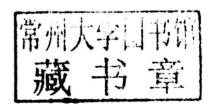
ContemporaryLiterary Criticism

CLC 382

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short-Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

Lawrence J. Trudeau EDITOR



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- The Introduction contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
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Oryx and Crake Margaret Atwood

(Full name Margaret Eleanor Atwood) Canadian novelist, short-story writer, poet, playwright, essayist, librettist, and critic.

The following entry provides criticism of Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003). For additional information about Atwood, see *CLC*, Volumes 2, 3, 4, 8, 13, 15, 25, 84, 246, and 342; for additional information about the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, see *CLC*, Volumes 44 and 135; for additional information about the novel *Alias Grace*, see *CLC*, Volume 232; for additional information about the novel *Cat's Eye*, see *CLC*, Volume 239; for additional information about the novel *Surfacing*, see *CLC*, Volume 371.

INTRODUCTION

Oryx and Crake, by Margaret Atwood (1939-), is a novel of physical and psychological endurance in a postapocalyptic landscape. Its protagonist, Snowman, is among the last survivors of a global pandemic that he unwittingly helped create; for much of the novel, he believes himself to be the only human to have escaped the plague. To secure such necessities as food and medication, Snowman scours the ruins of the Compounds, luxurious corporate research campuses built for society's elite. In the process, he encounters painful reminders of life before the pandemic and of the lost friends for whom the novel is named.

Published as the first installment of the MaddAddam trilogy (2003-13), *Oryx and Crake* drew praise for its critique of trends in contemporary culture, such as rampant consumerism and the rise of powerful multinational corporations. More controversial was Atwood's labeling of the work as "speculative fiction," which has been seen by some critics as an attempt to distance her novel from the established genre of science fiction. Critical studies of *Oryx and Crake* frequently emphasize its resemblance to earlier dystopian novels, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Indeed, Atwood's book is often described as an update of these novels in that it retains their basic themes while incorporating such recent phenomena as genetic engineering, the Internet, and neoliberal capitalism.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

The action of *Oryx and Crake* centers on Snowman, a treehouse-dwelling hermit who believes himself to be the

last human survivor of an unnamed calamity. The nature of this disaster is only revealed to the reader later in the work, but evidence of it is omnipresent: whole cities have been depopulated, and the Compounds, once heavily guarded communities controlled by powerful corporations, are now overrun with weeds and feral animals. Apart from Snowman, the only sentient characters are the Children of Crake, or "Crakers," a tribe of docile, green-eyed, transgenic humanoids who subsist on plant matter and lack any form of social hierarchy. They revere Snowman as a supernatural being, partly because of his appearance and partly because of his knowledge of the former world. In his interactions with them, Snowman claims to be capable of communing with Crake and Oryx, whom the Crakers worship as gods. The reader soon learns that these are the names of Snowman's deceased friends from before the disaster. From its opening pages, the narrative of Oryx and Crake shifts between Snowman's life in the present—a brute struggle for survival against insects, predators, and disease—and memories of the years before the calamity. The boundaries between these two time lines are somewhat permeable, though Atwood generally uses Snowman's real name, Jimmy, to signal episodes set in the past.

As Snowman makes the trek to the RejoovenEsense Compound to search for food and supplies, his thoughts take him back to his past. He recalls his mother, who left home shortly after his tenth birthday to pursue a career as an anticorporate activist and was later executed by police forces. He remembers meeting Crake, a laconic genius who was his best friend in high school and later helped him get a job at "Rejoov." There, Jimmy worked to promote a new pharmaceutical called BlyssPluss, which would prolong youth and increase sexual performance while lowering the fertility of the population. Troubled by the ethics of such a product, Jimmy uneasily agreed to the assignment. Later he realized that the pill's effect was not birth control but rather a deadly and highly contagious virus known as JUVE, which would lie dormant until BlyssPluss had been distributed worldwide. In the intervening months, Jimmy met Oryx, a beautiful young woman hired by Crake to market BlyssPluss globally and to watch over the genetic experiments known as Crakers. Jimmy and Oryx became lovers, despite her ongoing romantic relationship with Crake, who, Oryx claimed, was too preoccupied with his research to notice the affair. When the JUVE virus became active and began to spread, Crake returned to the inner sanctum of Rejoov and killed himself and Oryx, leaving Jimmy to lead the Crakers out of the Compound and teach them to survive in the outside world.

Tormented by these memories, Snowman makes his way through RejoovenEsense as quickly as possible, retrieving vital supplies but injuring his foot in the process. He returns to the Crakers, who announce that three others like him have visited their village. In the last scene of the novel, Snowman tracks these humans to their camp and waits, unsure whether to ambush them or ask for their help.

MAJOR THEMES

Oryx and Crake is in large measure a cautionary tale that illustrates how the technologies of the near future might contribute to a global catastrophe. The central event of the novel, the JUVE epidemic, is precipitated by two major forces: uncontrolled genetic experimentation and the unchecked power of profit-driven corporations. In the world of Oryx and Crake, the role of government is filled by multinational businesses who maintain their own housing facilities, banking systems, and militarized police forces, while government in its more familiar form has become insignificant. The global reach of corporations such as RejoovenEsense ensures that a product such as BlyssPluss will find as broad a market as possible, leaving few parts of the world safe from its devastating side effects. The novel is filled with events that foreshadow the JUVE incident, episodes that demonstrate the rashness of the experimenters and the greed of their sponsors. Midway through the book, Crake takes Jimmy on a tour of research projects at the Watson-Crick Institute. The two stop at the BioDefences facility, where a new species of wolvogs (wolf/dog hybrids) are being raised as sentries. The wolvogs, Crake explains, are natural killers whose ferocity is masked by a friendly exterior. "What if they get out?" Jimmy wonders. "Go on the rampage? Start breeding, then the population spirals out of control—like those big green rabbits?" Crake coolly reassures Jimmy that this is impossible.

The wolvogs do get out, and they form a recurring threat to Snowman's safety in the aftermath of the JUVE outbreak. The "big green rabbits," earlier escapees, thrive in the lush rainforest that covers much of North America in the present of the novel. Pigoons, mutant pigs engineered as humanorgan donors, also escape, and they nearly trample Snowman as he attempts to sneak through the RejoovenEsense compound. So numerous are these instances of laboratory jailbreak that the creatures themselves serve as a form of bleak comic relief: rakunks (raccoon-skunks) prowl the rubbish heap near Snowman's hut, and he repeatedly worries that snats (snake-rats), though reportedly exterminated, have survived and established a breeding population. Nor are transgenic animals the only case of human ingenuity spiraling out of control: Crake himself, as the product of a highly effective but deliberately lopsided education, is perhaps the finest illustration of this theme. Scientifically brilliant but ethically bankrupt, fueled by amoral curiosity and enabled by the greed of his corporate handlers, Crake represents the unpredictable, and ultimately disastrous, end stage in the social "experiment" of late capitalism.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Oryx and Crake was published in 2003 to largely positive reviews. Critics praised Atwood's suspenseful narrative and generally found a chilling aptness in her vision of the future. Detractors of the work often claimed that the novel contains a flaw common to works of science fiction: a focus on plot at the expense of character development. For literary scholars, it remained an open question whether Oryx and Crake should be classified as science fiction, belonged to some other genre, or was best regarded as a sui generis work. Thus, a great deal of Oryx and Crake criticism has been comparative in nature, seeking commonalities between the book and earlier literature of various styles and periods. Popularly, the work has often been labeled a dystopian science-fiction novel, but in a 2004 essay on the historical and literary context of her work, Atwood herself argued that Oryx and Crake was not science fiction, nor a dystopia in the strict sense, nor even truly a novel. "Science fiction proper," Atwood explained, "denotes books with things in them we can't yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can't go." Speculative fiction, in contrast, "employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth." She also clarified that Oryx and Crake was "not a classic dystopia," as her earlier and celebrated novel The Handmaid's Tale (1985) had been.

These disclaimers notwithstanding, the term dystopia has has emerged frequently in critical discussions of Oryx and Crake. Stephen Dunning (2005; see Further Reading) compared Atwood's novel to Huxley's Brave New World and Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, arguing that Oryx and Crake more closely resembles Huxley's work, in that it places the blame for society's "present vulnerability to unprecedented disaster" not on authoritarian forces like Orwell's Big Brother but on a more generalized sense of purposelessness and cynicism in contemporary culture. Oryx and Crake criticism often involves comparisons to The Handmaid's Tale, which takes place in a future United States ravaged by a fertility crisis and is arguably Atwood's best-known work. Angela Laflen (2009) observed that the two novels are united not only by their speculative plots but also by their concern with "the use of visual culture to aestheticize political and social life."

Not all readers have been impressed by the dystopian themes of Atwood's novel. Christina Bieber Lake (2013) noted that some proponents of biotechnology, such as bioethicist Ronald Green, have dismissed the novel as unduly alarmist and based on a "neo-Luddite fear of technology." Lake rejected such arguments, positing that Atwood's warning is not about the dangers of technology but rather

about the problems with a cultural shift that "encourages people to think about the purpose of human life in a narrow and nefarious way." Other critics have voiced appreciation for the novel's message while objecting to details of its presentation. Helen E. Mundler (2004), for example, argued that the strength of *Oryx and Crake* "leaves us with a number of riddling questions" and is undercut by its "attempt to universalise, to dislocate" what she calls the "riddling questions" of the novel "from any one, local discourse of the postcolonial." Conceding that the novel has a "strange and dark power," Mundler contended that it also projects North American values and institutions onto the global stage, relegating the rest of the world to a peripheral role; in the process, it veers toward a "totalising, generalising, and thus sometimes didactic and hectoring, discourse."

Nonetheless, a majority of critics have found the novel's pastiche of postmodern culture to be insightful, even prophetic, and many have remarked on the seemingly small distance between present-day technology and the apocalyptic world of the novel. J. Brooks Bouson (2004; see Further Reading) observed that the "new age of genetic manipulation and biological control" adumbrated in the novel had actually already begun, as scientists have produced transgenic plants and animals not far removed from the pigoons and rakunks of Atwood's novel. Chung-Hao Ku (2006) analyzed the thematic relationships among human characters and transgenic creatures in the novel, exploring "the notion of human corporeality in the context of an anthropocentric ideology." Grayson Cooke (2006) argued that Oryx and Crake is "a reflection on what it might mean to posit an end to the human within a biotechnological scenario."

Michael J. Hartwell

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Double Persephone. Toronto: Hawkshead, 1961. (Poetry)

The Circle Game. Detroit: Cranbrook Acad. of Art, 1964. (Poetry)

Kaleidoscopes Baroque: A Poem. Detroit: Cranbrook Acad. of Art, 1965. (Poetry)

Talismans for Children. Detroit: Cranbrook Acad. of Art, 1965. (Poetry)

Speeches for Doctor Frankenstein. Detroit: Cranbrook Acad. of Art, 1966. (Poetry)

The Animals in That Country. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1968. (Poetry)

The Edible Woman. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969. (Novel)

The Journals of Susanna Moodie. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1970. (Poetry)

Procedures for Underground. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1970. (Poetry)

Power Politics. Toronto: Anansi, 1971. (Poetry)

Surfacing. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972. (Novel)

Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature. Toronto: Anansi, 1972. (Criticism)

You Are Happy. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1974. (Poetry)

Lady Oracle. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976. (Novel)

Selected Poems. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1976. (Poetry)

Dancing Girls and Other Stories. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977. (Short stories)

Days of the Rebels: 1815-1840. Toronto: Natural Science of Canada, 1977. (History)

Marsh, Hawk. N.p.: Dreadnaught, 1977. (Poetry)

Two-Headed Poems. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1978. (Poetry)

Up in the Tree. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978. (Children's fiction)

Life before Man. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979. (Novel)

Anna's Pet. With Joyce Barkhouse. Toronto: Lorimer, 1980. (Children's fiction)

Bodily Harm. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981. (Novel)

Notes towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written. Toronto: Salamander, 1981. (Poetry)

True Stories. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1981. (Poetry)

Encounters with the Element Man. Concord: Ewert, 1982. (Novel)

The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English. Ed. Margaret Atwood. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1982. (Poetry)

Second Words: Selected Critical Prose. Toronto: Anansi, 1982. (Criticism)

Bluebeard's Egg. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983. Pub. as Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986. (Short stories)

Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems. Toronto: Coach House, 1983. (Fiction and poetry)

Snake Poems. Toronto: Salamander, 1983. (Poetry)

Unearthing Suite. N.p.: Grand Union, 1983. (Short story)

Interlunar. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1984. (Poetry)

The Handmaid's Tale. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985. (Novel)

The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English. Ed. Atwood and Robert Weaver. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1986. Rev. ed. The New Oxford Book of Canadian

- Short Stories in English. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1995. (Short stories)
- Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and New, 1976-1986. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1986. (Poetry)
- Selected Poems 1965-1975. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. (Poetry)
- Cat's Eye. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988. (Novel)
- The Best American Short Stories 1989. Ed. Atwood and Shannon Ravenel. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989. (Short stories)
- For the Birds. Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990. (Children's fiction)
- Selected Poems: 1966-1984. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1990. (Poetry)
- Margaret Atwood Poems 1976-1986. London: Virago, 1991. (Poetry)
- Wilderness Tips and Other Stories. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991. (Short stories)
- Good Bones. Toronto: Coach House, 1992. Pub. as Good Bones and Simple Murders. New York: Doubleday, 1994. Pub. as Bones and Murders. London: Virago, 1995. (Short stories)
- The Poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwan. 2 vols. By Gwendolyn MacEwan. Ed. Atwood and Barry Callaghan. Toronto: Exile, 1993. (Poetry)
- The Robber Bride. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993. (Novel)
- Morning in the Burned House. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995. (Poetry)
- Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut. Toronto: Key Porter, 1995. (Children's fiction)
- Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1995. (Criticism)
- Alias Grace. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996. (Novel)
- Deux sollicitudes: Entretiens [published as Two Solicitudes: Conversations]. With Victor-Lévy Beaulieu. Quebec: Trois Pistoles, 1996. (Interviews)
- A Quiet Game and Other Early Works. Ed. Kathy Chung and Sherrill Grace. Edmonton: Juvenilia, 1997. (Children's fiction and poetry)
- A Search of "Alias Grace": On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1997. (Criticism)
- Eating Fire: Selected Poems, 1965-1995. London: Virago, 1998. (Poetry)
- The Blind Assassin. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2000. (Novel)

- Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. (Lectures)
- *Oryx and Crake. New York: Talese, 2003. (Novel)
- Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes. London: Bloomsbury P, 2003. (Children's fiction)
- Bottle. Hay: Hay Festival, 2004. (Short stories)
- Moving Targets: Writing with Intent, 1982-2004. Toronto: Anansi, 2004. Pub. as Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose, 1983-2005. New York: Carroll and Graf, 2005. (Essays and reviews)
- Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing, 1970-2005. London: Virago, 2005. (Essays and journalism)
- The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus. New York: Canongate, 2005. (Novel)
- Bashful Bob and Doleful Dorinda. New York: Bloomsbury Children's, 2006. (Children's fiction)
- Moral Disorder. New York: Talese, 2006. (Short stories)
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- *The Door.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007. (Poetry)
- Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth. Toronto: Anansi, 2008. (Nonfiction)
- *The Year of the Flood. New York: Talese/Doubleday, 2009. (Novel)
- In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and the Human Imagination. New York: Talese, 2011. (Criticism)
- Wandering Wanda and Widow Wallop's Wunderground Washery. Toronto: McArthur, 2011. (Children's fiction)
- Choke Collar: Positron, Episode Two. San Francisco: Byliner, 2012. (Novel)
- Erase Me: Positron, Episode Three. San Francisco: Byliner, 2012. (Novel)
- I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth. Toronto: Walrus/Coach House, 2012. (Short story)
- I'm Starved for You: Positron, Episode One. San Francisco: Byliner, 2012. (Novel)
- The Heart Goes Last: Positron, Episode Four. San Francisco: Byliner, 2013. (Novel)
- *MaddAddam. New York: Talese/Doubleday, 2013. (Novel)
- Stone Mattress: Nine Tales. New York: Talese, 2014. (Short stories)
- We Wasn't Pals: Canadian Poetry and Prose of the First World War. Ed. Atwood, Callaghan, and Bruce Meyer. Ontario: Holstein, 2014. (Poetry and prose)

Principal English Translation

Two Solicitudes: Conversations. Trans. Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott. Toronto: M and S, 1998. Print. Trans. of *Deux sollicitudes: Entretiens*.

*These novels make up the MaddAddam trilogy.

CRITICISM

Helen E. Mundler (essay date 2004)

SOURCE: Mundler, Helen E. "Heritage, Pseudo-Heritage and Survival in a Spurious Wor(l)d: *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 27.1 (2004): 89-98. Print.

[In the following essay, Mundler explores the development of dystopian themes in Oryx and Crake through a detailed comparison to Atwood's earlier novel The Handmaid's Tale. She cautions that since both novels take place in North America, they may not reflect a truly global view of the problems brought about by capitalism and bioengineering.]

Winning meant you inherited a wasteland. I

Oryx and Crake takes up various threads from different periods of Atwood's previous fiction: the paradigm of solitary survival in the wilderness and the uneasy relationship between dominant and dominated cultures echo Surfacing (1972); moreover, by its use of dystopian and postapocalyptic paradigms, and its searing criticism of American hegemony, the most recent novel cannot fail to invite comparison with The Handmaid's Tale, published almost twenty years previously. Furthermore, in common with The Handmaid's Tale, Oryx and Crake uses the frame of postapocalyptic survival in order self-consciously to fragment and subvert the principles of realism, deconstructing the movement from utopia, in which an attempt is made to impose a univocal, universal discourse, to dystopia, in which a babel of discordant discourses is unleashed.

These narrative processes will be analysed through a consideration of the theme of heritage in three guises: the laying waste of the north-American cultural heritage in a vast, indeed totalising, pre-apocalyptic scenario, the establishment of a pseudo-heritage of the *ersatz* and the hybrid, and the emergence of a spurious and factitious symbolic and imaginary heritage, for a world whose culture has been entirely eclipsed by the imperative for survival. The new discourse, as so often in utopian-dystopian fictions, will bear a parodic resemblance to that which has been so summarily swept away.

Oryx and Crake clearly announces its affiliation to The Handmaid's Tale, demanding in a sense to be read as a sequel to it, in a close intratextual relationship—even if, in the period between these two novels, Atwood has explored other closed and artificially-ordered societies, in

Alias Grace (which is set in a prison) and The Blind Assassin (which is interspersed with intradiegetic pieces of science-fiction). For this reason, reading Oryx and Crake can be a disconcerting experience. Just as in The Handmaid's Tale, the reader shudders at the echoes of 'the time before'—glimpses, in everyday objects or place names, of what was for Offred ordinary, before the instauration of Gilead—so in Oryx and Crake the quotation from The Handmaid's Tale itself can produce a similar reaction. Certain phrases in Oryx and Crake echo the older text eerily: 'These are things from before,' 'before things got so serious'; 'most of the bugs have now been ironed out.' The language of 'the time before' is constantly played with and redesigned in order at once to evoke and reject, to name and deny, setting up an ironic-parodic discourse with the 'real,' that is, the extra-textual, world. A fresh battery of neologisms designates the new vision of America-Ultratext, CorpSeCorps—while lists of obsolete words from 'before' are elegiacally invoked.

If, in The Handmaid's Tale and previously, Atwood has explored the colonial or postcolonial ties between Canada and the USA²—as well as, in Surfacing, English-speaking Canada and Quebec—the Canadian perspective seems to be distilled in Oryx and Crake to the I/eye subject, looking into a fictionalised future of the United States. Atwood's protagonist, Jimmy,³ later to rename himself Snowman in the post-holocaust world, grows up in an America which has been taken over not by religious fundamentalists, as in The Handmaid's Tale, but by corporations. As far as their commercial activities are concerned, we are once again in a zone between reality and fiction, where recognisable elements of reality are present, but greatly exaggerated and/or distorted. The country has been sectioned off into sealed Compounds and Modules, where research and development of various extremely lucrative kinds takes place. Much of this research is based on various types of genetic engineering, in order to produce organs for transplant-Jimmy's parents, for example, are involved in the production of pigoons, pigs used to grow 'spare-part' human organs-or medicines to stop the ageing process or induce greater longevity: in the eternal quest for eternal youth, whole new skins for old bodies are developed.

The corporate employees live on-site with their families; children are educated in the Compounds. Freedom to come and go is very limited; movements are observed by the CorpSeCorps, a powerful police force, uniformed equivalent of the Eyes in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as by the corporate maid service, and exeats are granted only rarely and in special circumstances, thus creating sealed microcosms where nobody and nothing from the outside is authorised to enter, including 'hostile bioforms,' that is, bacteria and viruses, against which war is constantly waged. Within these self-sufficient enclosures are concentrated wealth and prosperity, and thus hard scientists are the elite of the new society, with the human sciences relegated to sub-par status.