling stories that are based on hope. Atwood’s optimistic conviction in the writer’s moral responsibility toward society is in accordance with Bouson (2010), who notes that Atwood “believes in the transformative – and ethical – potential of imaginative literature” (p. 23). Along this line of thought, the current paper maintains that *Oryx and Crake* is a story that prompts us to observe and question what renders this apocalyptic dystopia possible.

Approaching the novel with an ecocritical lens, this paper examines the author’s fictive speculation of a dystopian future in an attempt to illuminate the root causes of the world’s social and ecological ruination. It specifically investigates the conditions of human society and the characters in the time before the lethal pandemic to provide some insights into the interconnection between the novel’s pre-apocalyptic landscape and the tragic happenings that occur out of it. This paper analyzes social and environmental conditions in a dystopian future, particularly Atwood’s imaginings of a pre-apocalyptic world—when humanity is barely hanging on by a fingernail. It further argues that the elements constituting the dystopian landscape and serving as

harbingers of the apocalypse are diversiform inequality, deep-seated hierarchy, and warped ethics that are so profoundly ingrained in every socio-political and socio-economic stratum in *Oryx and Crake*. The examination of the three characters, Jimmy, Crake, and Oryx demonstrates how social conditions and environments have a significant influence on the characters, especially in terms of their hierarchical and exploitative attitude toward the natural world. To substantiate the arguments, it employs Murray Bookchin's (1982) social ecology as a theoretical framework to help draw connections between social problems and environmental issues. This interpretation argues against a purely reductionistic, biologically deterministic, eugenic view represented by Crake and sees ecological concerns as intertwined with political, economic, and social issues.

### **Atwood's Imaginings of a Pre-Apocalyptic Dystopian Future**

Set in a speculative and not-so-distant future, *Oryx and Crake* begins with Snowman, the novel's focalizer who has survived for several months after an apocalyptic outbreak of a lethal virus called Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary (or JUVE) that almost annihilates the *homo sapiens*. Snowman is currently staying with a group of the lab-bred humanoids, the Crakers, whose eponymous now dead creator is Crake, a genius transgenic scientist and Snowman's best and only friend. Believing himself to be the last of his kind, Snowman is suffering from symptoms of severe depression including disruptive hallucinations, recurring nightmares, reveries, and ever haunting fragments of his old memories. As he is making his arduous journey to the RejoovenEsense Compound (where he used to live) in order to find more food, Snowman occasionally experiences mentally epileptic moments, which reveal his past during the time before the deadly pandemic. The pre-apocalyptic world is a technocratic capitalist dystopia where the populace is under the stringent control of the CorpSeCorps, a tyrannical security company whose power and authority rival that of an authoritarian and totalitarian government. In addition to horrendous living conditions plagued with diseases and social ills of all kinds, the environment is in extremely dire straits, as a result of human unfettered exploitation of nature. Gradually, Snowman recalls stories of his younger self, Jimmy, of his

past with Crake and Oryx, and of how the curtain falls on humanity. The novel ends with the image of a feverish Snowman, who has just discovered that there are three other human survivors hobbling toward them on a seashore, with a gun in hand.

In a rigorous inquiry into the responsible root causes for a futurological dystopia in *Oryx and Crake*, scholarship on Atwood has, with great vigor, condemned multifarious factors. At the top of the list is unchecked capitalism. This article agrees with critics such as Mohr (2015), who views the novel's pre-apocalyptic society as an eco- and biotechnological dystopia that is a result of hypercapitalism. If we read the novel in this light, we can see that Atwood orchestrates a scabrous and uncannily familiar world before us. Unrestrained global capitalism and full-blown scientism have thoroughly dominated human society, causing the collapse of traditional democracy, the emergence of a business-run technocratic authoritarian state, and lastly the widespread ravaging of the environment by human beings. The ever-increasing power and influence of businesses, especially the giant multinational corporations, have become the bedrock of human civilization. An embodiment of this fact is the CorpSeCorps, a megacorporate enterprise that starts as a security company for other corporations and eventually transforms into the biggest tyrant in the business and the world. Under the Corps' jurisdiction, society becomes imbued with capitalist greed, and money turns into a new god. The appearance of the CorpSeCorps also marks the disappearance of traditional authority and states as it smoothly replaces the previous form of government. People do not show any resistance to this change since they, for understandable reasons, seem to consider this new corporate replacement better and more promising than the useless and corrupted government of the older time. Moreover, perhaps owing to the dissolution of governments and nation-states, although it is never explicitly mentioned in the book, democracy seems to have disappeared out of thin air. Without any power to counterbalance it, the titanic corporation has morphed into a sort of Orwellian Big Brother. Snowman's narrative of the pre-apocalyptic society portrays the CorpSeCorps as having fully enjoyed its draconian reign over the planet—although we know it is not long before the forthcoming radical intervention by Crake.

As one of the most distinctive elements of Atwood's pre-apocalyptic imagination, consumerism at its full blossom, as a result of rampant capitalism, has flourished with compounders' extravagant and hedonistic lifestyles. People revel in an easy life facilitated by technological innovations in various areas ranging from fun gadgets to useful practical services. However, this luxury is not free. Based on this status quo, the wealthier you are, the happier you can be, as more gates to indulgent happiness are accessible to you. Consequently, money and affluence become the ultimate indicator of one's social status as well as a guarantee of a contented life by a consumerist standard. By extension, knowledge and skills in the field of science and technology are more desirable than others are because they satisfy the market's demands. The prime examples of this are genetic scientists like Jimmy's father and Crake, who earn a lot of money and lead good lives thanks to their profitable talents. Consumerism is promoted by the technocratic capitalistic state in order to control its people by creating more and more insatiable consumption. Mercantile and consumerist ethics supersede other kinds of morality resulting in various social ills, such as inequality and abuse of power.

In addition to uncontrolled hypercapitalism, another cultural force that has dominated the world is scientism. It describes the dogmatic and often excessive belief in natural science as the only definitive methodology to objectively and empirically validate truths and reality and acquire knowledge. This almost fanatical faithfulness to scientific methods and rationale has become the ideological foundation of human society. That people who are gifted with scientific knowledge and ingenuity can contribute more to the world and the company, thus enjoying a more privileged life, is evident in the novel. The influence of science is especially far-reaching for the people who live in the Compounds where science and technology are integral to the whole gamut of compounders' quotidian lives from food, products for daily uses, and healthcare to security. Perhaps the most vivid illustration of scientism is seen in Crake's glorification of his successful Paradise project, which claims to remove detrimental features inherent in human genes, as he declares, "what once-unimaginable things had been accomplished by the team here" (Atwood, 2013, p. 358). Moreover,

when Jimmy protests that such projects are crossing the line of morality, Crake nonchalantly answers that “they represent the art of the possible” (p. 359). This exchange shows an unshakable faith in science and technology at its pinnacle. In other words, if the line can be crossed, then why not cross it? Furthermore, at a deeper level, a manipulative reductionist rationale embedded in science—such as Crake’s ambition to cure social ills by engineering human genes—also underpins the ways in which people think, live, and behave, as well as the ways in which social institutions operate. That is, humans assume a eugenic view that they can attain perfection simply and purely via science and biotechnology. However, such belief is proven to be a mere castle in the air by Crake’s telling failure to genetically edit out singing and a tendency for culture in the Crakers. Concerns over the problematics of science are in line with critics, such as Stein (2010) who sees Crake as an embodiment of the misuse of science in the same manner as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, or Kuznicki (2017). Some critics point out that by writing in the genre of dystopia and science fiction, Atwood automatically engages in the critique of science, though it should be noted that technology might not be harmful per se depending on humans who employ it. Dunlap (2013) contends that *Oryx and Crake* can be interpreted as a caution against any extreme solution to the environmental crisis. Dunning (2005) reads the novel as a warning against the underlying danger of eugenic science.

Perhaps the severest crisis in Atwood’s dystopian imaginings is environmental. Global ecological catastrophes threaten every life on earth. To start with, human-induced climate change has affected the pre-apocalyptic world in full force. Conventional seasons, such as Spring, Summer, Winter and Fall, have ceased to exist. The weather has also become unpredictable and dreadful. Even several months after the virus apocalypse and the disappearance of most humans and their activities, the natural world is still life-threatening as Snowman has to avoid unbearable heat during the mid-day described as the scorching super UV ray or “the punishing sun” (Atwood, 2013, p. 6)—he also has to be on the lookout for a sudden thunderstorm. Different parts of the world have been inflicted by different symptoms of the ill Mother Earth: the U.S. state of Texas has drastically transformed into a completely

inhabitable desert, forcing millions to migrate, and Oxford University has been inundated due to a rise in sea level. Sequentially, there are fewer natural resources for humans to exploit. Real food is increasingly substituted by lab-created edible materials and GMOs such as Svetlana No-Meat Sausage, ChickieNobs, and Secret Burger; they often are of a dubious origin and said to have awful flavors. A hidden bright side is that there is no need to be so concerned about carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels anymore since gasoline and such have already been depleted, leading the Compounds to use other alternative energies such as solar energy. Global climate change along with deforestation as part of business expansion and economic growth are speculated to have been factors in the daily extinction of many species. The road to extinction is not exclusive to other species because *homo sapiens* is too forecasted to be on its way ere long as Crake reveals to Jimmy:

I've seen the latest confidential Corps demographic reports. As a species, we're in deep trouble, worse than anyone's saying. They're afraid to release the stats because people might just give up, but take it from me, we're running out of space-time. Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon demand is going to exceed supply for everyone. (Atwood, 2013, p. 347)

According to reliable statistical data, humanity is running out of food, space, time, and luck. A kind but pointed reminder from Atwood's dystopia here is that even if all human activities are to immediately and effectively stop, the already badly damaged earth will not recover soon—provided that it will ever at all. Under such circumstances, it is unsurprising that some critics of *Oryx and Crake* regard humanity's dooms as inevitable (Bouson, 2013; Canavan, 2012).

This paper agrees with several other critics on the fact that unrestrained global capitalism, unchecked scientism, and technology are accountable for ecological disasters in *Oryx and Crake*. However, reading the novel through the lens of Murray Bookchin's social ecology, it attempts to shed light on more specific elements that are associated directly and indirectly with environmental crises. As this paper argues, diversiform inequality and pervasive hierarchical thinking, which result



in the society's warped ethics, are essential factors in the downfall of humanity and the destruction of the natural world.

### **Ubiquitous Inequality and Hierarchical Thinking**

This paper's examination of *Oryx and Crake* discovers that in a pre-apocalyptic dystopian landscape, wealth and knowledge are the most prominent areas in which inequality and hierarchy are best seen. Various kinds of hierarchy, dominant and deep-rooted in human society, serve as a perfect environment conducive to the fermentation of people's hierarchical perception of reality applicable to both humans and non-humans. Such a worldview leads to the exploitation of the natural world. This corresponds with Murray Bookchin's theory of social ecology where, as he succinctly summarizes, "the very notion of the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human" (1982, p. 5). Bookchin argues that all kinds of environmental issues faced by humanity today are a result of man-made actions. These actions, further explained, are the physical manifestation of that which is imbued in the human psyche (i.e., the conception of hierarchy and domination). Bookchin sees hierarchy as "the cultural, traditional and psychological systems of obedience and command, not merely the economic and political systems to which the terms class and State most appropriately refer" and domination as existing "in a more subtle psychological sense, of body by mind, of spirit by a shallow instrumental rationality, and of nature by society and technology" (p. 7). By this definition, hierarchy is almost omnipresent when we delve more deeply into layers upon layers of our society, experiences, and relationships with other humans as well as the non-human. Because human society is structured and organized in a hierarchical manner, humankind, therefore, becomes accustomed to and shaped by that very environment. Simply put, all social establishments, characterized by a hierarchical sensibility and chauvinistic human exceptionalism at their cruxes, can be held accountable for ecological exploitations and damages done by humans who believe or feel they are entitled to do so. This hubristic and imperialist mindset has contributed to serious damage done to the environment. At its core, social ecology believes that "at the most fundamental level ecological problems are

essentially social problems” (Price, 2012, p. 158). For a person who is born into a world full of multifarious stratifications, it is unavoidable that their worldview is reinforced by that very hierarchical status quo and, in turn, it is strengthened. In this vein, if a person perceives the world around them in a clearly defined, ranked order, they will likely see humans as the most special and superior to all in the grand scale of the natural world, resulting in a problematic anthropocentric belief in humankind’s entitled dominion of nature. These are the basic constituents of warped ethics.

In *Oryx and Crake*, economic inequality manifests itself most evidently in the bifurcation of society into the Compounds and the Pleeblands. The first is a technological haven of a wonderful life, a man-made and business-run paradise where the corporation’s executives, employees, affiliates, and scientists under its wing enjoy a wide range of goods and advantages such as better food, schools, air, water, security, home, jobs, future and supposedly a happy family. Jimmy and Crake grow up in this kind of environment. In sharp contrast, the Pleeblands can be described plainly in two ways: one, it is a greatly inferior version of the Compounds with a worse version of everything; or two, it simply lacks what the Compounds have.

Notably, hierarchy not only exists between the binary opposition of Compounds and Pleeblands but also enroots itself as a seemingly natural structure, especially within the Compounds. The Compounds can be ranked into different grades. One indicator of the Compound’s grade is its setting. Lowly AnooYoo Compound, where adult Jimmy works, is situated among the pleeblands and is described mockingly as it could as well be part of those pleeblands. OrganInc Farm Compound, where young Jimmy used to live, is average. Then, HelthWyzer Compound, where his family moves to, is an upgrade. The Compound’s academic standard and its genetic pool quality also considered indicators of the hierarchy among various Compounds. To illustrate, in comparison with OrganInc Farm’s level, the students at HelthWyzer High school are in the above-average and upper level, which suggests that either they inherit superior genes from parents or they receive better education and nurturing. Jimmy can only stay in this Compound by virtue of his father’s career, while Crake is a natural. After their graduation, only

Crake with his prodigious brain is selected—by merits of his superior intelligence—to join Watson-Crick Compound, which is said to be the capital of the top genius students. Finally, the RejoovenEsense Compound, where Crake develops his megaprojects, is the ultimate Compound of all as it has convened the best scientists in the field of biotechnology. Moreover, similar to any organization in existence, there is also stratification of people working in the compounds as the management is divided in hierarchic order.

Another significant hierarchical split is the socio-economic chasm between the first world and the third world. The best evidence of such disparity is in the comparison between Jimmy and Crake who live in the first world and Oryx in the third world. Oryx, a subaltern woman from a lowly background with a gruesome past, represents the oppressed voice. Her stories of bitter childhood, usually told during pillow talk between her and Jimmy, demonstrate a striking contrast with the life of Jimmy and Crake in the first-world Compound. Born in and raised by a poverty-stricken family in a destitute village far from civilization, Oryx has spent her earliest years in much crueler conditions than Jimmy or Crake. For the sake of the entire family's survival, her mother barter her and her brother for a meager sum of money. This "transaction" is nicely put as an "apprenticeship" that will train the children to "earn their living in the wide world" (Atwood, 2013, p. 135). And this situation was not uncommon at all as other women in the village would come to help with dressing up the on-sale children to look pretty to drive up the price because they "might need to sell their own children one day, and if they helped out, they would be able to count on such help in return" (p. 135). For these people, it seems very normal to commit usually unethical deeds such as sacrificing one's own children in exchange for money and subsistence for the rest of the family. The accepted wisdom here, children would be told, is that "what they were doing was good, they were helping their families" (p. 140). Reminiscing about her earliest years, Oryx has observed that "all of this was understood, and if not condoned, at least pardoned" and the mothers who initiated the transaction feel "as if this act, done freely by themselves (no one had forced them, no one had threatened them), had not been performed willingly ...

they'd had no choice" (p. 140). From a realistic and practical point of view, this transaction is perhaps the most reasonable bargain for maintaining the village's population and family members so that there will be adequate food—just enough for all to survive. Ethics or a concept of right and wrong can only be secondary to the urgent reality of starvation.

After being sold and transported to a less penniless place, a still-very-young Oryx has to learn sordid ways of the world starting from being placed on the street as a child laborer, where she has to practice using her charms to solicit money and pity from customers. Not long after that, she has to work in a pornographic filmmaking industry that requires her to put on an act to please men sexually. It is during this time that she decides to pleasure her boss in trade for learning the English language—a very important and useful skill for climbing up the social ladder in the first world. She then continues working in this industry, mastering the art of manipulation and acumen in business until she eventually gets headhunted by Crake and becomes his adroit trusted aide and lover. In a way, Oryx may be analogized to a group of amoral people who have no luxury to contemplate the ethics of good and evil as they are busy grappling with life and penuriousness. Such an ethical question as to how she should live her life or how she should interact with the natural world and other people is not as essential as her survival and well-being.

Together with economic inequality, hierarchical sensibility exists not only in the polarization of society into the rich and the poor but also in the two spectrums of knowledge. Although it is usually a given that people well equipped with knowledge should fare better than those without, in-equal treatment persists even among the well-educated. Human society in *Oryx and Crake* does not equally value different kinds of knowledge. Certain kinds of knowledge are more relevant than others depending on their market value. For instance, Jimmy observes that there are two types of people with regards to their knowledge: one is the "number" people, or those who are born talented in mathematics and science, and the other is the "word" people, or those who are more proficient in a language, art, history, or other skills that do not belong to science. Crake represents the first while

Jimmy the latter. Scientific knowledge is considered superior to or more desirable than the Arts and Humanities because it can best answer the demands of people in such a techno-scientifically oriented society. Scientists and technology developers compete in creating new products that aim to satisfy consumers. As a result, science and technology are crucial qualifications or a pass for a privileged life in the Compound that is limited to people with valued abilities and skills, such as Jimmy's parents and Crake's father.

Examining Jimmy and Crake's career paths, we cannot help but notice a significantly wide gap in their fortune. The difference in their treatment received from society may not be so distinct in their elementary, middle, and high school but no sooner than they matriculate at colleges it becomes apparent. For illustration, Crake scores top of his class and with his superhuman intelligence is "auctioned" by many prestigious Compounds who compete with one another to find a superior brain to become their excellent money-grabber. On the other hand, and, in a saddening comparison, Jimmy has to struggle to find a place he can go to after high school and even requires some backdoor help from his father in order to enroll in the Martha Graham Academy, a formerly famous but now rundown Arts academy. Vast differences between Crake and Jimmy in terms of their careers are determined by the capitalistic and mercantile ethos that always seeks materialistic gains above all else. Crake's economic value corresponds to the worth of science and technology in the market. The antithetical situation happens with Jimmy. Because the abilities to invent innovative technology and to achieve scientific breakthroughs are in high demand by all, society mainly focuses on grooming a promising talent, thus lavishly providing all kinds of resources and attention to the *crème de la crème* of science such as Crake. Such fact is corroborated by the great disparity between the living conditions of Jimmy's and Crake's colleges.

Crake generally enjoys extravagant treatments from his college, Watson-Crick, which is also known as an "Asperger's U" since it is teeming with prodigies that the Compound has collected. "Compared with Martha Graham, Watson-Crick was a palace" is probably the best line to describe Crake's college in comparison with Jimmy's

(Atwood, 2013, p. 234). An analogy to a palace is very apposite since it connotes a condescending sense of hierarchy: that is, it is a place of the nobility, as opposed to the commoners. Watson-Crick is beautifully designed and luxuriously equipped with all kinds of high-end fancy commodities. To illustrate this, a passage colorfully and vividly delineates the stately campus:

The students in Botanical Transgenic (Ornamental Division) has created a whole array of drought-and-flood-resistant tropical blends, with flowers or leaves in lurid shades of chrome yellow and brilliant flame red and phosphorescent blue and neon purple. The pathways, unlike the crumbling cement walks at Martha Graham, were smooth and wide. Students and faculty were beetling along them in their electric golf carts. (Atwood, 2013, p. 234)

Crake's residence is a private suite with "a large bedroom, an enclosed bath and shower unit with steam function, a main living-dining room with a pullout couch ... and a study with a built-in sound system and a full array of compu-gizmos" along with maid service and other facilities (Atwood, 2013, p. 236). Moreover, students here are paid half of the royalties from their inventions as an incentive to keep them constantly active in making new discoveries and products. Evidently, and with Crake's affirmation, Watson-Crick is well-funded with a massive amount of subsidy from investors and the CorpSeCorps because whatever is developed here will be lucrative in a market with fierce competition.

Atwood deliberately seems to juxtapose this prodigal and kingly estate of elite Science students with that of Jimmy who is an Arts and language student. Jimmy's Martha Graham Academy is described as already on the verge of closure—if not a complete collapse. Jimmy's first impression of Martha Graham sketches that "it was surrounded ... by the tackiest kind of pleeblands: vacant warehouses, burnt-out tenements, empty parking lots. Here and there were sheds and huts put together from scavenged materials—sheets of tin, slabs of plywood—and inhabited no doubt by squatters" (p. 217). The campus's location is not the only bad aspect. In fact, it might not be wrong to say that

there are no redeeming points, as we can glean from a passage that grippingly summarizes the place:

The security at the Martha Graham gateway was a joke. The guards were half asleep, the walls—scrawled all over with faded graffiti—could have been scaled by a one-legged dwarf. ... there were no recreational facilities apart from a swimming pool that looked and smelled like a giant sardine can. Half the time the air conditioning in the dorms didn't work; there was a brownout problem with the electrical supply; the food in the cafeteria was mostly beige and looked like rakunk shit. There were arthropods in the bedrooms, families and genera various, but half of them were cockroaches. (Atwood, 2013, pp. 217-218)

Suffice it to say that everything here depresses Jimmy. Apart from the horrid physical conditions of Martha Graham, the education and subjects taught here are bleak prospects as well. Its once-popular courses, such as performing arts and filmmaking, are no longer relevant; in other words, they do not generate income since anybody can easily produce an instant film with highly-advanced computerized technology. As a result, and to his dismay, Jimmy analogizes these obsolete areas of study to Latin or bookbinding, which are “pleasant to contemplate in its way, but no longer central to anything” (p. 219). A handful of subjects that remain somewhat relevant are those that could assist in selling goods and making more profits so they are mostly related to advertising, such as “Problematics” that Jimmy studies (p. 220). Lastly, everything in college is impelled to serve some utilitarian and mercantile purposes, as the college’s newly added motto says “Our Students Graduate With Employable Skills” (p. 220). Even so, non-science students like Jimmy can only be second or third-class citizens in the first-world Compound.

The imaginings of a dystopian future, where all kinds of inequality prevail and hierarchies between humans and other humans are a norm, also reveal the hierarchical worldview through which human beings see nature. *Homo sapiens* has not only dominated its own kind but also other species and lifeless things such as natural resources, thereby creating a hierarchic order where it deems itself to

be superior to all. Evidently, this ethos is most prevalent in scientific logic, thinking, and methods. Scientists, especially those in the biotechnological field, are too conceited, believing in their means to intervene with nature and manipulate it, they often claim, for the benefit of humankind. While it is irrefutable that there are some technological advances and scientific breakthroughs that are truly beneficial to the human race, they may not be beneficial to non-human entities. For example, with the monstrous invention of ChickieNobs, which is genetically altered to yield more meat for humans to eat, soon ordinary chickens as we are familiar with, will be replaced and then allowed to enter the lengthy list of extinct species. In consonance with the anthropocentric logic, there is nothing wrong with humans' genetic modification of chickens for the maximized cost-benefit profits. That the natural world and every life in it are of incalculable value is sabotaged by the introduction of hierarchy and capitalistic avarice. The whole world has transformed into a grand market, where different kinds of values—spiritual, emotional, or moral—are arbitrarily reduced to a single category (i.e., monetary or market value). This paper calls the product of such ideological transformation “warped ethics”, or a set of moral beliefs that are twisted or corrupted by the deeply hierarchical dystopian landscape.

### **Warped Ethics as Harbingers of Apocalypse**

The three main characters—Crake, Oryx, and Jimmy—are prime examples of how a human becomes warped by the hierarchical thinking prevalent in the society in which they live. In the novel's landscape where everything is in unequally ranked order, the inhabitants cannot help but perpetuate that very systematic hierarchy. However, perhaps, as Atwood is trying to convey, in reality, there is something that cannot or should not be put into a ranking. If everything is structured hierarchically as it appears in *Oryx and Crake*, the human race is in deep trouble because the ultimate result will be the apocalypse of the natural world and everything in it, including humanity itself.

First, Crake is the perpetrator behind the lethal virus outbreak and the most powerful and radical figure among the three. Hierarchically speaking, he considers himself to be at the top of the pyramid, seeing



himself as having a superior intellectual capacity to other humans and priding himself in his own potential to be a game-changer. Growing up in the Compound, the heart of a dystopian landscape, young Crake has absorbed its problematic ways of thinking and mentality which, when coupled with his gifted intellect, become a formidable and dangerous combination. There is a pivotal pattern of parallelism between the CorpSeCorps and Crake in their actions. The first is their worship of scientific knowledge and disdain for art and culture. Second, Crake practically emulates the ways in which the company operates and deals with problems by immoral means. They involve headhunting the talented MaddAddamite scientists via hacking, secretly disposing those who refuse to work under him, employing HelthWyzer's evil marketing strategy in the selling of BlyssPluss pills, and acting like a monomaniacal tyrant who has to be in control of everything in his Paradise project. However, despite their similarities, Crake is definitely not a genuine supporter of the Corps. In fact, it seems that he wants to destroy it to avenge his father who was killed by the company.

Perhaps as a result of his vengeful response to the corrupted world and his conceit in his own ability, destructive inclination ferments in Crake's heart. This penchant for destruction is best expressed in his over-ambitious plan to reset the entire planet, by first exterminating the human race and then replacing it with genetically-modified eco-friendly and peaceful humanoids. This is because Crake sees human beings as the chief contributor to the ruination of the ecosystem—a fact that he realizes as he grows up in the Compound where humans only know how to consume but never consider the well-being of the environment. Crake's conviction in creating a new kind of human lies in the bio-historical observation that *homo sapiens* are endowed with genetic flaws resulting in all sorts of sufferings and unhappinesses—a claim supported by human civilization's long history of blood and gore. Crake's *magnum opus*, the BlyssPluss project, thus not only answers to his vindictive desire but also insinuates his ethical belief that humans have the right to rule over nature and control it at their will, especially with such powerful tools as science and technology. In other words, Crake attempts to cleanse the earth and humanity because he believes in the good cause of saving ecosystems from a dangerous

species like humans, and simply because he has the power and the means to do so without regard for other moral considerations. Putting this in a hierarchical perspective, it can be argued that Crake thinks that he is able and entitled to perform his drastic scheme because he places himself in the highest God-like position. This is Crake's warped ethics resulting from the twisted dystopian society.

Another case of Crake's distorted view as influenced by his absolute faith in science and technology is his reductionist attitude. Growing up in a place where immoral corporate scientists are role models of successful and powerful people, Crake becomes readily attracted to science. Since scientific knowledge reigns supreme in the hierarchy, it is easy for anyone, including Crake, to prioritize it over other kinds of knowledge. Like most scientists in the novel, Crake appears to champion science as the only correct source of truths and facts, where everything begins and ends. The best manifestation of such belief is the idea behind BlyssPluss, a miraculous pill that, as Crake proclaims to Jimmy, will "eliminate external causes of death" (Atwood, 2013, p. 345). These so-called external causes of death refer to unnatural causes of death such as war, contagious diseases, overpopulation, and environmental degradation. Crake further explains that the pill "was designed to take a set of givens, namely the nature of human nature, and steer these givens in a more beneficial direction than the ones are hitherto taken" (p. 346). In plain English, he means that his pill is capable of modifying human genes, thereby improving the species on a genetic and biological level, which he believes is the root cause of human suffering. Crake's hidden assumption is that human beings are just "hormone robots" and "faulty ones" at that (p. 196), meaning that all social ills originate in human biology and must only be fixed through biotechnology. This suggests a narrow perspective that oversimplifies such complex beings as humans and overlooks other possible factors misinterpreting them as merely biological. Crake's reductionist and biologically deterministic view is highly problematic as it leads to a serious case of misanthropy. He firmly believes that since humans are hereditarily defective, they are doomed to behave irrationally and suffer as a result. Snowman himself seems to realize his friend's destructive tendency acknowledging that "Crake

had no very high opinion of human ingenuity, despite the large amount of it he himself possessed” (p. 114). In this light, Crake may be seen as having wasted his excellent intellectual potential to make benign contributions to the world regardless of the obsession with economic value—an alternate possibility that is made impossible by the dystopian society propelled by rampant capitalism where only unethical or amoral people can thrive. Ubiquitous examples of this poignant truth in the society run by the corrupt CorpSeCorps do not allow Crake to see other positive alternatives and ultimately inspire him to create an apocalypse to end all corruption and begin everything anew.

The character Crake is one of the most commonly seen types of villains, a mad scientist whose motive can be identified as eugenic and whose grand scheme has gone wrong. The most well-known example of such characters would be Victor Frankenstein from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, doctor Moreau from H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and Aylmer from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story, “The Birth-Mark”. According to Levine (2017), the eugenics movement, “often dubbed the science of good breeding,” (p. 1) is characterized by the scientific beliefs in the genetic betterment of the human species. Eugenicists believe that in humans there are genes that determine human good and bad behaviors, thus by manipulating biological elements they can control the quality of human beings. The proponents of eugenics believe in the power of genetic science to improve the quality of humanity, while the opponents attack their underlying assumptions that are marked by racist and imperialist attitudes. As Levine (2017) explains, “in seeking to eradicate ‘bad’ genes and hereditary defects, eugenicists embarked on radical schemes that reinforced and often burnished existing prejudices” and “[i]n the name of science and human improvement, eugenics offered biological solutions to social problems” (p. 2). By this definition, Crake can be regarded as an unmistakable epitome of a eugenicist. His ambition might originate from a good intention to save humanity from such problems as overpopulation, depletion of natural resources, and food shortage, yet because of warped ethics and reductionistic thinking, he cannot solve them correctly. As this paper has already demonstrated, there are important social causes that play a major role in shaping human behaviors and ethics that

cannot be simplistically reduced to genetic or biological factors. It is clear in the novel that Atwood holds that human beings are more than just “hormone robots” (Atwood, 2012, p. 196). Crake’s most ambitious creation, the Crakers, whom he hopes to be devoid of culture that he believes to be the origin of human corruptness and sufferings, betray his expectation.

Oryx is another character who grows up with warped ethics influenced by the living conditions with which she has to grapple. In order to survive in a harsh environment and secure a better life, Oryx has to learn to pretend, act, lie, manipulate, and use her beauty as an advantage following the unwritten rules of the dystopian world to advance up the social ladder. Consequently, many questions circulate around this elusive character. Is she Crake’s co-conspirator who knows every detail about his vicious plan, hence an accomplice to his human-decimating subterfuge? Alternatively, is she simply an example of an amoral bystander? It is not clarified whether she really does have no clue about JUVIE in the BlyssPluss pills she helps distribute around the world as she claims to Jimmy. Oryx explains that she follows Crake because she believes in his ideals and refuses to elope with Jimmy saying, “[y]ou’re a good boy. But I would never leave Crake. I believe in Crake, I believe in his [– she groped for the word –] his vision. He wants to make the world a better place. This is what he’s always telling me. I think that is so fine, don’t you, Jimmy?” (Atwood, 2013, p. 377). Jimmy does not believe in Crake’s ideal nor altruism but Oryx defends Crake: “Oh, you are wrong, Jimmy. He has found the problems, I think he is right. There are too many people and that makes the people bad. I know this from my own life, Jimmy. Crake is a very smart man” (p. 377). This conversation reveals one essential thing about Oryx. A life of poverty and being used by people in society as commodities have led Oryx to have faith in Crake’s ideals and goals. At present, overpopulation results in poverty and suffering with which she has first-hand experience. From this angle, Oryx might not know the full extent of Crake’s subterfuge and might be genuinely advocating for a better world where people would not have to go through the same things she did.

Nonetheless, in any case, the character of Oryx illuminates the crucial fact that because inequality and injustice so abound in the world, it is difficult and probably unjust for the underprivileged to uphold ethics and morality. They almost have nothing save their lives as a bargain against wrongdoings committed by the powerful and the wealthy. Thus, a dilemmatic question prompted by Oryx is this: should or can the subaltern or marginal voices be subjected to the same moral standard and accountability as people of more affluence and power? Furthermore, in a society brimming with inequality and hierarchy, it is extremely difficult—if possible, at all—to maintain ethics that is not warped. At the end of the day, all sorts of complications and issues boil down to the social problems of inequality and hierarchy, which are in agreement with Bookchin's social ecology. When warped ethics becomes normalized, humanity is on a bullet train to the apocalypse. Even people with a conscience can turn corrupt thanks to the suppression society puts on them.

Finally, Jimmy or Snowman is the only character whose inner moral strife is evident throughout the time. As the novel opens with the post-apocalyptic scenario, it displays an image of a heartbroken and guilt-ridden man who struggles to cope with his remorse. Having survived a virus apocalypse, Snowman suffers from haunting guilt. Contrite, angry, and depressed, he feels that he should or could have done something to prevent the pandemonium masqueraded and unleashed by his best friend, Crake. He repeatedly ruminates over his past. As he contemplates his pre-apocalyptic experiences, he admits that “[t]here had been something willed about it though, his ignorance. Or not willed, exactly: structured. He'd grown up in walled spaces, and then he had become one. He had shut things out” (Atwood, 2013, p. 216). This statement strongly suggests how the prison-like compound in which he grows up has a profound influence on the person. His upbringing in this kind of world compels him to ignore the obvious problems. It is noteworthy that this is not mere ignorance but an act of ignoring. We cannot say Jimmy is not aware of the bad deeds committed by the company or Crake. He definitely knows but he turns a blind eye to them. Even if he has his moral stance, he does not stand up to it.

Along the same line of thought, how much then is Jimmy complicit in Crake's scheme to decimate the human race? Arguably, he sees it coming but chooses to indulge in a happy time with Oryx rather than tackle the bubbling fatal signal from his friend. This is likely because, in this dystopian society, it is more normal and easier to ignore headache-inducing morality and prioritize one's happiness. In a world where corporations hold immensely powerful positions in society, it appears that businesses unscrupulously abuse their power and influence solely for the sake of their benefits. In Jimmy's earliest complete memory when he is about five and a half, we witness a scene of a huge bonfire with cows, sheep, and pigs (Atwood, 2013, pp. 17-18). This outdoor crematorium is necessitated by a contagious disease and the fear of it. Watching the bonfire, Jimmy's father shares his thoughts with a friend that he "wouldn't be surprised" if the bug is "brought in on purpose" and he is disgusted by the possibility that the company itself is culpable in this because they want to "drive up the prices" and "make a killing on their own stuff, that way" (p. 21). A similar replay of such an event is when Crake discloses to Jimmy the heinous truth he has found out about HelthWyzer. Crake states that the company has furtively inserted a new disease in their health products and supplements so that they can perpetuate a lucrative but vicious cycle of new illness, new product, and new customers (pp. 246-248). Such revelation that should have been shocking and completely unacceptable is readily tolerated by many, including Jimmy. There are at least two major stakes here: one is that the Corps deters potential dissenters by threatening them with death, and the other is that those who do not condone their policies will have to forfeit good living conditions and a happy life promised by the Compounds.

Living in this kind of environment, Jimmy naturally becomes accustomed to the warped ethics of the world. The corporation with its pervasive power can easily arrange a convenient death for any non-conformist. Jimmy may have his mother as a moral model who stands up to her cause and fights against the immoral company, but the terrible way in which she has ended up must have thrown cold water on Jimmy's spirit and conscience. What can he, a failure compared to his parents, do when even his more capable mother fails? The sorry

fates of Jimmy's mother and Crake's father serve as a conspicuous threat to those who dare to oppose the Corps. Jimmy's mother, Sharon, after learning about the company's unethical proceedings, turns against the HelthWyzer Compound and escapes. As a counterattack, the CorpSeCorps never stops its vindictive pursuit of her until she is finally captured and executed several years later. In addition, during her absence, it also occasionally sends people to visit Jimmy in person with a lie detector to interrogate him about whether he has come into contact with his fugitive mother, thus putting him under great stress. Jimmy is also aware that they always have him on the monitor via different means, such as his e-mail and phone. Like Sharon, Crake's father cannot tolerate his company's vile deeds and is set to blow the whistle on HelthWyzer's crime. However, just before he does, he accidentally falls off the rails to his death—and to the company's convenience. The truth is that someone close to him, Crake believes it is his soon-to-be stepfather (uncle Pete) who has tipped off the HelthWyzer first, hence his death preserves the secrets of the corporation.

Jimmy must have suffocated in the air of hopelessness in defying the corporate establishments that can be felt not just at the individual level but also on a larger scale. The biggest social insurgence on the coverage is the "gen-mod coffee war" (Atwood, 2013, p. 209), which stems out of HelthWyzer's brand new genetically modified coffee bean called "Happicuppa", which boasts the latest feature of simultaneous ripening. This new design enables larger plantations and replaces human harvesters with machines. Such innovation "[throws] the small growers out of business and [reduces] both them and their laborers to starvation-level poverty" thereby inciting a global public outrage (p. 209). This gory episode brusquely describes the scene: "Riots broke out, crops were burned, Happicuppa cafes were looted, Happicuppa personnel were car-bombed or kidnapped or shot by snipers or beaten to death by mobs; and, on the other side, peasants were massacred by the army" (p. 209). Uncle Pete, who is amongst the top brass of HelthWyzer, has displayed no sympathy for this as he says, while watching the commentary after his afternoon golfing. He simply comments "it's the usual uproar" and "they'll get tired of it, they'll settle down. Everybody wants a cheaper cup of coffee – you

can't fight that" (p. 212). This uncaring attitude implies an assumption—if not an axiom—that in the extreme capitalist climate, money has become the invincible weapon and the side with money will always emerge a winner. Furthermore, it seems that in this dystopian landscape there are no historical examples of a truly successful attempt at stopping the Corps for anyone to see and learn from so that they can do something about it. In addition, if this is the status quo of the world Jimmy has seen and the solely kind of stories he has heard, what can an ordinary individual like Jimmy do to change it?

## Conclusion

This paper has so far identified the chief causes and factors behind the apocalypse that transpires in *Oryx and Crake*. They are human but not just in their genetic makeup. *Homo sapiens* have begun their world domination by subjugating both their own kinds and others until it has finally conquered the whole planet. It has established hierarchy, perpetuated inequality, and maintained its sovereignty over everything or so they think. Now, humanity still continues its attempt to harness life and death with its wondrous scientific knowledge and technological excellence. However, little does it know it is walking down a wrong path, and one that leads to self-destruction. Humanity spends so much money, time, and life seeking pleasure without paying any heed to countless incessant warnings that if these circumstances are allowed to go on, there will be nothing left at all. In short, it has fallen prey to its own inventions.

One of many major ideas that Atwood's novel gives us is that in the grand scheme of things everybody is both the victim and the victimizer, as they are naturally warped by the world around them. Social ecology and this paper's analysis of *Oryx and Crake* similarly see the crucial role that hierarchy and domination deep-rooted in human society play in the devastation of both humans and the natural world. Human civilization as it is in Atwood's dystopian imaginings is mortally ill from the unbridled exploitation of the environment. In other words, we are socially responsible for our actions and their effect on the world around us. In turn, the society we live in is also accountable for shaping us to be who we are and influencing what we



do. In correspondence with this logic, in order to secure hope for the survival of our species we need to resolve this seemingly eternal cycle with our unwavering determination by searching for unwarped ethics which will be able to alleviate those underlying problems.

In the pursuit of a better future, what Crake does is simply eliminate human civilization with the assistance of a pandemic apocalypse that solely targets the genetically flawed *homo sapiens*, thereby forestalling a complete ecological apocalypse that will result in lifeless earth. However, Crake's wholesale genocide is certainly not what we hope to see. Whereas Crake, as a believer of biological determinism, chiefly condemns biological roots for human sufferings and thinks that culture is illogical and jeopardizing, this paper has thus far argued that the roots are social, and that culture is our most powerful tool to manage problems and help lessen our sufferings. This paper has also contended that *Oryx and Crake* show how ethics, as one important aspect of culture, proves to be most central to the survival of all lives. Finally, sharing Atwood's ideal and agreeing with Bookchin's spirit, this paper bases its conviction on the ground that if humanity has sufficient power to destroy the earth, they must—most logically and naturally—hold the potential to save it as well. By the cultural means of writing and storytelling, Atwood evokes our conscience and galvanizes us to seek apposite ethics, which serves as an indispensable factor that will render this utopian enterprise possible.

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