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**ARMAGEDDON HAS ONLY BEGUN: THE USTOPIAN
IMAGINATION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S
*ORYX AND CRAKE***

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*Apocalypse means revelation,
and when art becomes apocalyptic, it reveals.*

(Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*)

RESUMO

Seja na literatura, em filmes ou séries de TV, as temáticas da utopia/distopia e do apocalipse se tornam cada vez mais recorrentes. Tendo por base o arranjo de um design social utópico/distópico e de um imaginário apocalíptico, esta dissertação tem por objetivo analisar o romance *Oryx e Crake*, publicado em 2003 pela escritora canadense Margaret Atwood, autora de uma obra extensa, que é considerada ao mesmo tempo acadêmica e popular. *Oryx e Crake* retrata um universo ficcional onde a humanidade foi quase totalmente aniquilada por uma epidemia que irrompeu simultaneamente em vários países. Nesse cenário pós-apocalíptico, o Homem das Neves, único sobrevivente provável, busca alimentos e suprimentos em uma área costeira, relembando seu passado e dividindo residência com criaturas geneticamente modificadas. Considerando uma possível combinação de gêneros literários e efeitos narrativos, o objetivo desta investigação é explorar o romance, separando o passado e o presente da narrativa, cada um associado, respectivamente, aos conceitos de *ustopia* (termo cunhado por Atwood, para se referir à fusão entre utopia e distopia) e de apocalipse/Armageddon. Os conceitos são analisados com base em como se relacionam entre si e, em última instância, quanto ao que podem revelar sobre a nossa sociedade atual. Como aporte teórico-crítico, a investigação recorre a nomes como Erich Fromm (1990), Fredric Jameson (2005; 2009), Gregory Claeys (2010), Northrop Frye (1973), Paul Alkon (1987) e Peter Fitting (2010), bem como a uma série de estudiosos atwoodianos, especialmente Coral Ann Howells (2005; 2006). A voz de Margaret Atwood como teórica e crítica literária também permeia todo o texto, fornecendo informações valiosas para a análise de sua própria ficção. Pela sua riqueza tanto em termos de forma quanto de conteúdo, *Oryx e Crake* representa um desafio para os seus leitores e estudiosos. Ao final do trabalho, fica manifesto o quão assustadoramente próximo este mundo ficcional criado por Atwood está da nossa realidade, sendo a imagem de um universo que, em certo grau, já habitamos.

Palavras-chave: Literatura Canadense. Margaret Atwood. *Oryx e Crake*. Ustopia. Armageddon.

ABSTRACT

The themes of utopia/dystopia and apocalypse are becoming increasingly more frequent in literature, movies or TV series. Taking into account an arrangement of a utopian/dystopian social design and an apocalyptic imagination, this thesis aims at examining the novel *Oryx and Crake*, published in 2003 by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, author to an extensive body of works, considered at one time academic and popular. *Oryx and Crake* portrays a fictional universe where humankind has been almost entirely annihilated by an epidemic that broke out simultaneously in several countries. In this post-apocalyptic scenario, Snowman, the probable sole survivor, scavenges for food and supplies in a coastal area, recollecting his past and sharing residence with genetically modified creatures. Considering a possible combination of literary genres and moods, the focus of this investigation is the play of past and present in the novel, each one associated with the concepts of *ustopia* (a term coined by Atwood to refer to the fusion of utopia and dystopia) and apocalypse/Armageddon, respectively. The concepts are analyzed on the basis of how they relate to each other and, ultimately, as to what they reveal about our contemporary society. For theoretical support, the thesis draws on names like Erich Fromm (1990), Fredric Jameson (2005; 2009), Gregory Claeys (2010), Northrop Frye (1973), Paul Alkon (1987), Peter Fitting (2010), and on a number of Atwoodian scholars and critics, especially Coral Ann Howells (2005; 2006). The voice of Margaret Atwood as theoretical and literary critic also permeates the entire thesis, providing valuable insights for the analysis of her own fiction. For its wealth in terms of form and content, *Oryx and Crake* poses a significant challenge for readers and researchers. At the end of the work, it is evident that the fictional universe created by Atwood is frighteningly close to our reality, reflecting a world that, to a certain extent, we already inhabit.

Keywords: Canadian Literature. Margaret Atwood. *Oryx and Crake*. Ustopia. Armageddon.

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INTRODUCTION

February 2012. Blackout. It was a summer evening; the weather was very warm, but rainy. In fear of an imminent thunderstorm, my mother and I decided to go out in order to buy some candles. Once we got in the car, we were immediately swallowed by the darkness of the town. The picture was apocalyptic, and the rainwater that splashed over the windshield blurred our vision. I am not sure where exactly we were going, but the car traveled on a street parallel to the railway. It was almost 6 p.m., and we could hear the horn: the train was coming in the opposite direction from ours. Everything normal so far. All of a sudden, the noise of the train became deafening; other cars were aquaplaning, and there were desperate screams coming from nowhere. The rain had increased, but still there were flames that seemed to be coming out of the asphalt. Some wagons had derailed and then came abruptly toward us. It was possible to hear the shrill noise of iron scraping over the ground. And in this gothic atmosphere of doom, everything ended.

Just as the year 2000, the year 2012 stimulated several images like the one just described. In times of a supposed “doomsday”, that was my delusional nightmare while my mother drove quietly looking for a store to buy the candles. The scene was real – except for the tragic part involving the wagons, the cars, the screams, and the fire. We actually saw the train coming, but apart from my imagination of disaster, nothing out of the ordinary happened that day. There was a thunderstorm, and I was afraid of it, that is it. However, that was only another disturbing scenario in which I saw myself thinking about how the end of the world could be. Would it involve a large amount of water? Would our cities be reduced to ashes due to globes of burning matter coming from the sky? The collective imagination also anticipates extraterrestrial invasions, zombie attacks, atomic wars, nuclear winters, epidemics, radical climate changes because of global warming, and so on and so forth. But, the “end of the world” has been presented so often that perhaps our creativity cannot bring up anymore original fantasies about it. We speculate about the end so much, that it seems that it has already happened countless times – even if only in books, whose examples abound; TV series; or movies, like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951-2008), *Independence Day* (1996), *Deep*

Impact (1998), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *The Happening* (2008), and *2012* (2009), to name a few.¹

Either by fear or just curiosity – or even for fun – I am somewhat fond of catastrophes. I may say that the roots of my predilection for this subject rely on Michael Bay’s *Armageddon* (1998), probably my very first contact with the idea of a global cataclysm when I was eleven or twelve years old. At that time, my father still used to choose most of the movies that I watched, and this one eventually became a great symbolic mark during my adolescence. The attempt to save the planet undertaken by a team of astronauts and deep-core drillers had taken the protagonist, the girl’s father, away forever – and this fact seemed worse to me than the prospect of Earth exploding due to a gigantic asteroid. In so many years, I have never forgotten the particular scene when Harry Stamper (Bruce Willis) dies as he detonates a nuclear bomb. The imagery of a global disaster, the core of the movie, was then passed over for something more emotional and private, that is, a father and daughter relationship about to expire. That is probably why I never forgot this movie, and from then on, I was somehow obsessed with the likelihood of great catastrophes and their outcomes.

Since appreciating the apocalypse is not enough, as a student of literature I saw myself craving another “cheerful” subject: dystopia. I wanted to study a literary dystopia so badly, that I started to look for contemporary dystopian novels – I did not want to resort to classics in the genre like *Brave New World* (1932) or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), I needed something fresh. Then, Margaret Atwood’s novels dropped from the sky. When I read *Oryx and Crake*’s synopsis, the plot mesmerized me; in my head, I was at first imagining the Yeti from Himalaya walking through snowy mountains (an iced and windy frame somewhat resembling the creature of Frankenstein running to the North Pole). Awesome! A science fiction story with a legendary creature that always haunted me. However, this image remained in my head just until I realized that the Abominable Snowman, Atwood’s main character, was a figurative pseudonym for the human survivor of a cataclysm. I was certainly disappointed to see my imagination being dissolved, but the novel was so good to be true that I stopped bemoaning Yeti’s absence in it.

I had never read anything by Margaret Atwood before; encountering her fiction was a pleasant surprise. To my contentment, *Oryx and Crake* had many elements I have always

¹ According to Susan Sontag (1986, p. 213), “the science fiction film [...] is concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess. And it is in the imagery of destruction that the core of a good science fiction film lies”.

liked in literature: a good castaway story, a controversial social design, scientific breakthroughs, an apocalyptic scenario, a love triangle with a tragic ending, and two friends who like and hate each other in the same proportion. Margaret Atwood is an author that can easily compose male and female characters that feel real, and she nailed it with the construction of Jimmy and Crake – Jimmy is her first male protagonist, by the way. They are three-dimensional characters from the beginning, and the verisimilitude is sustained until the end. Before them, the only best friends’ duo I really liked in literature was Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. (It is true that Jimmy and Crake are more frenemies than best friends, but this is a matter for later). In addition to the characters’ complexity and the interesting construction of the narrative, another aspect to be considered is Atwood’s ironic tone, which I identify with insofar as it allows an approach that is not only tragic, but comic as well. In this novel, therefore, I had found the perfect arrangement of a dystopian social design and an apocalyptic imagination, two topics I was eager to combine in the academia.

Published in 2003, *Oryx and Crake* depicts a world where humankind was annihilated by a plague, a pandemic that broke out simultaneously in several countries. In this post-apocalyptic scenario, Snowman, the probable sole survivor, wanders in search of food on an overheated beach, sharing residence with genetically modified creatures – among them, there are transgenic plants and animals, as well as a peculiar group of humanoids, the Crakers (who at first might resemble the boys of *Lord of the Flies*, lost children without adult supervision). While Snowman is struggling to survive in a hostile environment, he mourns the loss of Oryx, the elusive woman he loved, and Crake, his former best friend, the person responsible for producing a lethal virus that decimated human civilization on Earth. Following Snowman’s reminiscences while he tries to adapt and to establish a relationship with the humanoids, we not only come to know about Oryx and Crake, but we also finally come to understand how things happened and how the cities became a great wilderness.

For Coral Ann Howells (2005, p. 172), “the most striking feature of *Oryx and Crake* is the way everything is doubled, not only the title and the epigraphs² but also the narrative structure, while not surprisingly there are two dystopian visions – one a bioengineered wilderness nightmare and the other a savagely satirical version of late capitalist Western society”. To this, we can add the double protagonist, Jimmy/Snowman, as he is a person split in two, before and after catastrophe. As for the narrative structure, it is double because it presents two different times, since it shifts between a current time and a retrospective one.

² The epigraphs are excerpts from Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*.

That is to say, the chapters alternate between present – where the protagonist is facing the pandemic destructive effects – and past – where his memories tell us how life was before the cataclysmic event takes place. In a way, we can imply that the retrospective time is there to enlighten the current one. Further, considering the way the narration and the focalization are constructed, they allow another interpretation: the past as compulsory for the protagonist to carry on. In any case, “through this structure, we learn more and more about the world in which humans are on the verge of extinction. This, in itself, raises the paradox of the need to go back in order to move forward” (COLE, 2005, p. 5). The retrospective time takes place through analepsis, flashing back to earlier points in the protagonist’s personal story in order to reveal his inner thoughts and anxieties as well as decisive events that led him to the present condition. The novel situates the reader by opening with the current layer of the narrative and then taking it back in time. This alternation occurs repeatedly throughout the novel, puzzling the reader while providing him/her with answers.

Moreover, *Oryx and Crake* has two sequences, *The Year of the Flood* (2009)³ and *MaddAddam* (2013)⁴. Together, the three novels became known as the *MaddAddam* trilogy. My initial project was to work with the first two novels – the third had not been published yet at the time I started my research –, but then it proved to be a never-ending work, since each one of the novels is so substantial that it deserves a thesis dedicated to itself alone. For this reason, the corpus of this thesis came to be *Oryx and Crake*, which I analyze by separating the past and the present of the narrative, while associating them to the concepts of utopia/dystopia and Armageddon, respectively. Hence, the first chapter provides a theoretical background in order to give an overview of the author, the genres and the moods involved. Thus, the first subchapter (1.1) reviews Margaret Atwood in terms of life, context, work, and reception. The second subchapter (1.2) is dedicated to the genre crossover that encompasses science fiction, speculative fiction, and apocalyptic fiction. Finally, the third subchapter (1.3) discusses the mood crossover that embraces the mixture of utopia and dystopia, understood here as two sides of the same fictional coin, thus resulting in the term *ustopia*, concept idealized by Atwood herself.

³ *The Year of the Flood* is neither a prequel nor a sequel to the previous novel, because its narrative explores the world of *Oryx and Crake*, but from a different perspective. While the first novel focuses especially on the elite of society, the second gives voice to marginalized groups, such as the God’s Gardeners, eco-religious people who defend vegetarianism and the respect for animals, and who accumulate provisions on the verge of what they call the Waterless Flood. The main characters are two women who were part of the God’s Gardeners and who are now among the survivors of the long-feared disaster.

⁴ *MaddAddam* brings the previous novels together, gathering their characters from where the stories have ended. Now, months after the catastrophe, the pandemic survivors presented in the previous novels form a group, along with the quasi-human Crakers.

Taking into account the theoretical background, the second and the third chapter of the thesis are dedicated to the presentation and analysis of *Oryx and Crake* itself. The second chapter of the thesis, therefore, approaches the narrative backstory, a pre-catastrophe scenario that can elucidate some questions, showing a controversial construction of society, that is, its utopian and dystopian aspects. In this world, the characters are confined in huge Compounds, where life is well organized and clean – a kind of brave postmodern world, so to speak – and where everything is done in the name of science and profit. The first subchapter (2.1) summarizes the part of the narrative set in the past, whereas the second subchapter (2.2) analyzes this social design and its characters, building what I refer to as ustopian imagination. Thereafter, the third and last chapter of the thesis approaches the narrative in the present, which shows the post-catastrophe scenario, where an organized society no longer exists. In this world, the probable sole survivor tries to subsist in a wasteland. Following the structure of chapter two, the first half of chapter three (3.1) summarizes the part of the narrative set in the present, whereas the second half (3.2) analyzes what is left of that society, with focus on the protagonist and his struggle “subsequent to the end”.

As a result, this thesis analyzes *Oryx and Crake* by exploring: a) the concepts of utopia/dystopia/ustopia and apocalypse/Armageddon in the novel, with focus on b) how they relate to each other, and, finally, c) what they can say about our current society. The hypothesis I intend to prove is that *Oryx and Crake* is Margaret Atwood’s first novel to be representative of a possible new fictional genre under construction: *ustopia*. Atwood did manage to put on paper a thought that we all have in mind: utopia and dystopia do not exist separately these days; they are inexorably combined. In this sense, this work goes further from general criticism by exploring the idea of *ustopia*, a brand new concept on which Atwood still does not have a well-defined theory. She is an author whose work is still in progress – and so is her critical fortune. In addition, she poses further difficulties by willingly messing with preconceived generic categorizations and notions concerning her literary themes and style. Precisely by addressing these complications and novelties, this research is relevant and original.

After presenting the sketch of the thesis and the guiding purpose, maybe it is relevant to comment that this research does not subscribe to a particular theory or theorist, because I believe in letting a literary work speak for itself first and then following the text wherever it can take me. In order to pursue the concepts just described, I fall back on a range of Atwoodian scholars and critics, especially Coral Ann Howells (2005; 2006), and rely on ideas

of several thinkers whose texts were evoked when I read certain passages from the novel. Among them, I would like to mention Erich Fromm (1990), Fredric Jameson (2005; 2009), Gregory Claeys (2010), Northrop Frye (1973), Paul Alkon (1987), and Peter Fitting (2010). Furthermore, I have to acknowledge the role played by Margaret Atwood's voice as a perceptive and enthusiastic literary critic and theorist, which pervades the entire text, helping me in this analysis of her own fiction.

Margaret Atwood "is amongst the most important contemporary women writers, and critics are still discovering new ways to address and respond to her work" (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 120). It is no accident that many papers on her fiction can be found around the globe, whether through the scope of Canadian studies, feminist criticism, environmentalism or science fiction. In addition, "with their combination of empirical and speculative intelligence, her novels challenge her readers to see more by seeing differently" (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 3). I have to agree with this statement, inasmuch as *Oryx and Crake* is indeed a huge challenge, both in terms of form and in terms of content. Lastly, I hope that *Armageddon Has Only Begun: The Utopian Imagination in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake* can demonstrate to the reader that such novel is worth reading and studying, as well as its author is worthy of her popularity and Canadian celebrity status and her worldwide academic reputation.

1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 The Author: Life, Context, Work, Reception

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, on 18 November 1939. She spent part of her childhood in the forests and small settlements of Northern Ontario and Quebec with parents and elder brother, since her father was an entomologist and used to bring the family with him on his scientific explorations. At that point, the girl did not attend school full-time, yet she already was an avid reader of literature. As Coral Ann Howells (2005, p. 3) states, “it was not until after the end of the Second World War that her family settled in Toronto, where her father became a university professor”. Atwood began writing as a child and after completing high school, she began studying at Victoria College in the University of Toronto, where she took an Arts degree with honors in English. During this period, she published articles and poems in the college literary journal.

As an undergraduate, she had professor Northrop Frye and poet Jay Macpherson as mentors and role models. “It was in Macpherson’s private library that Atwood read her way through Canadian poetry, while she was also influenced by Frye’s myth-centered criticism and his efforts to translate European myths into a new Canadian cultural context” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 12-13). As David Staines (2006, p. 14) reminds us, “Frye was the major figure of Canadian criticism, penning, for example, the yearly review of poetry in the fifties in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*. And he advised Atwood to go to graduate school, where she would have ‘more time to write’.” Thus, confronting a change of scenery, she went on a master’s program in English Literature at Radcliffe College, Harvard University, where she also began her PhD research on “The English Metaphysical Romance”. However, “the dissertation remains incomplete because Atwood’s creative writing assumed dominant interest in her life, even during her time at Harvard” (STAINES, 2006, p. 15).

All of a sudden, she became a writer indeed: “one week I wasn’t a writer, the next I was. Who did I think I was, to be able to get away with this? What did I think I was doing? How did I get that way?” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 110). But, as a consequence for having suffered a kind of culture shock, Atwood moved back to Canada without finishing her doctorate and spent the next decade teaching in university English departments across the country, from Vancouver to Montreal and Toronto, traveling to Europe, getting married for

the first time, and writing her first novel. In the 1970s, she met writer Graeme Gibson, her husband until today, with whom she had a daughter, Eleanor Jess Gibson, born in 1976. “As with many Canadians of her generation, Atwood’s time outside of Canada gave her a necessary distance from, and a perspective on, her own land” (STAINES, 2006, p. 15). Hence, the short experience in the United States allowed her to have a better understanding about her own nation.

Atwood’s was the common colonial experience of moving to a metropolitan culture where people know nothing and care nothing about one’s home place. Here might be located the roots of Atwood’s Canadian nationalism, which developed in the late 1960s and frequently defined itself against the United States, a position which she scrutinizes in her early 1970s work, *Surfacing* and *Survival* (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 4).

Under the influence of Jay Macpherson, it is no surprise that Atwood started her career as a poet, having the first poetry collection published in the early 1960s. However, her reputation was made in the 1970s, with the publication of *Surfacing* (1972), her second novel, and *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* in the same year, a controversial volume of criticism – and a sort of political manifesto – whose impact is felt on Canadian letters until today. Heidi S. Macpherson (2010, p. 16) asserts that “the key point of the book is that it situates Canadian literature in its own space and explores what Atwood sees as Canadian literature’s patterns and motifs. It is unashamedly ‘thematic’ criticism (as the title denotes), a form of criticism that does have its detractors”. During Atwood’s youth, Canadian literature was not on the syllabus, not being recognized as a canon. As a result, there is a “notion that her generation of writers had grown up with the ‘illusion’ that there was no Canadian literature, and so they set about creating it” (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 21).

With *Survival*, therefore, Atwood “had accomplished what she set out to do: forge an identity as a Canadian writer, something almost unique on the Canadian scene” (STAINES, 2006, p. 19). In addition, “as Atwood discovered her voice as a Canadian writer of poetry, fiction, and literary criticism, she helped the country discover its own life as a literary landscape” (STAINES, 2006, p. 19). Then, she clearly became central to CanLit, both as a critic and as a creative writer, “the major exponent of Canadian literature, a wholly viable and emerging voice of power and urgency” (STAINES, 2006, p. 19). In fact, Canadian literature is primarily related to survival – theme evident throughout Atwood’s career. As Howells (2005, p. 187) reminds us, “The key term for Atwood is always ‘survival’ in a context of

environmental change which is both ecological and ideological”. Considering survival as a key term that is central to Canadian identity, wilderness is also a recurrent image in Atwood’s fiction. The “sense of geographical location is the basis of Atwood’s realism. She writes about Canadian cities and small towns, about the Canadian wilderness with its forests and lakes, and sometimes about the Arctic North” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 10). Although “several of her novels move outside Canada to the United States, the Caribbean, or to Europe, yet her fiction is based on a strong sense of local identity” (HOWELLS, 2005, p.10) – notwithstanding she questions stereotypes of nationality and gender.

Besides the discourse of Canadianness, Atwood is well known as a feminist author – even though it might be dangerous to define her as such. At a certain level, both issues, Canadianness and feminism, have a close relation due to the gender metaphor: feminization of Canada’s literature and popular culture, that is to say, women explored by men actually meaning Canada being explored by other nations. “This motif has been elaborated by feminist writers, artists, political cartoonists, and journalists who tend to create a remarkably feminized popular culture compared to American media culture” (BERLAND, 1995, p. 522). In this respect, “Margaret Atwood functions like a subtly sanctioned national muse” (BERLAND, 1995, p. 523). In view of that, we see “Canadian culture as closer to nature, aesthetically highbrow, non-violent, uncorrupted, committed to the public good but powerless before the masculinized figures of (external) authority” (BERLAND, 1995, p. 523). Whatever the consequences of it, some people still perceive or describe Canada as a feminized and powerless country for its colonized and dominated position in comparison to other cultures.⁵

At another level, Atwood really is concerned with the female figure itself, and “what becomes obvious very quickly in reviewing the criticism on Atwood is that the majority of Atwood scholars take a feminist approach, and this might be in part because she began writing at a time of raised feminist consciousness” (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 111). Countless researches on her work were developed following this particular line. In 1971, “Elaine Showalter argued that Atwood’s work fitted into a feminist literary curriculum and might actually help to offer female students a new way of thinking about literature and themselves [...]” (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 112). Moreover, Atwood herself “refers to Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan as the two most significant influences on her thinking

⁵ The survival theme has also to do with Canada’s national inferiority complex. Several people know little or nothing about this country, which is usually seen just as the territory to the north of the United States. It is possible that this lack of general knowledge on Canada is another reason for the urge to survive.

as a young woman in early 1960s” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 15). Furthermore, we have to take into consideration that almost all of her protagonists are female.

Indeed, it is impossible to consider Atwood’s work without considering the central importance she places on women as characters, with every one of her novels, except *Oryx and Crake*, featuring a female protagonist, and most of her short stories doing so as well. Atwood’s investigation of female subjectivity ranges from explorations of the female as victim, to representations of the dissembling, monstrous female (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 22).

As Macpherson’s statement suggests, it is clear in Atwood’s fiction that women can be as bad people as men can. It is important to stress that the author does not inscribe women only to a position of absolute vulnerability and victimization, since some of her female characters play the role of villains. “Fascinated with female badness, Atwood, in works like *Cat’s Eyes* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), and *Alias Grace* (1996), critiques the feminist ideal of female goodness as she revives, in the characters of Cordelia, Zenia and Grace Marks, the female villain” (BOUSON, 2010, p. 11). According to Atwood, evil women are necessary in story traditions for many reasons:

First, they exist in life, so why shouldn’t they exist in literature? Second – which may be another way of saying the same thing – women have more to them than virtue. They are fully dimensional human beings; they, too, have subterranean depths; why shouldn’t their many-dimensionality be given literary expression? (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 138).

As Atwood has already made clear in interviews, she seems to dislike rigid ideologies and claims to have no political obligations as a writer. The fact that she does not assume a decisive feminist position perhaps has to do with her attempt to escape from being labeled as a pamphleteering writer. “[...] She argues that she is a writer who has been more adopted by the women’s movement than a particular member herself” (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 23). In her fiction, she also “provides a richly comic account of feminism, the cultural movement that initially fed women writers from her generation but then, in Atwood’s view, turned into a voice-stifling *ism* that threatened, once again, to silence women’s voice” (BOUSON, 2010, p. 7). Truth is that everything is a matter of relativization: her ideological allegiances, her fiction, her characters, and even her statements as a critic.

If you're a woman and a writer, does the combination of gender and vocation automatically make you a feminist, and what does that mean, exactly? That you shouldn't put a good man into your books, even though you may in real life have managed to dig up a specimen or two? And if you do courageously admit to being one of those F-words females, how should this self-categorization influence your wardrobe choices? I know that's a frivolous comment, but if the wardrobe matter is all that frivolous, then why have so many earnest commentators made such ideological heavy work of it? And even if you aren't an F-word feminist in any strict ideological sense, will nervous critics wallop you over the head for being one, simply because you exemplify that suspicious character, *A Woman Who Writes*? If, that is, you put any female characters into your books who aren't happy, and any men who aren't good. Well, probably they will. It's happened before (ATWOOD, 2012, p. 95-96).

For all of these reasons, one may say that her fiction easily slides between a feminist and an anti-feminist place, and “readers of Atwood need to be as discriminating as Atwood herself when describing her as a feminist writer, for her fiction is a combination of engagement, analysis and critique of the changing fashions within feminism” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 17). In addition, “readers of Atwood's work must take care when ascribing political views to her, or assuming that the stances adopted by her characters equate with her own” (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 24). Besides, several scholars have been asserting that her novels are better characterized as *experiments* – term used by Atwood herself in regards to her own writing –, “always testing the limits of theory and exceeding ideological definitions. Her fiction canvasses such a comprehensive range of issues that it eludes the simplicity of any single ‘feminist’ position” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 13). For sure, taking into account that other concerns emerge from her writing, an author whose work is so comprehensive cannot be reduced to only one frame of reference. Focusing on one aspect of Atwood alone is reducing her to a very small part of who she is as a writer.

By being a versatile and prolific writer, Atwood not only expanded her writing from poetry to novels and criticism, but also to short stories, children's books, forewords, essays, reviews, and so forth. With her extensive writing, she became popular and academic at the same time. Though “Atwood is a popular writer whose works are easily understandable on a surface level, she is also a difficult writer whose texts are multilayered, filled with literary, political, and historical allusions, and subtle in their use of symbolism, parody, and satire” (WILSON, 2004, p. xi). We have Atwood the writer, “[...] but there is also Atwood the literary celebrity, media star, and public performer, Atwood the cultural critic, social historian, environmentalist, and human rights spokeswoman, and Atwood the political satirist and cartoonist” (HOWELLS, 2006, p. 1). In the course of time, she has acquired new tasks, like screenwriter and editor, for instance. Furthermore, she adventures through different

literary genres: “in every novel she takes up the conventions of a different narrative form – Gothic romance, fairy tale, spy thriller, science fiction or historical novel – working within those conventions and reshaping them” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 6). According to J. Brooks Bouson (2010), Atwood is a writer who delights readers through genre crossovers.

[She] has long taken her reader’s breath away with her own deviousness and inventiveness and audacity and yes, at times, perversity. In her characteristic voice, which ranges from the serious and poetic to the wryly ironic and deeply sardonic, Atwood self-consciously writes and rewrites – often with subversive, parodic intent – traditional and popular fictional forms and formulas (BOUSON, 2010, p. 2).

Atwood’s general humorous manner, according to Marta Dvorak (2006), is typical of the rural Nova Scotia of her childhood, a region pervaded with the oral tradition. Her peculiar humor “relies fundamentally on various forms of incongruity, derived from the tall tale or yarn, an outlandish mode of oral storytelling grounded in a subversive carnivalesque tradition stretching back to Aristophanes” (DVORAK, 2006, p. 115). Also, like Mark Twain, “and like certain Canadian writers who preceded or followed him, Margaret Atwood anchors her playful writing in the motifs and mindset of North America” (DVORAK, 2006, p. 114). She explores a kind of concealed self-deprecation in many of her narratives. Her predominant discourse of “alimentary and sexual consumption challenges institutions and social practices from American corporate culture to patriarchy in a manner ranging from the benevolent irony of Horatian satire (as practiced by Chaucer, Rabelais, or Byron) to the corrective derision of militant Juvenalian satire (rendered notorious by Swift)” (DVORAK, 2006, p. 115). Moreover, Atwood’s irony goes “from verbal and dramatic (relying on the speaker’s intention or ignorance of the ironic intent) to structural and cosmic (resting on narratorial or authorial duplicity)” (DVORAK, 2006, p. 121). Dvorak also states that:

The tall tale strategies Atwood deploys essentially involve three parameters: the outrageous combination of understatement and exaggeration; the overlapping of the ordinary and the extravagant; and, finally, the collision of myth with a mimetic restitution of reality. [...] Atwood injects the fantastic into the apparently ordinary. Like William Faulkner, who used the “real” material of local legends, she mixes stories grounded in local experience with the fabulous or mythological, as in *Surfacing*, for example. These parameters are the driving force in novels such as *Oryx and Crake* (DVORAK, 2006, p. 118).

Therefore, comparing Atwood to humorists like Thomas Haliburton, Mark Twain, Robert Kroetsch and Thomas King, Dvorak (2006, p. 126) affirms that Atwood “builds a mode of exaggeration moving from the domain of the plausible to the domain of the wildly exaggerated and hilariously incredible”. Nonetheless, beyond the characteristics just described, “there is also a strong self-reflexive quality to her writing, which often engages with the conventions of the creation process itself, as well as with the mechanisms of reception” (DVORAK, 2006, p. 124-125). It is no coincidence that one of her favorite themes is storytelling – topic developed in many of her novels. Moreover, literature itself, as well as the process of writing, might be a good thing to parody. Finally, Atwood manipulates “cultural frames with as much virtuosity as she manipulates language, playing with the formal features which underlie the spheres of social action and of ideas”. For this reason, “in the manner of humorists since antiquity, Atwood is a moralist who expertly reconciles the double function of literature: to entertain and to teach” (DVORAK, 2006, p. 128).

Taking Atwood’s fiction into account – apart from poetry, short stories, and children’s books –, she has fourteen novels published so far: *The Edible Woman* (1969); *Surfacing* (1972); *Lady Oracle* (1976); *Life Before Man* (1979); *Bodily Harm* (1981); *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985); *Cat’s Eye* (1988); *The Robber Bride* (1993); *Alias Grace* (1996); *The Blind Assassin* (2000); *Oryx and Crake* (2003); *The Penelopiad* (2005); *The Year of the Flood* (2009); and *MaddAddam* (2013). Among these novels, the best known is *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the author’s text most frequently taught in English departments, whose narrative, in general terms, depicts a feminist dystopia. The novel was adapted into an unsuccessful film in 1990, with screenplay by Harold Pinter, directed by Volker Schlöndorff, and starring Natasha Richardson in the leading role. Later on, the novel was adapted into a successful opera in 2000, with a great number of international performances.

It is the only one of Atwood’s novels to expand beyond its original format in this way and this is testament to its enduring legacy. The novel’s powers resides in its clear depiction of a future dystopia, a vision that recalls earlier dystopias such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, George Orwell’s *1984* and Evgeny Zamyatin’s *We*. Alternatively defined as science fiction, dystopic nightmare, futuristic prophecy, slave narrative or satiric romance, *The Handmaid’s Tale* expands beyond such limiting frameworks as it explores a potential future (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 53).

Following *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood kept doing experiments in the field of science fiction. *The Blind Assassin*, *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *MaddAddam*

participate in this genre. “Atwood continues to speak out not only on global feminist issues and human rights but also on the dangers of environmental degradation and global climate change, which, as she warns in her futuristic dystopian novels [...], threaten the survival of us all” (BOUSON, 2010, p. 13). Some critics think that she is becoming more pessimist in recent years, “but is still very conscious of her role as a writer. As a visionary writer, she regards art as not for ‘art’s sake’ or for ‘morality’s sake’ but for ‘survival’s sake’ and regards her own writing as a legitimate way of participating in struggle” (VEVAINA, 2006, p. 97). In addition, she “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 which will make our rapidly shrinking and increasingly threatened world a better place for ourselves and for the generations to come” (VEVAINA, 2006, p. 97). These projections of the future have to do with the typical closures without closures of her novels:

Atwood’s novels are characterized by their refusals to invoke any final authority as their open endings resist conclusiveness, offering instead hesitation, absence or silence while hovering on the verge of new possibilities. Their indeterminacy is a challenge to readers, for one of the problems we have to confront is how to find a critical language to describe Atwood’s distinctive brand of postmodernism with its ironic mixture of realism and fantasy, fictive artifice and moral engagement (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 10).

Another significant aspect when it comes to Margaret Atwood is her celebrity status, a condition that she both recognizes and refuses, since she believes that readers do not have to deal with the figure of the author, but with his/her output instead. However, she has learned how to intervene in her public figure throughout the years. As Lorraine York (2006, p. 34) points out, she offers “both an appearance of openness and a sly defensive maneuver. It is as though she declared that if she is to be a visual spectacle, she is, at least, fully capable of operating the light-and-sound show”. One example of this maneuver is her website, which provides a lot of information, emphasizing her achievements (awards, for instance), “confirming her literary star status”, while “it also appears to offer readers access to her” (YORK, 2006, p. 32). Frustrating some fans, truth is that the website never exposes details about her private life. “At any rate, whether seeming to offer readers access or denying it, the website shows Margaret Atwood and her agents directly intervening in the flurry of media texts about her that are in circulation” (YORK, 2006, p. 33). Here follows an Atwood’s very frank comment on being a celebrity:

I'm not a football star. I'm not a film star. I'm not a TV star. I haven't murdered anyone. I'm not a top model. I am a writer of literary fiction. And the level of fame and celebrity that you get doing that is quite manageable. You'll notice I have no bodyguards around me. No screaming fans are clambering over my shoelaces. So it's not the same kind of thing as it would be if you were Jackie Kennedy, Elizabeth Taylor, Mick Jagger, that person who plays football... David Beckham, a Spice Girl. Any of those kinds of things are at a very much higher level of that phenomenon than a person who writes books ever will be (ATWOOD apud MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 5).

From this passage, one realizes that Atwood manifests a very superficial view of what would be a celebrity, a condition that would involve crowds of fans, appearances, fame, money, flashes, the media – or even the court and the prison in the case of a murderer. Nevertheless, the controversial statement is obviously deliberate, since she tends to provoke the interviewer, sometimes putting him in an awkward situation, especially if he is naive enough to take seriously everything she says. And it is funny to notice that some interviewers do not grasp her mockery intentions or even are afraid of her sharp tongue. Moreover, according to Atwood, there is no point in wanting to know an author as a person. “Wanting to meet an author because you like his work is like wanting to meet a duck because you like pâté. [...] In order for the pâté to be made and then eaten, the duck must first be killed. And who is it that does the killing?” (ATWOOD apud YORK, 2006, p. 38). Furthermore, Atwood insists on the idea that she is not dead yet – a reaction perhaps not only provoked by nosy people trying to find out who she really is, but also by those scholars and critics who believe that she has already published more than enough material by now. Thus, “I'm not dead!” is usually the answer when it comes to some biographical speculations, but mainly to her high productivity as a writer.

There are two unauthorized biographies on Atwood: Nathalie Cooke's *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, and Rosemary Sullivan's *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out*, both published in the late 1990s and maybe premature in their surveys. On the one hand, biographies that portray people still alive are positive because they do not have the presumption of presenting themselves as definite works. Not to mention the fact that they open space for the target person to contest information. On the other hand, this kind of biography might be stranger than fiction, therefore controversial or at least unnecessary, because it seems that it announces the person's death in the near future. Nobody writes about someone at the very beginning of his/her career. Right? Either way, despite the fact that a biography can be a respectable work or even a beautiful homage, there is something morbid

about it. Completing Atwood's metaphor, York (2006, p. 39) asserts that "biography is, par excellence, the making of pâté from the duck, so to speak".

This discussion on being or not being dead inevitably resorts to Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author", in which we see that "[...] writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (BARTHES, 1997, p. 142). For Barthes, the meaning of a text is not found in its origin, but in its destination, that is to say, the reader, and "[...] we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (BARTHES, 1997, p. 148). Where does Atwood stand here? Despite emphasizing that she is not dead, she is a great example of the distinction between author and *scriptor* (writer). Being aware of the separation of both and the important role played by the readers, she claims to be alive as a *writer*, defending her right to produce more fiction. On the other hand, as suggested with the example of biographies (which usually kill author and writer all at once), her identity outside the text has no real significance to readers. Therefore, considering the author, yes, we should make pâté from the duck; considering the writer, we should not – otherwise, we will no longer have new textual creations to appreciate.

I believe that Atwood's reputation and popular appeal rest on her capacity to be a multiple figure, and a writer concerned with several different issues and open to new experiments in terms of form as well. If I had to choose one word to describe her (besides prolificacy), it would be versatility. It is no coincidence that "her books are both best-sellers and the subjects of thousands of reviews and scholarly studies, written by scholars from China to Italy to Belgium to New Zealand, England, France, Canada, and the United States" (WILSON, 2004, p. xi). This list expands every year, with new researches on Atwood's work being done in other places, such as South America, for example. In addition, Atwood "was a founder member of the Writer's Union of Canada, on the editorial board of the newly established Anansi Press in Toronto, and a member of Amnesty International" (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 5). She has received honorary degrees too: "Oxford University (1998), Cambridge University (2001), Harvard University (2004), and the Sorbonne Nouvelle (2005), among many top institutions" (STAINES, 2006, p. 25). Moreover, she has received numerous literary prizes, including "her country's Governor General Award for *The Circle Game* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Booker and Dashiell Hammett Awards for *The Blind Assassin*, the

Trillium Book Award for *Wilderness Tips*, [...] the Giller and *Premio Mondello* Prizes for *Alias Grace*” (WILSON, 2004, p. xii), among others.

Another remarkable fact was the formation of the Margaret Atwood Society in the 1980s, having Jan Garden Castro as founder and Kathryn Van Spanckeren as the first editor of the society’s Newsletter. “In 2007, a new journal was established, *Margaret Atwood Studies*, coming out of the society’s Newsletter, which had been published since 1984” (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 120). Despite the prominence of this society, Atwood seems to have an uneasy relationship with it. She has “expressed some reservations about the scholarly organization devoted to the study of her works – the Margaret Atwood Society” (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 14), probably because of the same reason that I mentioned previously, the fact that some critics and scholars in particular think she has written and published enough by now and could retire. Nevertheless, she is very interested in her readers. “She does have an intense interest in her readers, for to Atwood a text is ‘alive’ if it cannot only ‘grow’ but also ‘change’ through its interactions with its readers. And, as she also insists, what survives in writing is a voice telling a story” (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 17). Another example of Atwood’s influence is the fact that, as Macpherson (2010, p. 3) points out, “the annual Modern Language Association (MLA) convention reserves space for two sessions on Atwood scholarship each year”. However, there is more...

Another measure of Margaret Atwood’s influence and success resides in the Atwood Archives in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto that number some 369 boxes, while a description of the contents runs to 220 pages. The materials included range from juvenilia and unpublished manuscripts to early rejection letters and discussions of filmic projects based on her work (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 3).

Considering all the points that have been mentioned up to now, Atwood certainly is Canada’s best-known contemporary author, the most often studied Canadian writer at the university level and, finally, the Canadian literary celebrity par excellence. Her work carry on receiving “substantial attention in the twenty-first century, including in texts that explore her work in relation to other women writers, other Canadian writers or other postmodern writers [...]; as well as other thematic and critical foci, such as postcolonialism [...] or dystopian fiction” (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 118). Some people recognize her as having one foot in modernism and the other in postmodernism. Others believe that she is post-everything: “her fiction is both canonical and postcanonical, nationalistic and postnationalistic, realistic and

postmodern” (HENGGEN apud HOWELLS, 2005, p. 10) – to which we could add postfeminist and posthuman. Of course, there is a bit of a controversy in criticism here, since some people place her in the past (by writing biographies) while others place her in the present (by seeing her as post-everything). Howsoever, all those terms are only arbitrary labels if out of context. “Often lauded for her anticipation of cultural trends, Atwood is a careful and often shrewd commentator on the fashions and obsessions of contemporary culture” (BOUSON, 2010, p. 2); and this notion of contemporaneity is what we should bear in mind in order to study her work from now on.

1.2 Genre Crossover: Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Apocalyptic Fiction

It can be problematic when a critic or scholar postulates that the genre science fiction was inaugurated with the publication of a specific literary work. Such a restriction implies a number of exclusions. In addition, truth is that we can find scientific elements in literature since always. “SF is an impure genre [...] which did not finally take shape until the late 19th century, although all its separate elements existed earlier” (CLUTE; NICHOLLS, 1995, p. 1067). Even if there are scientific traits in literary works from the nineteenth century, such as Mary Shelley’s and Edgar Allan Poe’s, there are also scientific elements in works from the eighteenth century, like Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, for example, which makes almost impossible to establish a definite origin for the genre. However, despite the controversies regarding its origins, one may say that science fiction derives from the gothic novel or also from the utopian thinking – which lead us to the classic chicken-and-egg situation of which came first. Howsoever, according to Peter Fitting (2010, p. 137), there is a “specificity of modern science fiction as a response to the effects of the scientific transformation of the world beginning around the end of the eighteenth century”. Thus, it is conceivable to relate modern science fiction to many works from the nineteenth century onwards, as it is proposed bellow,

[...] many critics set the birth of modern science fiction in the nineteenth century, some arguing for Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) or H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895) – or Jules Verne’s third novel, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (*Voyage au centre de la terre*), 1864; or *From the Earth to the Moon* the following year (*De la Terre à la Lune*); while others identify it with Hugo Gernsback’s *Ralph 124C 41+* (1925), or with his launching of *Amazing Stories: The Magazine of*

Scientifiction in April 1926 (he only coined the term ‘science fiction’ a few years later) (FITTING, 2010, p. 137).⁶

Therefore, even if we take into consideration only the first three authors mentioned, Mary Shelley, H. G. Wells, and Jules Verne (each with his/her own narrative features, of course), texts like the above succeed precisely by admitting that the birth of a genre can be represented by more than one name or style. Furthermore, common sense seems to agree that science fiction has, at least, three fathers: Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Hugo Gernsback. Mary Shelley, perhaps, is another case... Are there scientific elements in *Frankenstein*? Yes, for sure. Yet the novel is also a gothic horror story inserted in the romantic tradition.⁷ At first sight, Wells’s and Verne’s works, on the other hand, are more easily identifiable within science fiction (despite being different from each other). From a twenty-first century perspective, it is believed that time travel would be more tangible than a trip to the center of the Earth, for instance. At this point, Wells’s scientific explorations are more consistent than Verne’s are. However, it was Verne who predicted man’s voyage to the moon, fact that would be accomplished in real life about one hundred years later.⁸ All this is to say that all of these works participate in the birth of modern science fiction, each in its own terms⁹ – as well as other literary texts that we might recall here and there.

As Fitting (2010) suggests, there is disagreement today about the boundaries and characteristics of science fiction as a genre. “[...] There is still no single accepted definition of the genre: ‘There is no good reason to expect’, the editors of the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* tell us, ‘that a workable definition of SF will ever be established’” (FITTING, 2010, p. 135). In general terms, “science fiction is that branch of literature which is concerned with the impact of scientific advance upon human beings” (ASIMOV apud SLUSSER; GUFFEY, 1982, p. 194). As we are acquainted with, some characteristics are alternative timelines (mainly the future), the existence of parallel universes, outer space and extraterrestrial life,

⁶ For more information about Hugo Gernsback and the term *scientifiction*, see the entry DEFINITIONS OF SF in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, 1995, p. 588-593.

⁷ Maybe Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) has more to do with science fiction than *Frankenstein* (1818).

⁸ After Verne, Wells also anticipated man’s journey to the moon with the scientific romance *The First Men in the Moon*, published in 1901 – even though some critics consider Francis Godwin’s *The Man in the Moone* (1638) as the first to explore the theme and as one of the first works of science fiction.

⁹ As Fitting (2010, p. 137-138) also reminds us: “Another aspect of the construction of modern science fiction as a recognizable form and body of work can be seen in its immediate connection to the new medium of the cinema: one of the first film narratives is in fact science fiction, Georges Méliès’s *Voyage to the Moon* (*Voyage dans la Lune*, 1902), a 14-minute version of the Jules Verne story. Indeed, all three of the nineteenth-century texts in contention as the ‘first’ science-fiction novel – *Frankenstein*, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and *The Time Machine* – have been filmed several times, although the film versions of the oldest of these novels – *Frankenstein* – are perceived more as horror films than as science fiction”.

time travel, robots, mutant creatures, humanoids, technology and scientific principles. Moreover, SF is usually divided into two sub-genres¹⁰: *hard science fiction* (stories that emphasize scientific or technical details, with authentic scientific knowledge); and *soft science fiction* (focused on sociological or anthropological speculation about human society and more concerned with the characters rather than proper scientific elements). But, again, this division is controversial as any other categorization – and even more if we consider the possible arrangements with associate genres, like fantasy, horror, speculative fiction, etc.

Several top names tried to define SF: Hugo Gernsback and Isaac Asimov, already mentioned; Robert A. Heinlein; Darko Suvin; Arthur C. Clarke, among many others. To my personal taste, one of the best definitions as far as I know is Rod Serling's in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, in which he, as the narrator, states in front of the camera: "It is been said that science fiction and fantasy are two different things. Science fiction: the improbable made possible. Fantasy: the impossible made probable" ("The Fugitive", 1962). If science fiction deals with possible things, it is closer to reality than some people tend to conclude. And let's bear in mind that, as the paradoxical name indicates, science fiction is a mixture of knowledge, demonstrable facts (the *science* half) and invented stuff (the *fiction* half). Besides, if science fiction's "specific ability is not so much to predict the future, [...] but to show our own present through a particularly effective distorting lens" (FITTING, 2010, p. 144), we can wonder why there are still people seeing the genre as an artificial and fallacious space for delusional fans to discuss a far distant future when they will no longer be alive. Sometimes, the further away a literary text is from our known material reality, the more it is able to bring relevant issues for debates on the present.

Fredric Jameson (2005, p. xiv) recognizes a *generic revulsion* in regards to SF: "The conventional high-cultural repudiation of SF [...] complaints about the absence of complex and psychologically 'interesting' characters [...], a yearning for original literary styles which ignores the stylistic variety of modern SF". According to him, it is probably not a matter of personal taste or something like that, "We must here identify a kind of generic revulsion, in which this form and narrative discourse is the object of psychic resistance as a whole and the target of a kind of literary 'reality principle'" (JAMESON, 2005, p. xiv). For sure, other genres are affected by such a reality principle, especially fantastic fiction, constantly assaulted for being too abstract and implausible, so far removed from the real world. Nevertheless, as

¹⁰ Other forms that are usually considered sub-genres of science fiction are space opera, cyberpunk, steampunk, biopunk, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, alternate history, etc.

Peter Y. Paik (2010, p. 1) points out, “science fiction and fantasy, in particular narratives drawn from media often dismissed as unserious and trivial, such as the comic book and the science fiction film, are capable of achieving profound and probing insights into the principal dilemmas of political life”. Furthermore, science fiction

can accordingly serve as a vital instrument for the investigation of the contingencies governing political life, the forces that structure and dissolve collective existence, by proving the reader with visions in which familiar realities are destabilized and transformed. By compelling us to imagine a different order, science fiction cultivates in us the capacity to conceive of our contemporary situation in a dynamic manner, whether in terms of its disintegration or rejuvenation, making it the literary genre that perhaps most actively fosters a sense of historical as well as – in the Nietzschean sense – unhistorical consciousness in the present (PAIK, 2010, p. 2).

The science fiction stigmatization, naturally, may derive from the prejudice regarding the commercial phenomenon of pulp magazines, whose quality might be considered dubious. However, despite the psychic resistance indicated by Jameson (2005), one should acknowledge that science fiction – whether through literature or other media, such as the cinema – is a genre capable of shedding lights on our present or near future by means of its rational-scientific extrapolations. Jameson (2005, p. xiii), by the way, also reminds us that there are works that descend “from what may be called the European art tradition of H. G. Wells’s ‘scientific romances’ or speculative fiction, rather than from the commercial pulps in which America SF emerged”. Thus, science fiction proves to be a black hole with immeasurable dimensions, from which all sort of stories pop up, from the most naive and unreasonable one to the most profound and compromised.

In 2011, Margaret Atwood published a book with a series of essays entitled *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, in which we can encounter her personal exploration of the genre: “So that is what this book is about. It’s about my somewhat tangled personal history with SF, first as a child, then as an adolescent, then as a one-time student and academic, then as a reviewer and commentator, and then, finally, as a composer” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 10). The book opens with an interesting discussion about the differences between *science fiction* and *speculative fiction*. According to Atwood, some of her novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood* (and today we can add *MaddAddam* to the list), have been strictly read as science fiction, though she tends to disagree by arguing that they are speculative fiction otherwise.

Are these books “science fiction”? I am often asked. Though sometimes I am not asked, but told: I am a silly nit or a snob or a genre traitor for dodging the term because these books are as much “science fiction” as *Nineteenth Eighty-Four* is, whatever I might say. But is *Nineteenth Eighty-Four* as much “science fiction” as *The Martian Chronicles*? I might reply. I would answer not, and therein lies the distinction (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 2).

Following this discussion, Atwood recollects that *The Year of the Flood* was reviewed “by one of the reigning monarchs of the SF and Fantasy forms, Ursula K. Le Guin” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 5), and the review appeared in *The Guardian* in 2009. Le Guin politely contests Atwood’s definition to sci-fi – “fiction in which things happen that are not possible today” – and the statement that her novels cannot be science fiction inasmuch as they deal with possible things that have already happened in real life. “This arbitrarily restrictive definition seems designed to protect her novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awarders. She doesn’t want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto” (LE GUIN, 2009, electronic information). In *In Other Worlds*, Atwood replies by affirming, “If winning prizes were topmost on my list, and if writing such books would guarantee non-wins, my obvious move would be just to avoid writing them” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 6). Moreover, as Atwood distinguishes,

What I mean by “science fiction” is those books that descend from H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*, which treats of an invasion by tentacled, blood-sucking Martians shot to Earth in metal canisters – things that could not possibly happen – whereas, for me, “speculative fiction” means plots that descend from Jules Verne’s books about submarines and balloon travel and such – things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books. I would place my own books in this second category: no Martians (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 6).

From this point of view, in science fiction we have a higher degree of suspension of disbelief, whereas speculative fiction – still interested in science and its effects – is bound to realistic verisimilitude. While science fiction explores elements such as monsters, time travel, invasion and abduction perpetrated by aliens, speculative fiction works with things that could actually happen – more viable, logically speaking. It means that it explores things that we assume as possible in an immediate future, based on the science that we have already invented or started to invent. In other words, speculative fiction takes to extremes things that we are already familiar with. As example, we can think of the creation of an entire clone population, which resembles Dolly the sheep, a concrete achievement in our world. Still, the creation of a

group of humanoids in laboratories (something that Atwood explores in her novels), which has some resonances from the existing technique of choosing the sex of a baby in IVF (in vitro fertilization).

In the entry *speculative fiction* in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, we can encounter the following information: a) “used by some writers and critics in place of ‘science fiction’”; b) in a symposium published in 1947, “Robert A. Heinlein proposed the term to describe a subset of SF involving extrapolation from known science and technology”; c) “Judith Merrill borrowed the term in 1966, spelling out her version of ‘speculative fiction’ in rather more detail in such a way as to de-emphasize the science component of SF (which acronym can equally stand for ‘speculative fiction’) while keeping the idea of extrapolation” (CLUTE; NICHOLLS, 1995, p. 2120). The entry also shows that,

Since then the term has generally appealed to writers and readers who are as interested in soft SF as in hard SF. Though the term has proved attractive to many, especially perhaps academics who find the term more respectable-sounding than “science fiction” and lacking the pulp associations, nobody’s definition of “speculative fiction” has as yet any formal rigour, though the term has come to be used with a very wide application [...] as if science fiction were a subset of speculative fiction rather than vice versa (CLUTE; NICHOLLS, 1995, p. 2120).

Furthermore, the authors of the entry add that “many critics do not find it a consistently helpful term but [...] critics tend to worry more about the demarcation of genres than writers do, and, as a propaganda weapon, the term has been useful precisely because it allows the blurring of boundaries, which in turn permits a greater auctorial freedom from genre constraints and ‘rules’” (CLUTE; NICHOLLS, 1995, p. 2120). With respect to the fluidity of the terms, Atwood calls attention to the fact that “some use *speculative fiction* as an umbrella covering science fiction and all its hyphenated forms – science-fiction fantasy and so forth – and others choose the reverse” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 61). Sometime after Le Guin’s review, the two ladies, in a public discussion, found out that what one meant by science fiction was what the other meant by speculative fiction, that is to say, both agreed on the content, but were using different labels. “What Le Guin means by ‘science fiction’ is what I mean by ‘speculative fiction,’ and what she means by ‘fantasy’ would include some of what I mean by ‘science fiction.’ So that clears it all up, more or less. When it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 7). In addition, we have to consider that, to some degree,

the labeling of scientific works depends on the critic's knowledge about science, which sometimes may be much more limited than the author's.

The discussion about genres and categories in literature, therefore, is quite difficult inasmuch as every writer, critic or reader has his/her own way of interpreting a literary work and its effects. Moreover, "much depends on your nomenclatural allegiances, or else on your system of literary taxonomy" (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 2). What does science fiction mean nowadays, when we already have a bunch of scientific and technological improvements that seemed impossible some decades ago? One may say that the term perhaps is losing its direction little by little, since today our abstractions can be accomplished faster than ever. Though, science fiction will always be some steps ahead – simply because our imagination is always ahead –, and despite all the nomenclatural mess, I believe that it is too premature to infer that we are in the future of the futures so that the genre no longer makes sense. It still does, but maybe in a different way. Besides, science fiction does not necessarily present only tales of the future.

"Is this term a corral with real fences that separate what is clearly 'science fiction' from what is not, or is it merely a shelving aid, there to help workers in bookstores place the book in a semi-accurate or at least lucrative way?" (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 2). What is the criterion to define a genre? Atwood's metaphor about fences reflects very well our naivety when we try to separate works in specific categories. Her apparent refusal to be identified as a science fiction writer not only has to do with all of these confusing categorizations, but also with a wish of not being reduced to only one thing – the same way that she has always been reduced to a feminist writer. Furthermore, perhaps she does not have the ambition to put herself at the same level of acclaimed writers of sci-fi. It is a matter of respect for those who were truly scientists and wrote science fiction with empirical knowledge. It is, therefore, a diplomatic attitude on her part, not an act of escape or betrayal – even because, as she herself tells us in *In Other Worlds'* introduction, the third part of the book is destined to a group of her own literary mini-SF compositions. We must agree that no one would write an entire book about a particular genre if he/she does not recognize any personal connections with it. Finally, if someone asked me about the most interesting part of *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, I would probably have to say that it is the dedicatory to Ursula K. Le Guin at the very first page: a sort of provocation or a white flag?

Ingeniously, Atwood (2011, p. 8) postulates that "Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Sword and Sorcery Fantasy, and Slipstream Fiction: all of them might be placed under the

same large ‘wonder tale’ umbrella”, what leads us to another type of ‘wonder tale’, the (post) apocalyptic fiction. (Post) apocalyptic fiction has been interpreted as a separate genre as well as another subset of science fiction (or speculative fiction). However, the opposite holds true: “science fiction is the contemporary form of apocalyptic literature” (ALKON, 1987, p. 158). Still, apocalyptic is “the most familiar kind of futuristic fiction” (ALKON, 1987, p. 158). Moreover, as Greg Garrard (2012, p. 94) asserts, “Apocalypticism is inevitably bound up with imagination, because it has yet to come into being. To use the narratological term, it is always ‘proleptic’”. Although the narrative can be proleptic, that is, future-oriented, the premise is quite the same as in science/speculative fiction, “Apocalyptic themes in recent fiction are usually not intended to provide a true vision of the future but to raise disturbing questions about the present” (ALKON, 1987, p. 159). (Post) apocalyptic fiction, however, does not have an entry in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, although the subject comes to pop up in associate terms, as in the examples that follow,

DISASTER

Cataclysm, natural or manmade, is one of the most popular themes in SF (CLUTE; NICHOLLS, 1995, p. 638).

END OF THE WORLD

Together with utopias and cautionary tales, apocalyptic visions form one of the three principal traditions of pre-20th-century futuristic fantasy (CLUTE; NICHOLLS, 1995, p. 723).

ESCHATOLOGY

Eschatology is the class of theological doctrine pertaining to death and the subsequent fate of the soul, and to the ultimate fate of the world (CLUTE; NICHOLLS, 1995, p. 734).

Whether being or not a genre, apocalyptic fiction, in general terms, is concerned with the end of the world – for the most part taking an anthropocentric perspective, therefore focusing only on the end of *human* civilization. Such stories explore both natural and manmade crises and disasters, that is, catastrophes that go from divine judgment, supernatural phenomena, ecological collapse, and extraterrestrial invasion to nuclear warfare, pandemic, and technological singularity, for instance. Post-apocalyptic fiction is set to be those stories describing a world or civilization immediately or long after a catastrophic situation, often depicting a society (or remnants of it) that has returned to a primitive stage. Even though we

can see a clear difference in terms of time displacement, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction sound alike, since both deal with disaster – usually, the first with the causes, the second with the effects. As many literary works explore the two forms, I will use only the term *apocalyptic* to refer to both from now on.

Apocalyptic literature takes the form of a revelation of the end of history. Violent and grotesque images are juxtaposed with glimpses of a world transformed; the underlying theme is usually a titanic struggle between good and evil... Apocalypticism has been described as a genre born out of crisis, designed to stiffen the resolve of an embattled community by dangling in front of it the vision of a sudden and permanent release from its captivity. It is underground literature, the consolation of the persecuted (THOMPSON apud GARRARD, 2012, p. 94).

Since apocalyptic fiction can offer “glimpses of a world transformed” and can be “the consolation of the persecuted”, it is understandable why people are so fascinated by the end times possibility; for most people, every ending presupposes a new beginning. In other words, such fascination with images of the end comes from “[...] our desire to see the human race perpetuated and human history prolonged on this world” (ALKON, 1987, p. 181). Moreover, as Atwood (2011, p. 53) points out, “if you’ve invented the past tense and the future tense, and if you are a question-asking being – which *Homo sapiens* is – then sooner or later the creative part of the brain is going to come up with a point of origin and an ultimate destination, even if it’s the cyclic destruction and re-creation of the universe”. Thus, the creative part of our brains has been always concerned with tales regarding origins and endings, turning things upside down and beginning from scratch, relying on the “eternal return”, in which time is not linear but cyclical.

Accordingly, as Stephen Hawking (2011, p. 10) reminds us, “When most people believed in an essentially static and unchanging universe, the question of whether or not it had a beginning was really one of metaphysics or theology”. The same holds true for the end of the universe. “Einstein’s general theory of relativity, on its own, predicted that space-time began at the big bang singularity and would come to an end either at the big crunch singularity (if the whole universe recollapsed), or at a singularity inside a black hole (if a local region, such as a star, were to collapse)” (HAWKING, 2011, p. 130). Thus, following a metaphysical line, we can wonder if the world really started with the big bang, the singularity at the beginning of the universe, or, most importantly, if it is going to cease with the big

crunch, the singularity at the end of the universe. “Does the universe in fact have a beginning or an end? And if so, what are they like?” (HAWKING, 2011, p. 131).

As Northrop Frye (1973, p. 141) points out nonetheless, “[...] the Biblical apocalypse is our grammar of apocalyptic imagery”. In this sense, apocalyptic fiction has been presenting predominantly a theological framework. Thereby, for the big bang, there is Creation; for the big crunch, there is Judgment Day. According to Frye (1973), the apocalyptic world of the Bible presents a pattern that includes a divine world, a human world, an animal world, a vegetable world, and a mineral world – and we may say that this pattern is followed in many traditional apocalyptic texts. One of the most remarkable examples of the genre is Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, published in 1826, and also considered the first work of modern apocalyptic fiction^{11 12}, “[...] a narrative that draws on biblical Apocalypse mainly for imagery to reinforce a secular tale of the future” (ALKON, 1987, p. 188). However, “[...] the world at the conclusion of Shelley’s story continues to exist as usual with its natural stock of plants and animals, although without humans. The year 2100 is their last, not the end as foretold in Apocalypse” (ALKON, 1987, p. 189). Frye also states that,

In our culture the central sacred book is the Christian Bible, which is also probably the most systematically constructed sacred book in the world. To say that the Bible is “more” than a work of literature is merely to say that other methods of approaching it are possible. No book could have had its influence on literature without itself having literary qualities, and the Bible is a work of literature as long as it is being examined by a literary critic. [...] A genuine higher criticism of the Bible, therefore, would be a synthesizing process which would start with the assumption that the Bible is a definitive myth, a single archetypal structure extending from creation to apocalypse (FRYE, 1973, p. 315).

Thus, if we really consider the Bible as a piece of literature, we have to assume that at least part of its content may be fictional, a myth as any other, without being necessarily committed to reality. In this sense, “myths are stories that are central to their cultures and that are taken seriously enough so that people organize their ritual and emotional lives around them, and can even start wars over them” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 55). Myth, in this context,

¹¹ Regarding Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, Alkon also reminds us that the “most significant formal affiliations of her work are suggested very clearly by allusions to Defoe’s account of the 1665 plague and to *Robinson Crusoe* as a saga of isolation”. Thus, the novel “is firmly rooted in the realistic tradition of Defoe, although there are strong affinities with the gothic as in *Frankenstein*” (ALKON, 1987, p. 190).

¹² Other notable examples of apocalyptic fiction are Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend* (1954) and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006). The first also participates in the zombie genre, presenting a worldwide apocalypse due to a disease; the second presents a post-apocalyptic situation after an unspecified cataclysm that has decimated most of civilization.

does not have any connotation of truth or falsehood attached to it; it is simply a story being told. At any rate, whether being or not fictional, the Bible continues to feed the collective imagination, for better or for worse. According to Mick Broderick (1993, electronic information), there is a “[...] dangerous level of credence given to spurious apocalyptic logic and desire”. Such credence perpetuate all sort of predictions about “the end of the world”. The latest most widespread prophecies were about the years 2000 and 2012, but countless others existed before (such as Noah’s Ark and the flood), and several others will still take place – even though the Bible has not made such predictions.

Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts express the expectation of an imminent cosmic cataclysm in which God will destroy the ruling powers of evil and raise the righteous to life in a new messianic kingdom. [...] The language of apocalypse is designed primarily to elicit fear and resentment concerning this cataclysmic prospect but at the same time to offer encouragement and comfort as the elect await the new world that will come into being (BOSCO, 2010, p. 157).

It is known historically that “most apocalyptic texts prior to the eighteenth century either dealt directly with literal interpretations of the Book of Revelation or offered reinterpretations of the end time that attempted to interiorize or spiritualize it for an audience” (BOSCO, 2010, p. 159). The established definition to *apocalypse*, as for example in the *Oxford Dictionary* – “1 the destruction of the world; 2 the end of the world, as described in the Bible; 3 a situation causing very serious damage and destruction” (HORNBY, 2008, p. 59) – reveals a misinterpretation of the Bible that already became common sense. *Apocalypse* is just the Greek name of the Book of Revelation and denotes exactly this: “uncovering, revelation” (BIBLE, 1769, electronic information). It can mean a disclosure of knowledge or something else hidden, as well. Thus, a moment of revelation can be a prelude to something to come, not necessarily an end. And even if it represents a conclusion, it may be the end of a particular civilization, not of the universe as a whole. In a twenty-first century context, howsoever, words like hecatomb, Armageddon, and apocalypse do not denote an end, but a development model collapsing or a metaphor for something else. There is, consequently, a figurative nature in the Bible’s apocalyptic visions that can be interpreted in many ways.

What can also be interpreted in many ways is Atwood’s fiction, especially *Oryx and Crake*, my corpus, a novel that falls into the genres just described – science fiction, speculative fiction, and apocalyptic fiction – whereas it also problematizes their limits. It would be negligence to try to simplify the question by choosing only one genre inasmuch as

they influence one another, constructing a complex net of relations. Therefore, this is to suggest a blurring of boundaries, since the novel is able to participate in more than one genre at the same time. On the whole, *Oryx and Crake* borrows some scientific elements from science fiction, like the mad scientist archetype; secondly, it presents a story whose scientific extrapolations are more down-to-earth, so echoing the speculative fiction; finally, it has pre and post-catastrophe narratives, thus dialoguing with the imagination of disaster common to apocalyptic fiction. As mentioned in the previous section, Atwood is a writer who delights readers through genre crossovers, and we have here a possible and interesting mixture of genres – in a dynamic manner, the novel fits them all very well.

1.3 Mood Crossover: Utopia, Dystopia, Ustopia

An early example of a utopian conception from classical antiquity is Plato's *Republic*, in which he outlines what he considers the perfect society and its political system. It is known, however, that the term was coined and popularized by Thomas More with the publication of *Utopia* (1516), satirical narrative that depicts a fictional society and its customs in an Atlantic Ocean island. Utopia then came to be "an imaginary place or state in which everything is perfect" (HORNBY, 2008, p. 1690). More's work "gave a name to a mode of thinking and a literary form with an old tradition and a rich future" (BARRICELLI; GIBALDI, 1982, p. 316), resulting in several literary representations of the ideal society as well as in utopian proposals for real communities. Curiously, "the name originates from a pun: the combination of the Greek *ou* 'no' and *topos* 'place', yielding *utopia*, literally, 'no place,' which is both homonymous and synonymous with *eutopia*, from *eu* 'good' and *topos*, or 'the good place'" (BARRICELLI; GIBALDI, 1982, p. 316). This double meaning, that is, the association between "no place" and "good place", may suggest that utopia might be a perfect and at the same time an ultimately unreachable society, a sort of distant heaven, so to speak. According to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*,

The concept of a utopia or "Ideal State" is linked to religious ideas of Heaven or the Promised Land and to folkloristic ideas like the Isles of the Blessed, but it is essentially a future-historical goal, to be achieved by the active efforts of human beings, not a transcendental goal reserved as a reward for those who follow a particularly virtuous path in life (CLUTE; NICHOLLS, 1995, p. 2342).

Margaret Atwood believes that Thomas More, through his discourse on government, perhaps “meant to indicate that although his *Utopia* made more rational sense than the England of his day, it was unlikely to be found anywhere outside a book” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 93). She adds that “as a rule, Utopia is only safe when it remains true to its name and stays nowhere. It’s a nice place to visit, but do we really want to live there?” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 95). For Atwood (2005), some of More’s *Utopia* descendants are Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726); Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872); W. H. Hudson’s *A Crystal Age* (1887); Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888); William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890); H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895); Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915); Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932); George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949); and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). At any rate, the list is endless – and even more when we consider intersections with the dystopian tradition, for example. Erich Fromm (1990), on the other hand, proposes a trilogy of utopias, with Thomas More’s *Utopia* being followed by the Italian friar Tommaso Campanella’s *City of the Sun* (1602) and the German humanist Johann Valentin Andreae’s *Christianopolis* (1619). According to him,

Utopias were written from then on for several hundred years, until the beginning of the twentieth century. The latest and most influential utopia was Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, published in 1888. Aside from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Ben-Hur*, it was undoubtedly the most popular book at the turn of the century, printed in many millions of copies in the United States, translated into over twenty languages. Bellamy’s utopia is part of the great American tradition as expressed in the thinking of Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson (FROMM, 1990, p. 315).

Based on the idea that Bellamy’s socialist utopia put an end to a tradition of utopian texts, Fromm (1990, p. 315) affirms that “this hope for man’s individual and social perfectibility, which in philosophical and anthropological terms was clearly expressed in the writings of the Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century and of the socialist thinkers of the nineteenth, remained unchanged until after the First World War”. In fact, when it comes to utopia/dystopia, it seems common to recognize that the First World War was one of the key historical moments that led to a greater tendency for the writers to produce stories that depict negative instead of positive societies. To some extent, utopia became old-fashioned, an outdated delusion. “Utopia has always been a political issue, an unusual destiny for a literary form: yet just as the literary value of the form is subject to permanent doubt, so also its political status is structurally ambiguous” (JAMESON, 2005, p. xi). Moreover, as Jameson (2005, p. xi) states, “during the Cold War [...], Utopia had become a synonym for

Stalinism and had come to designate a program which neglected human frailty and original sin, and betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects”.

So, what is utopia, after all? Is it a literary genre? Would it be a political structure inside science fiction? According to Clute and Nicholls (1995, p. 2342), “it can be argued that all utopias are SF, in that they are exercises in hypothetical sociology and political science. Alternatively, it might be argued that only those utopias which embody some notion of scientific advancement qualify as SF”. As utopia has always been a political issue, one may conclude that it has nothing to do with science fiction. More’s *Utopia*, for instance, is a description of a particular government, not a speculation on scientific advances. However, many scholars and critics defend the opposite in believing utopia to be a socio-economic sub-genre of the broader literary form of science fiction (JAMESON, 2005). Thus, utopia would be “one specific subset of this generic category specifically devoted to the imagination of alternative social and economic forms” (JAMESON, 2005, p. xiv). Jameson’s statements are in accordance with Darko Suvin’s ideas, another great expert on the subject,

Strictly and precisely speaking, utopia is not a genre but the *sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction*. Paradoxically, it can be seen as such only now that SF has expanded into its modern phase, “looking backward” from its englobing of utopia. Further, that expansion was in some not always direct ways a continuation of classical and nineteenth century utopian literature. Thus, conversely, SF is at the same time wider than and at least collaterally descended from utopia; it is, if not a daughter, yet a niece of utopia – a niece usually ashamed of the family inheritance but unable to escape her genetic destiny. For all its adventure, romance, popularization, and wondrousness, SF can finally be written only between the utopian and the anti-utopian horizons (SUVIN, 1979, p. 61-62).

As I previously suggested, we may be facing a chicken-and-egg situation. As Jameson (2005) reminds us, we should bear in mind that there is a difference between a utopian genre or text and a utopian impulse. “It has often been observed that we need to distinguish between the Utopian form and the Utopian wish: between the written text or genre and something like a Utopian impulse detectable in daily life and its practices” (JAMESON, 2005, p. 1). As a result, even when we are within other literary confines, it is possible to identify utopian impulses in it. Another term that complicates a bit the comprehension of utopia is *uchronia*, neologism from the word utopia that replaces *topos* with *chronos*, ‘time’, coined by Charles Renouvier in 1857. “He defined it as a utopia of past time, alluding to the new fictional genre of alternate history: works in which some crucial turning point is given a different, and from

the author's viewpoint better, outcome" (ALKON, 1987, p. 115). Another notion, however, has been assigned to the term, linking *uchronia* to a future history instead of an alternate history.

Twentieth-century critics have used *uchronia* in referring to works of alternate history but also and more frequently to mean utopias set in the future. This usage mirrors the fact that futuristic *uchronias* have been more common. Their greater appeal for writers and readers has many justifications, but it has nevertheless obscured a significant affinity to alternate histories (ALKON, 1987, p. 116).

For Alkon (1987, 154), "the greatest work to combine features of futuristic and alternate past *uchronias* is *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But its dystopian form is such an unmistakable source of power that other equally crucial attributes of Orwell's novel, especially its *uchronic* features, have been neglected". This only proves how much these definitions also depend on the narrator and the readers' interpretation and the historical context in which they are inserted. In the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it was certainly a futuristic narrative by the time it was written and published; today it may well be read as a *uchronian* text in the alternate history mode, that is, past-oriented – or future history, if we forget that it is placed in a particular time that is already behind us now. Still, it can be read as utopian or dystopian, depending on your point of view. "There are certainly utopias whose alternative society I do not like or which many readers may find abhorrent [...], but this does not mean that such works are not utopias" (FITTING, 2010, p. 136). The same holds true in regards to dystopia. Besides, any "investigation of the future, whether in *uchronic* or other modes of futuristic fiction, assumes – and tacitly argues for – an open future with many possibilities" (ALKON, 1987, p. 126). And that is precisely what these impulses – utopia, *uchronia*, and dystopia – are about: possibilities.

As Paik (2010, p. 2) points out, "the work of literary speculation, to be sure, can be mobilized toward the depiction of an ideal social order as much as it can result in the creation of a society with flaws and limitations distinct from our own". That is when dystopia starts to take shape until it becomes the worst of our nightmares, where there is a gray sun setting over a dark horizon. Unlike the utopia (eutopia or positive utopia, if you prefer), the dystopia "follows the model of 'if this goes on': a future in which some aspect of the present had continued and worsened" (FITTING, 2010, p. 151). Dystopia is also referred to as negative utopia or anti-utopia. However, as Fitting (2010, p. 151) calls attention, the term "should be

distinguished from the *anti-utopia* which is an equally dismal future, but one which is intended as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia” (FITTING, 2010, p. 151). The author explains it, by saying that “social critique and the critique of the utopianism are not the same thing, and there is a clear distinction between dystopian social critique and the critique of the very idea of wanting to imagine a better world” (FITTING, 2010, p. 141). For this reason, “the critique of contemporary society expressed in the dystopia implies (or asserts) the need for change; the anti-utopia is, on the other hand, explicitly or implicitly a defence of the status quo” (FITTING, 2010, p. 141).

Anyway, following a broad definition in contrast to utopia, dystopia is that “imaginary place or state in which everything is extremely bad or unpleasant” (HORNBY, 2008, p. 479); the dystopian mode then brings chaos and a hellish atmosphere. Furthermore, with respect to dystopia’s origins and epistemology, here are in contention excerpts from the glossary contained in *Interrelations of Literature*, the entry “Dystopias” found in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, and the chapter “The Origins of Dystopia” from *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, respectively. Despite bringing some subtly differentiated information, all authors seem to be in accordance with what has been said about dystopia throughout the ages; thus, all definitions sound great – at least for the purposes of this particular research.

Dystopian fiction: (from the Greek *dys* ‘ill, bad, diseased’ and *topos* ‘place’; sometimes referred to as “negative” or “pessimistic” utopia) the presentation of a possible world that is the nightmarish opposite of perfection; has its origins in the satirical use of utopian fiction in such works as Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* but to a large extent is a product of twentieth-century pessimism (e.g., Zamyatin’s *We*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and Orwell’s *1984*) (BARRICELLI; GIBALDI, 1982, p. 309).

The word “dystopia” is the commonly used antonym of “eutopia” and denotes that class of hypothetical societies containing images of worlds worse than our own. An early user of the term was John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), in a parliamentary speech in 1868, but its recent fashionableness probably stems from its use in *Quest for Utopia* (1952) by Glenn Negley (1907-1988) and J. Max Patrick (1908-). [...] Dystopian images are almost invariably images of future society, pointing fearfully at the way the world is supposedly going in order to provide urgent propaganda for a change in direction (CLUTE; NICHOLLS, 1995, p. 682).

The term ‘dystopia’ enters common currency only in the twentieth century, though it appears intermittently beforehand (dys-topia or ‘cacotopia’, bad place, having been used by John Stuart Mill in an 1868 parliamentary debate). The flowering of the dystopian genre was preceded by a variety of satirical tropes. Francis Bacon’s scientific ambitions were brought down several notches in Swift’s famous parody in book three of *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). The dystopian ideal has also been linked both historically and logically to proclamations of the ‘end of utopia’ (for instance in

Marcuse, *Five Lectures*, 1970), and has sometimes also been wedded to the now debunked hypothesis of the ‘end of history’ (CLAEYS, 2010, p. 107-108).

In addition, in the *Dicionário Houaiss da Língua Portuguesa* (apud CARVALHO, 2011, p. 8, my translation), there is the following definition to the term: “any representation or description of a future social organization characterized by intolerable living conditions, with the aim of criticizing trends of the actual society or parody utopias, warning about their dangers [...]”. The entry also mentions Aldous Huxley and George Orwell as the novelists who designed the most famous dystopias. The first brings up *Brave New World* through a totalitarianism “that relies on highly effective methods of persuasion that, by their scientific nature, exclude the need of physical violence”. The totalitarianism of Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, on the other hand, “is the quintessence of violent regimes generally associated with the images of Hitler and Stalin” (CARVALHO, 2011, p. 22, my translation). The concept of dystopia thus “encompasses a series of implications, such as mass hysteria around tutelary figures, distorted views of history, the mistaken dirigisme of values, the scientific exaggerations, the harms of overpopulation, among other effects” (DIAS apud CARVALHO, 2011, p. 10, my translation).

In general, if utopia works with the idealization of places and seeks optimistic answers, dystopia works differently, it accepts the world we live in – taking its negative traits to extremes – or it denies it, forcing a return to circumstances and/or values that were lost long ago. The classic dystopian narratives, therefore, explore the oppressive governance of a corruptible society, in which technology is generally used as a tool to control the subordinate masses. There is a negative atmosphere emanating from the plot, in which the command of the human by technological or State machinery is predominant. In dystopia, we watch the collapse of a society, whatever it may be.

Utopias and dystopias from Plato’s *Republic* on have had to cover the same basic ground that real societies do. All must answer the same questions: Where do people live, what do they eat, what do they wear, what do they do about sex and child-rearing? Who has the power, who does the work, how do citizens relate to nature, and how does the economy function? (ATWOOD, 2007, p. 11).

For Margaret Atwood (2005), it is simply about the designing of societies, good ones (utopias) and bad ones (dystopias). Moreover, as she points, “In a Utopia, you get to plan everything – the cities, the legal system, the customs, even facets of the language. The

Dystopian bad design is the Utopian good design in reverse – that is, we the readers are supposed to deduce what a good society is by seeing, in detail, what it isn't" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 93). Moreover, in the collective imagination, utopia and its wicked counterpart are sometimes perceived as analogous to images of heaven and hell – the triumph of God set against the triumph of the Devil. It is no coincidence that “in the background of every modern Utopia lurk Plato's *Republic* and the Book of Revelation, and modern Dystopias have not been uninfluenced by various literary versions of Hell, especially those of Dante and Milton, which in their turn go right back to the Bible, that indispensable sourcebook of Western literature” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 93-94). However, even associated with the idea of perfection, utopia does not necessarily imply freedom and welfare. “Utopia is an extreme example of the impulse to order; it's the word *should* run rampant. Dystopia, its nightmare mirror image, is the desire to squash dissent taken to inhuman and lunatic lengths. [...] Neither are what you'd call tolerant, but both are necessary to the imagination” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 95). Although one may have already proclaimed their end as a form (especially utopia), both are so necessary to our empirical world and its political life that they keep multiplying in popular culture, always challenging our imagination.

Utopia was never free from history, since its earlier moments of writing “were influenced by historical events; eighteenth-century utopias imagined alternatives to French Absolutism while late nineteenth-century utopias reacted to the struggles of workers. Similarly, the struggles of the 1960s, the counter-culture and especially ‘Second Wave’ feminism have strongly influenced the utopian writing of the 1970s” (FITTING, 2010, p. 147-148). Needless to sustain that history is embedded in dystopia as well. While dystopian imageries began to flourish in the last decades of the nineteenth century, they are also a product of the twentieth century despair and pessimism, as indicated previously. Atwood (2007) agrees with the general idea that the First World War was a turning point to utopian/dystopian fiction. In her opinion, the War marked the end of the romantic-idealistic utopian dream in literature, as well as a number of real-life utopian plans were about to be concretized with devastating effects. We have to remember that both Communism in Russia and Nazism in Germany began as utopian visions. As the world watched the “dream” coming true with dire results, it would be better to hope that that horrible utopia was actually a non-existent place, a never-never land that should no longer be looked for. Thus, due to the pessimism brought about by such historical facts, a higher tendency to dystopias came to exist ever since. Furthermore,

true dictatorships do not come in in good times. They come in in bad times, when people are ready to give up some of their freedoms to someone – anyone – who can take control and promise them better times. The bad times that made Hitler and Mussolini possible were economic, with some extra frills such as a shortage of men in proportion to women, due to the high death rates during the First World War (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 98).

Besides, for the author, “It’s a sad commentary on our age that we find Dystopias a lot easier to believe in than Utopias: Utopias we can only imagine; Dystopias we’ve already had” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 95). History, therefore, helped us to believe in dystopia – which may be a pessimistic commentary for some people, but realistic for others. By comparing the two forms, Alkon (1987, p. 155), believes that “all varieties of utopia, even those with whose premises we disagree, are inherently comforting to the extent that as a genre they are affirmations of the consoling possibility that life might be better”. Conversely, dystopias “are disturbing negations of that possibility not only because they show dismal worlds where life is even worse than in ours but because they displace and deny that form – the utopia – which assures us that better things are at least imaginable” (ALKON, 1987, p. 155). For Fromm (1990), a two-thousand-year-old Western tradition of hope was destroyed and transformed into a mood of despair, and “the moral callousness of the First World War was only the beginning. Other events followed...” (FROMM, 1990, p. 315) – such as the Second World War, the Cold War, and the construction of the Berlin Wall. Atwood (2007) associates the severe future of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for instance, with the historical context of the Cold War, whereas the more flexible future of *Brave New World* would have to do with the fall of the Berlin Wall,

Which template would win, we wondered? During the Cold War, *Nineteenth Eighty-Four* seemed to have the edge. But when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, pundits proclaimed the end of history, shopping reigned triumphant, and there was already lots of quasi-*soma* percolating through society. True, promiscuity had taken a hit from AIDS, but on balance we seemed to be in for a trivial, giggly, drug-enhanced Spend-O-Rama: *Brave New World* was winning the race (ATWOOD, 2007, p. 8).

By extension, dystopia is also a political issue, and one can consider that dystopian stories are a projection of specific portions of real life. Then, their goal would be to extend real life, amplifying it into a fictional narrative that may be perceived as a criticism of something that actually happens in the empirical world. For this reason, dystopias are easily associated with particular historical contexts. In other words, they occur in accordance with

different phases throughout history. The first can be recognized as the one regarding totalitarian regimes, fear of the State, related to World War II and to oppressive governments that delegitimize freedom. A second wave seems marked by a certain anxiety about the body, as a consequence of the Cold War and identity policies. Then we have a wave that encompasses novels for young adults, marked by the insipidity of pop culture, September 11 and the War on Terror.¹³ For sure, these phases suggested here do not necessarily imply a chronology, since phases may overlap. In a world of real and fictional dystopias, the “picture changed, too, with the attack on New York City’s Twin Towers in 2001” (ATWOOD, 2007, p. 8), and it will be changing forever, just because the greatest tragedies of history may be an inspiration to the conception of fictional utopias and dystopias. While the real scenario changes, the fictional one does too – likewise, the readers’ reception might differ over the years.

Taking into account the most prominent literary dystopias, along with Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* we have Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* – which Fromm (1990) considers to form the trilogy of negative utopias. This new twentieth century trilogy “express[es] the mood of powerlessness and hopelessness of modern man just as the early utopias expressed the mood of self-confidence and hope of post-medieval man” (FROMM, 1990, p. 316). Still, he recognizes Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908), the prediction of fascism in America, as the earliest of the modern negative utopias. Other remarkable examples that can be considered dystopian fiction are Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925), Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Pierre Boulle’s *Planet of the Apes* (1963), Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975), Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1987) and *V for Vendetta* (1989). In the twenty-first century, we keep on seeing this kind of fiction, like in Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* (2003-present), Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010), Veronica

¹³ Inspired by the success of *The Hunger Games* series, Goodreads website posted an infographic with a guide/timeline to dystopian literature, in which these waves were proposed. According to the post: “Dystopian fiction is more popular than it has been in more than 50 years. Whether it’s the result of political turmoil, global financial crises, or other anxieties, readers are craving books about ruthless governments and terrifying worlds. The new breed of dystopian novels combines classic dystopian themes of cruel governments and violent, restrictive worlds with a few new twists – badass heroines and romance [...]” (GOODREADS, 2012).

Roth's *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013), and of course, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013).¹⁴

Claeys (2010), on the other hand, describes the origins of dystopia focusing on Wells, Huxley, and Orwell. For him, "their common theme is the quasi-omnipotence of a monolithic, totalitarian state demanding and normally exacting complete obedience from its citizens, challenged occasionally but usually ineffectually by vestigial individualism or systemic flaws, and relying upon scientific and technological advances to ensure social control" (CLAEYS, 2010, p. 109). H. G. Wells starts his career "amidst an aura of *fin de siècle* pessimism, by writing a number of dystopian works, and then embracing utopia and exchanging degeneration for regeneration" (CLAEYS, 2010, p. 112-113). Nevertheless, many of Wells's early works go beyond dystopia into science fiction – two separate things in Claeys's opinion. Also, Claeys points some major strands in dystopian fiction at that time, population control and socialism, which "are addressed by the most famous anti-utopian text of the nineteenth century, and a key source for Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), T. R. Malthus's *Essay on Population* (1798)" (CLAEYS, 2010, p. 110). Moreover, he cites Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), "often held to be the founding text of the genre of science fiction, but also partly a satire on the failed aspirations of the Revolution, heralding one of the key themes of late dystopian writings" (CLAEYS, 2010, p. 110). It is another example that illustrates how all of these boundaries are extremely fluid.

For many, the theme of science (or scientist) gone-wild, then, first heralds dystopia, from Swift onwards. Thereafter science, technology, utopia and dystopia move forward increasingly in tandem, and after 1900 the characteristic form of the imaginary society would be both dystopian and often formally cast in the genre of science fiction, set normally in the future rather than the past or elsewhere in the here-and now (CLAEYS, 2010, p. 110).

Curiously, even with such considerations regarding utopia, dystopia, and science fiction, Claeys, as opposed to other critics and scholars who believe in the natural connection between these elements, proposes dystopia in a restrictive sense (or broad, in his opinion), in which only totalitarian dystopias are clearly dystopias. He uses the term in the sense "of portraying feasible negative visions of social and political development, cast principally in fictional form. By 'feasible' we imply that no extraordinary or utterly unrealistic features

¹⁴ For sure, it is important to mention George A. Romero's *Dead* series (1968-2009) at this point. Even though zombie movies are generally associated with the horror genre, they are super responsible for the boost in the popularity of dystopian stories.

dominate the narrative. Much of the domain of science fiction is thus excluded from this definition” (CLAEYS, 2010, p. 109). However, as suggested previously in regards to utopia, when Clute and Nicholls (1995) argued that all utopias could be SF since they are exercises in political science, we can appropriate this idea in relation to dystopia as well. If dystopia is a political issue, it may be a socio-economic sub-genre of science fiction too. Besides, political issues and scientific advances are not mutually exclusive; otherwise, what would we do with totalitarian dystopias with plenty of scientific extrapolations in them?

“Conquest by alien beings, or robots, or the final calling of time by God at Judgment Day, may portray dystopic elements (as well as utopic, or both simultaneously). But texts portraying such events are not ‘dystopias’ as such” (CLAEYS, 2010, p. 109). Claeys’s argument is fine by me, I can see his point and I would tend to agree that totalitarian dystopias are clearly dystopias and that a text can portray dystopic elements without being a dystopia, for sure. However, I wonder what exactly makes a dystopia a dystopia. Is there any formal rigor or criterion? Is not it only a matter of perception? Is the theme of totalitarianism allied to certain technologies enough to establish a genre? Within the limits of his ideas about Wells, Claeys (2010, p. 113) then asserts that “*The Time Machine* (1895), *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), are works of science fiction, while *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) is a dystopia”. I ask myself whether any of them could be both science fiction and dystopia at the same time. Certainly, they could, but perhaps we face here a problem similar to the one Jameson (2005) solved by differentiating utopia as a form and utopia as an impulse; some sort of distinction should be proposed for dystopia too.

Although there is no necessary connection between science fiction, utopia, and dystopia, Fitting (2010) promptly recognizes the intersection. “The intersection of modern science fiction and utopia begins with what I consider the foundational characteristic of science fiction, namely its ability to reflect or express our hopes and fears about the future, and more specifically to link those hopes and fears to science and technology” (FITTING, 2010, p. 138). Also, science fiction as a genre that specialized in imaginary worlds and the future of our planet, as much as its intrinsic optimism, provided a perfect narrative home for utopian speculation (FITTING, 2010). As regards to dystopia, the author affirms that the dystopian mood, “the sense of a threatened near future, can be seen in the titles of some of the studies of science fiction written as the genre began to grow in popularity and importance in the 1960s” (FITTING, 2010, p. 140). In addition, “as the study of science fiction began to interest the academy, there was a strong focus on its dystopian characteristics” (FITTING,

2010, p. 140). Even though a connection can really be established, in some cases dystopia and science fiction are taken as interchangeable, which they are not; science fiction is not necessarily dystopian, and dystopia is not necessarily scientific, either.

Howsoever, as well as utopia, dystopia is an intricate concept. Another complication is the fact that dystopian images are sometimes confused with apocalyptic fiction – another case of mistaken interchangeability. The two may well intersect, but they are certainly not the same thing, because there are dystopias with no apocalyptic results as well as apocalyptic narratives with no previous dystopian societies. In Nic Felton (2009), we can find a frame of dystopian sub-genres, which would be totalitarian (e.g. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*); bureaucratic (e.g. *The Trial*); cyberpunk (e.g. *Neuromancer*, *Matrix*); tech noir (e.g. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*); off-world (e.g. *The Forever War*); crime (e.g. *A Clockwork Orange*); overpopulation (e.g. *Make Room! Make Room!*); leisure (e.g. *Brave New World*); apocalyptic (e.g. *Dr. Strangelove*); post-apocalyptic (e.g. *A Canticle for Leibowitz*); alien (e.g. *Battlefield Earth*); surreal (e.g. *The Naked Lunch*); uchronian (e.g. *Fatherland*); machine (e.g. *Metropolis*); pseudo-utopian (e.g. *Starship Troopers*); feminist (e.g. *The Handmaid's Tale*); time-travel (e.g. *The Terminator*); and capitalistic (e.g. *Robocop*). Considering *Oryx and Crake*, it can be interpreted in consonance with at least two of these dystopian sub-genres, even though this proposed categorization is questionable.

APOCALYPTIC DYSTOPIAS

Mankind, or sometimes a single nation or an ethnic group, are facing Armageddon, be it nuclear war, gigantic meteorites or nature disasters. The main focus may be political, but nevertheless may apocalyptic stories expose the dark psychological depths of mankind. The victims of the apocalypse may be egoistic, short-sighted, cynical and opportunistic, even in the very moment of annihilation. Actually, it is questionable if apocalyptic stories really are dystopian, but they usually have strong dystopian qualities.

POST-APOCALYPTIC DYSTOPIAS

The cause is nuclear war, environmental collapse or deadly epidemics. The effect is usually anarchy and survival of the fittest, and not seldom a regression to feudalism as well. Many, although far from all, stories taking place in post-apocalyptic dystopias are simple action adventures with few, if any, depths. There are often obvious parallels to epic western movies as well as a grim sense of humor. A common plot includes a cynical lone-wolf anti-hero who reluctantly aids a small community which is trying to re-establish civilization and has to fight brutal and savage bands of raiders (FELTON, 2009, p. 36).¹⁵

¹⁵ Nic Felton (2009) is not the author of these dystopian sub-genres. However, the original source is no longer available.

Therefore, I bring back the question, what is dystopia, after all? According to what has been exposed so far: a) in a more traditional interpretation, dystopia is a literary genre only when it comes to totalitarianism and when there are no scientific extrapolations involved, that is to say, when the narrative presented is within the bounds of possibility; b) as well as utopia, dystopia may be a socio-economic sub-genre of science fiction; c) in a less traditional interpretation, dystopia is a broad genre that encompasses various sub-genres, such as apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic dystopias. First of all, I think it is problematic to admit dystopia as a genre, since it is difficult to recognize a formal rigor in it – I did not find any source about it, at least. A genre is said to be “a particular type or style of literature, art, film or music that you can recognize because of its special features” (HORNBY, 2008, p. 646) or still, “a spectrum of work united by an inner identity, a coherent aesthetic, a set of conceptual guidelines, an ideology if you will” (STERLING apud ATWOOD, 2011, p. 7). Which are the features, the inner identity or the ideology of dystopia? We have many and of all types.¹⁶

Moreover, I do not believe that only one topic like totalitarianism can be enough to establish a genre, for instance. What else do we have in every single dystopia? There seem to be no rules. By way of illustration, consider the following examples: the two major literary dystopias, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are extremely diverse. In the first, people are dominated by pleasure, in the second, by pain. Dystopia is said to be the bad design of society. But what does it mean, exactly? What is bad for me might not be bad for you. In Orwell’s world, one may see dirt and disorder. In Huxley’s everything is aseptic and well organized – and people seem happy. It is said too that dystopia is about a future social organization. Well, not necessarily. Take Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* as example and you have a dystopia that takes place in an alternate 1950s, that is, no future as setting for the story – besides, there is a silent and almost invisible totalitarian system in that society. In *Oryx and Crake*, there is no State controlling the citizens inasmuch as the power is in the hands of private institutions. In addition, order and disorder share a residence.

Many of us indeed live today in the utopias of the past, in circumstances vastly better than those most of our ancestors even dreamt of. Thus the liberal paradigm of universal opulence and stable democracy is itself also a utopian ideal, and itself susceptible to dystopian failure, both economically and environmentally. There is of

¹⁶ Despite the great number of references to films, series, and other texts that also explore the themes and issues associated with the concepts in discussion here, I do not assume that everything that applies to literary texts has a counterpart in other languages or the other way round. However, since those definitions are theme-based (not form), we may approach dystopia as a transmedia or transdisciplinary concept/fictional genre. As a matter of fact, most of the debate concerning science fiction, utopia, and dystopia is essentially transmedia, which explains the need to make references to fiction in different semiotic systems throughout this research.

course something in the argument that, just as one person's terrorist is another's freedom-fighter, so is one person's utopia another's dystopia. Indisputably, thus, whether a given text can be described as a dystopia or utopia will depend on one's perspective of the narrative outcome. Such ambiguity should, however, be a provocative source of discussion, rather than a rationale for dismissing the genre as such (CLAEYS, 2010, p. 108).

Without in any way discrediting what scholars have been saying about utopia and dystopia – even because I think all the interpretations mentioned before apply –, I believe it is necessary to emphasize how much the definition to utopia and dystopia strongly depends on the readers' interpretation (as well as the historical context). It is their understanding of the narrative (and their previous knowledge) that will set up the distinction between what constitutes a respectable and a degraded society or community. Thus, defining utopia and dystopia is also a matter of perception, how each reader deals with the literary text. In this sense, utopia and dystopia seem to be more *effects* than forms themselves. However, the dystopian effect generated by the narrative is different from a mere impulse (back to Jameson's distinction between utopian form and impulse) – even because nobody with a clear conscience would have impulses to long for a dystopian social design. Therefore, thinking specifically about Atwood's fiction, I recognize something in between a form and an impulse, it is precisely this effect that here I decided to refer to as *mood*.

My proposal of mood crossover (utopia + dystopia) is in perfect consonance with Atwood's *ustopia*. "*Ustopia* is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite – because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 66). Utopias and dystopias indeed can be mixed up; they are invariably two sides of the same coin: heads and tails. As Atwood (2007, p. 9) states, "*Brave New World* is either a perfect-world utopia or its nasty, opposite, a dystopia, depending on your point of view: its inhabitants are beautiful, secure, and free from diseases and worries, though in a way we like to think we would find unacceptable". For sure, other examples with both perspectives abound. As Atwood remind us, "the 'dire' might at first glance appear to be connected only to the obverse or dystopic side of this coin, where unpleasantness prevails, though most utopias viewed slantwise – from the point of view of people who don't fit into their high standards of perfection – are equally dire" (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 66-67). In addition, as it was already observed regarding some historical events, "though utopian from their own point of view, some of these movements are dystopian from ours; indeed, in their frequent celebration of violence, they point to a recurring motif in

literary as well as in political utopian thinking: the brave new order often comes about as the result of war and chaos” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 83).

At any rate, Thomas More’s term stuck, and in spite of its double meaning of *no place* and *good place*, “by general usage, utopias are thought to portray ideal societies or some version of them. Their program is to do away with the ills that plague us, such as wars, social inequality, poverty and famine, gender inequalities, fallen arches, and the like” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 85). In contrast, “dystopias are usually described as the opposite of utopias – they are Great Bad Places rather than Great Good Places and are characterized by suffering, tyranny, and oppression of all kinds” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 85). We already know all of this, but sometimes we neglect the fact that “some books contain both – a sort of ‘look on this picture, then on that,’ as Hamlet puts it – one, noble and virtuous; the other, corrupt and vicious. Polar opposites” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 85). Utopia and dystopia are not taken as diametrically opposed but rather as different manifestations of the same form, thus complementing one another.

[...] scratch the surface a little, and – or so I think – you see something more like a yin and yang pattern; within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia, if only in the form of the world as it existed before the bad guys took over. Even in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – surely one of the most unrelievedly gloomy dystopias ever concocted – utopia is present, though minimally, in the form of an antique glass paperweight and a little woodland glade beside a stream. As for the utopias, from Thomas More onwards, there is always provision made for the renegades, those who don’t or won’t follow the rules: prison, enslavement, exile, exclusion, or execution (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 85-86).¹⁷

As they say, the path between heaven and hell is a narrow one. Accordingly, by combining utopian and dystopian qualities, *Oryx and Crake* is a *ustopia* that brings the “better” of two worlds: famine and food in abundance; free will and the lack of it; savagery and civility; dirt and cleanness; order and disorder; wealth and poverty. And to a mad scientist’s excesses there are the warnings of a good friend. The novel is so multilayered that the examples are innumerable – not to mention the ambiguous characters who populate the narrative. As Atwood (2011, p. 115) points out, “the membranes separating [some] subdivisions are permeable, and osmotic flow from one to another is the norm”. Therefore, the blurring of boundaries that I suggested in regards to the literary genres in the previous

¹⁷ It is interesting to notice that the utopic side of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not represented because the narrative is told from the point of view of the oppressed, not the oppressor. What would it be like with another focalizer?

section applies to the moods just described – the combination of utopia and dystopia resulting in *ustopia*; for this reason, the novel is supposed to be analyzed in the light of genre crossover as well as mood crossover.

2 A NARRATIVE SET IN THE PAST

2.1 *Oryx and Crake*: Within the Confines of the Compounds

Published in 2003, *Oryx and Crake* presents a narrative that flows through an omniscient narrator, having the central character, Snowman, as the focalizer, a character from whose viewpoint the story is focused. The novel opens with Snowman, a man in his twenties who seems to be the last remaining human, the survivor of an undetermined cataclysm that has killed Earth's entire population. At this point in the story, we do not know exactly what happened, even though we can realize that he is on a beach, living on the top of a tree. "Snowman wakes before dawn. He lies unmoving, listening to the tide coming in, wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades, wish-wash, wish-wash, the rhythm of heartbeat. He would so like to believe he is still asleep" (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 3).¹⁸ Then the reader can watch how his current everyday life unfolds in that hostile environment. "He scans the ground below for wildlife: all quiet, no scales and tails. Left hand, right foot, right hand, left foot, he makes his way down from the tree. [...] He sits down on the ground and begins to eat the mango" (OC p. 4). However, the beginning of the narrative is actually a part of the end of the story, and after the presentation of the main character, his routine on the beach, and the creatures he comes to meet, the recollections of past events start in the subsequent chapter.

"Once upon a time, Snowman wasn't Snowman. Instead he was Jimmy. He'd been a good boy then" (OC p. 15). This is the opening of chapter two, when Snowman starts to remember his past – apparently random facts from childhood and adolescence. Snowman's real name – Jimmy – has to do with a time of certain naivety or, at least, a time when life seemed quite normal. Jimmy and his family used to live in privileged walled Compounds, where powerful corporations took everyone on an unrestrained genetic engineering ride. His

¹⁸ All references to *Oryx and Crake* have been taken from the first Anchor Books edition (2004). Further quotations from the novel include only the abbreviation OC plus the page number.

mother (Sharon) was a microbiologist and his father (unnamed) was a genographer, who worked at first for OrganInc Farms (sometimes comically referred to as Organ-Oink Farms). “He’d been one of the foremost architects of the pigoon project, along with a team of transplant experts and the microbiologists who were splicing against infections” (OC p. 22). The goal of the pigoon project was

to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host – organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by opportunistic microbes and viruses [...]. A rapid maturity gene was spliced in so the pigoon kidneys and livers and hearts would be ready sooner, and now they were perfecting a pigoon that could grow five or six kidneys at a time. Such a host animal could be reaped of its extra kidneys; then, rather than being destroyed, it could keep on living and grow more organs, much as a lobster could grow another claw to replace a missing one (OC p. 22-23).

In addition, the project allowed the pigoon organs to be customized according to clients demands, “using cells from individual human donors” for the organs to be “frozen until needed” (OC p. 23). The only concern about the project was the possibility of people coming to eat such animals. So, a (not very effective) procedure was implemented, “it was claimed that none of the defunct pigoons ended up as bacon and sausages: no one would want to eat an animal whose cells might be identical with at least some of their own” (OC p. 23-24). Moreover, in order to avoid any contagion, it was not recommended that other animals stayed near the pigs. However, when Jimmy was ten, his father gave him a pet rakunk. These animals, the rakunks, “had begun as an after-hours hobby on the part of one of the OrganInc biolab hotshots. There’d been a lot of fooling around in those days: create-an-animal was so much fun, said the guys doing it; it made you feel like God” (OC p. 51). And so, as great creators, they kept doing experiments, some of them even dangerous.¹⁹ But the rakunks “hadn’t come in from the outside world – the world outside the Compound – so they had no foreign microbes and were safe for the pigoons. In addition to which they were cute” (OC p. 51).

After some time, Jimmy’s father changed jobs; he began to work at NooSkins, “a subsidiary of HelthWyzer, and so they moved into the HelthWyzer Compound” (OC p. 53), which was superior to the OrganInc layout. “It had two shopping malls instead of one, a better hospital, three dance clubs, even its own golf course” (OC p. 54). There were ongoing researches with pigoons at HelthWyzer too; and within the Compound, Jimmy began

¹⁹ A rakunk is the crossing of a raccoon and a skunk.

attending the HelthWyzer Public School. His mother, though, had been feeling like a prisoner within any of those gated communities. She still had ideals and began to question the intentions of corporations. “Be that as it may, there’s research and there’s research. What you’re doing – this pig brain thing. You’re interfering with the building blocks of life. It’s immoral” (OC p. 57). At that point, Jimmy “avoided his parents as much as possible. [...] He was no longer frightened by their negative electrical field, he simply found them tedious, or so he told himself” (OC p. 59). Besides, “they knew nothing about him, what he liked, what he hated, what he longed for. They thought he was only what they could see. A nice boy but a bit of a goof, a bit of a show-off. Not the brightest star in the universe, not a numbers person [...]” (OC p. 58). The different beliefs end up creating a large gap between Jimmy’s parents, until his mother decides to run away, leaving everything behind. Now she belonged to the outside world, and for the corporations, she had become a dissident.

Compound people didn’t go to the cities unless they had to, and then never alone. They called the cities *the pleeblands*. Despite the fingerprint identity cards now carried by everyone, public security in the pleeblands was leaky: there were people cruising around in those places who could forge anything and who might be anybody, not to mention the loose change – the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies. [...] Outside the [...] walls and gates and searchlights, things were unpredictable (OC p. 27).

Jimmy’s father had already explained to him the importance of the Compounds, the need to maintain the respectable citizens isolated from a harmful external world. He compares the Compounds to castles: “Long ago, in the days of knights and dragons, the kings and dukes had lived in castles, with high walls and drawbridges and slots on the ramparts so you could pour hot pitch on your enemies”, he said, “and the Compounds were the same idea. Castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside” (OC p. 28). Therefore, only top people used to live within those confines: executives, junior scientists, engineers, geneticists. Inside the Compounds, they had everything they needed: houses with pools and expensive furniture, air conditioning, labs, restaurants and stores, schools, entertainment; and the most important part was security, a right ensured by the CorpSeCorps, a private security firm for the corporations. The external world was in general dirty, poor, anarchic, and too hot. As Jimmy’s father would say, “Despite the sterile transport corridors and the high-speed bullet trains, there was always a risk when you went through the city” (OC p. 27). Not to mention the fact that “everything in the pleeblands seemed so boundless, so porous, so penetrable, so wide-open. So subject to chance” (OC p. 196).

At HelthWyzer High, Jimmy met Crake for the first time in “one of those months that used to be called *autumn*” (OC p. 71). At that time, Crake was not Crake yet, his name was Glenn. Glenn’s father named him “after a dead pianist, some boy genius with two n’s”²⁰ (OC p. 70). However, the narrator promptly informs the reader that Snowman cannot think of Crake as Glenn; for him, Crake’s later persona has predominance over the earlier one. “The Crake side of him must have been there from the beginning [...]: there was never any real Glenn, Glenn was only a disguise” (OC p. 70-71). Consequently, “in Snowman’s returns of the story, Crake is never Glenn [...]. He is always just Crake, pure and simple” (OC p. 71). The two take to hanging out together and eventually become best friends.

Jimmy and Crake spent much of their leisure time entertained with games, like computer chess, but Jimmy did not see the point in playing it in a virtual set. He wanted “the old kind. With plastic men” (OC p. 77). Crake would reply that “the real set is in your head” (OC p. 77). Other computer games played by them were Kwiktime Osama, a clear reference to Osama bin Laden; Barbarian Stomp (See If You Can Change History!), a game involving historical battles; Blood and Roses, a sort of competition game between human atrocities (massacres, genocides) and human achievements (scientific breakthroughs, helpful inventions, artworks); and Extinctathon, “an interactive biofreak masterlore game” (OC p. 80) that Crake found on the Web. The last one was a trivia game that required immense knowledge on bioforms that were already extinct. In order to play Extinctathon they needed codenames, “Jimmy’s was Thickney, after a defunct Australian double-jointed bird that used to hang around in cemeteries” whereas “Crake’s codename was Crake, after the Red-necked Crake, another Australian bird”²¹ (OC p. 81). The nickname *Crake* stuck, and that is how the birth name *Glenn* definitely ceased to exist.

“When they weren’t playing games they’d surf the Net” (OC p. 81). In their surfing, the two friends used to watch things like the Noodie News, Felicia’s Frog Squash (an animal snuff site), the Queek Geek Show (contestants eating live animals), dirtysockpuppets.com (a show about world political leaders), hedsoff.com (live coverage of executions in Asia),

²⁰ Reference to Glenn Herbert Gould (1932-1982), Canadian pianist. It is said that Glenn Gould had the Asperger syndrome, thus some scholars have pointed out that Atwood’s Glenn has it too. This hypothesis is corroborated when Glenn/Crake and other students at university assume their own eccentricity by referring to the institution as Asperger’s U, “because of the high percentage of brilliant weirdos that strolled and hopped and lurched through its corridors. Demi-autistic, genetically speaking; single-track tunnel-vision minds, a marked degree of social ineptitude” (OC p. 193).

²¹ Although these birds are taken as extinct species in the novel, they are references to real birds with no current threat of extinction: the Bush Stone-curlew, also known as Bush Thick-knee (*Burhinus grallarius*) and the Red-necked Crake (*Rallina tricolor*).

alibooboo.com (thieves having their hands cut off and adulterers being stoned to death), shortcircuit.com/ brainfrizz.com/ deathrowlive.com (electrocutions and lethal injections), and nitee-nite.com (assisted suicides). Obviously, these are all fictitious domain names, even though some of them might resemble existing websites or television programs. Moreover, in times of trivialized violence and pornography, it is ironically through a reality show, *At Home with Anna K.*, that Jimmy comes to know about Shakespeare,

Anna K. was a self-styled installation artist with big boobs who'd wired up her apartment so that every moment of her life was sent out live to millions of voyeurs. [...] Then you might watch her tweezing her eyebrows, waxing her bikini line, washing her underwear. Sometimes she'd read scenes from old plays out loud, taking all the parts, while sitting on the can with her retro-look bell-bottom jeans around her ankles. This was how Jimmy first encountered Shakespeare – through Anna K.'s rendition of *Macbeth* (OC p. 84).

It is quite funny indeed to imagine a time when Shakespeare is quoted in a futile reality show, presented by a young girl who is more interested in great popularity ratings than in literature itself. Curiously, Jimmy still believes in the importance of art to civilization, “When any civilization is dust and aches, [...] art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning – human meaning, that is – is defined by them. You have to admit that” (OC p. 167). Crake ridicules him by answering back that art is not all that is left over, since “the archeologists are just as interested in gnawed bones and old bricks and ossified shit these days. Sometimes more interested. They think human meaning is defined by those things too” (OC p. 167). Despite the mockery intention, Crake is not wrong in relation to the archeologists’ concerns. It seems that the material remnants of humanity represent its true heritage, whereas imaginative structures (images, words, music, for instance) do not – for the simple reason that they hold ideas, and ideas are immaterial.

In addition, as pointed out in the novel, “the body had its own cultural forms. It had its own art. Executions were its tragedies, pornography was its romance” (OC p. 85). Jimmy and Crake spent a lot of time watching tragic events, but they also had their “romantic” trips when they resorted to porn shows, such as *HottTotts*, “a global sex-trotting site”, which “claimed to show real sex tourists, filmed while doing things they’d be put in jail for back in their home countries” (OC p. 89). It was through this particular website that they first saw Oryx, still a child, only about eight years old. “Her name wasn’t Oryx, she didn’t have a name. She was just another little girl on a porno site. None of those little girls had ever seemed real to Jimmy

– they’d always struck him as digital clones – but for some reason Oryx was three-dimensional from the start” (OC p. 90). Crake then printed a picture of her looking at the invisible voyeurs at the other side of the screen, and Jimmy was forever haunted by the young Oryx’s look.

Shortly after graduating from HelthWyzer High, Jimmy and Crake follow different educational paths. “Crake was top of the class. The bidding for him by the rival EduCompounds at the Student Auction was brisk, and he was snatched up at a high price by the Watson-Crick Institute” (OC p. 173). Jimmy, on the other hand, “was a mid-range student, high on word scores but a poor average in the numbers columns” (OC p. 173-174) who ended up at a very different kind of institution. “After a humiliating wait while the brainiacs were tussled over by the best EduCompounds and the transcripts of the mediocre were fingered and skimmed and had coffee spilled on them and got dropped on the floor by mistake, Jimmy was knocked down at last to the Martha Graham Academy” (OC p. 174). The artistic and the scientific discourses are strongly marked in the novel by these two distinct fictional institutions: the Martha Graham Academy²², a college for humanities and arts, destined to “words people”; and the Watson-Crick Institute²³, a college for sciences, intended to “numbers people”. The Watson-Crick Institute is a highly respected institution that keeps the most important students, those who are going to be great scientists one day. “Once a student there and your future was assured. It was like going to Harvard had been, back before it got drowned” (OC p. 173). The Martha Graham Academy, on the other hand, is a decadent place that had prestige in the past, when companies were interested in investing in arts. Now it just offers “risible degrees”, since literature, for instance, is no longer a valued field of study – the power of words being useful only for advertisement purposes. Thus, in this social design, practical knowledge prevails over the artistic one.

“Martha Graham was falling apart. It was surrounded [...] by the tackiest kind of pleeblands: vacant warehouses, burnt-out tenements, empty parking lots” (OC p. 185). Furthermore, the security at the gateway was a joke; the place was depressing. Disciplines that were more practical, with courses aimed at the market, had replaced the disciplines concerning arts, no longer central to anything. Jimmy ended up studying Problematics.

²² The college’s name is a reference to Martha Graham (1894-1991), North-American modern dancer and choreographer.

²³ Reference to James Dewey Watson (1928) and Francis Harry Compton Crick (1916-2004), the two co-discoverers of the structure of DNA in 1953. “Either by strategy or by uncanny coincidence *Oryx and Crake* was published the same year as the fiftieth anniversary of Crick and Watson’s discovery of the double helix structure of DNA, spelling out the secret code of every living organism, which opened up the book of life – or was it Pandora’s Box?” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 174).

“Problematics was for word people, so that was what Jimmy took. [...] Like everything at Martha Graham it had utilitarian aims. Our Students Graduate With Employable Skills, ran the motto underneath the original Latin motto, which was *Ars Longa Vita Brevis*” (OC p. 188). Even though Martha Graham was one of the most decadent institutions, it was still part of the corporate world and had to operate according to business needs; for this reason, the most important thing for a student was to have such employable skills. In the novel, books are not necessarily suppressed, but they are certainly neglected and, as a result, their contents fade to oblivion.

Better libraries, at institutions with more money, had long ago burned their actual books and kept everything on CD-ROM, but Martha Graham was behind the times in that, as in everything. [...] Who was it who'd said that all art was completely useless? [...] The more obsolete a book was, the more eagerly Jimmy would add it to his inner collection. [...] *wheelwright, lodestone, saturnine, adamant*. He'd developed a strangely tender feeling towards such words, as if they were children abandoned in the woods and it was his duty to rescue them (OC p. 195).

There was a bullet-train connection between the two colleges, so Jimmy could visit Crake at Watson-Crick Institute. But “what was a serf like him doing visiting the nobility?” (OC p. 198). The people there knew he was an outsider, so “he was feeling more and more like a troglodyte. Living in a cave, fighting off the body parasites, gnawing the odd bone. [...] Next step they'd be putting him in a cage, feeding him bananas, and poking him with electroprods” (OC p. 201-203). In comparison to Martha Graham, that place was a palace. Crake was taking Transgenics and took his friend to visit the amazing laboratories and their research projects underway. The first project Crake presented to Jimmy was the ChickieNobs, headless chickens. More accurately, they were just chicken specific parts. “What they were looking at was a large bulblike object that seemed to be covered with stippled whitish-yellow skin. Out of it came twenty thick fleshy tubes, and at the end of each tube another bulb was growing” (OC p. 202). Jimmy immediately recalls the pigeons of his childhood. In fact, the chickens had a mouth, through which the nutrients were dumped in. For Jimmy, “the thing was a nightmare. It was like an animal-protein tuber” (OC p. 202). Besides, “they'd removed all the brain functions that had nothing to do with digestion, assimilation, and growth” (OC p. 203).

Besides the ChickieNobs, Jimmy could take a look at the wolvoogs, dogs with a cute expression but ferocious. The truth is that all Jimmy saw in Watson-Crick was “too

reminiscent. The labs, the peculiar bioforms, the socially spastic scientists – they were too much like his former life, his life as a child. Which was the last place he wanted to go back to. Even Martha Graham was preferable” (OC p. 205). He was actually worried about such animal experiments. “Why is it he feels some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed? How much is too much, how far is too far?” (OC p. 206). Furthermore, another terrifying discovery came to him when he realized that some of the corporations were investing in creating new diseases. The logic was clear: the market would always need more sick people. The more new and different diseases exist, more treatments and medicines to be offered and more people to be cured – or, more accurately, more people to be financially explored, until there is nothing left. And this is how Crake indifferently reveals to Jimmy the story behind the death of his own father, who was executed for having found out that HelthWyzer was inserting hostile bioforms in vitamin pills. “They’d have said he was about to destroy an elegant concept” (OC p. 212), said Crake.

After some years, Jimmy graduated from the Martha Graham Academy with his little degree in Problematics. “He didn’t expect to get a job right away, and in this he was not deceived” (OC p. 241). But then he gets “a summer job at the Martha Graham library, going through old books and earmarking them for destruction while deciding which should remain on earth in digital form” (OC p. 241). However, he loses the post because he could not bear to throw anything out, especially books. Later on, he lands another job, this time at AnooYoo, “a minor Compound situated so close to one of the more dilapidated pleeblands that it might as well have been in it” (OC p. 245). AnooYoo was a kind of spa, offering solutions for wrinkles, depression, and insomnia – a “new you”. Jimmy would be in charge of the advertising part, promoting things like “cosmetic creams, workout equipment [...]. Pills to make you fatter, thinner, hairier, balder, whiter, browner, blacker, yellower, sexier, and happier” (OC p. 248). His task was to describe and exalt these superb products and services. “Once in a while he’d make up a word – *tensicity*, *fibracionous*, *pheromonimal* – but he never once got caught out. His proprietors liked those kinds of words in the small print on packages because they sounded scientific and had a convincing effect” (OC p. 248-249).

Crake had graduated earlier than Jimmy, done post-grad work, and now he was at RejoovenEsense, “one of the most powerful Compounds of them all” (OC p. 252) – even bigger than OrganInc Farms and HelthWyzer. The two friends had kept in touch by e-mail, and “Crake spoke vaguely of a special project he was doing, something white-hot. [...] Jimmy should come and visit sometime and he’d show him around” (OC p. 252-253). Instead, it is

Crake who goes to visit his friend after knowing about the death of Jimmy's mother. Jimmy used to receive postcards from her, but she was considered a fugitive, so the CorpSeCorps spent years persecuting him in order to obtain information. "The CorpSeCorps had never lost sight of Jimmy. During his time at Martha Graham they'd hauled him in regularly, four times a year, for what they called *little talks*" (OC p. 256). Now, he could see a video in which his mother appears while being executed. "Jimmy was shocked by how old she'd become: her skin was lined, her mouth withered. Was it the hard living she'd been doing on the run, or was it bad treatment? How long had she been in prison, in their grip? What had they been doing to her?" (OC p. 258). At that time, Jimmy's life was so upside down that even "language itself had lost its solidity; it had become thin, contingent, slippery, a viscid film on which he was sliding around like an eyeball on a plate. An eyeball that could still see, however" (OC p. 260). Fortunately – or maybe not –, Crake had a proposal for him.

During the visit, Crake decides to take Jimmy in an adventure through the pleeblands. "Before setting out, Crake had stuck a needle in Jimmy's arm – an all-purpose, short-term vaccine he'd cooked himself" and he "had nose cones for them too, the latest model, not just to filter microbes but also to skim out particulate. The air was worse in the pleeblands, he said" (OC p. 287). Jimmy had never been there before, so he was excited with the experience, "though he wasn't prepared for so many people so close to one another, walking, talking, hurrying somewhere" (OC p. 287-288). There were all skin colors, all sizes, rich and poor pleeblanders, hookers, real tramps and beggars, musicians on the street corners, "asymmetries, deformities: the faces [there] were a far cry from the regularity of the Compounds. There were even bad teeth" (OC p. 288). Jimmy then noticed that the "pleebland inhabitants didn't look like the mental deficientes the Compounders were fond of depicting, or most of them didn't" (OC p. 288). People from all over the world go there to shop around, "gender, sexual orientation, height, color of skin and eyes – it's all on order, it can all be done or redone" (OC p. 289). Like this, after a few drinks and some entertainment at the pleeblands, Crake finally offers Jimmy a job at RejoovenEsense, where he would join Crake's secret project by doing the ad campaign.

[...] Crake took him for a preliminary tour of the RejoovenEsense Compound in his souped-up electric golf cart. It was, Jimmy had to admit, spectacular in all ways. Everything was sparkling clean, landscaped, ecologically pristine, and very expensive. The air was particulate-free, due to the many solar whirlpool purifying towers, discreetly placed and disguised as modern art. Rockulators took care of the microclimate, butterflies as big as plates drifted among the vividly colored shrubs. It

made all the other Compounds Jimmy had ever been in, Watson- Crick included, look shabby and retro (OC p. 291).

The unit where Crake had been working inside RejoovenEsense was called Paradise, within which they were on the way to achieve the ultimate goal, they were seeking immortality. “There were two major initiatives going forward. The first – the BlyssPluss Pill – was prophylactic in nature, and the logic behind it was simple: eliminate the external causes of death and you were halfway there” (OC p. 293). By external causes, Crake meant war, which for him simply represents “misplaced sexual energy”; contagious diseases, mainly sexually transmitted ones; and overpopulation, which may lead to “environmental degradation and poor nutrition” (OC p. 293). The BlyssPluss Pill, the first of his most ambitious projects, “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 hitherto taken. It was based on studies of the now unfortunately extinct pygmy or bonobo chimpanzee”²⁴ (OC p. 293). The idea was to produce a single pill with various functions at once, so the BlyssPluss had basically three purposes: 1) “protect the user against all known sexually transmitted diseases, fatal, inconvenient, or merely unsightly”; 2) “provide an unlimited supply of libido and sexual prowess, coupled with a generalized sense of energy and well-being, thus reducing the frustration and blocked testosterone that led to jealousy and violence, and eliminating feelings of low self-worth”; and 3) “prolong youth” (OC p. 294). However, as Jean Baudrillard (1993, p. 64) would say, “Total prophylaxis is lethal”.

The product still had a fourth purpose (this one omitted in the ads, of course): to work as a birth control pill. Jimmy was somewhat shocked by the idea. “So basically you’re going to sterilize people without them knowing it under the guise of giving them the ultra in orgies?” (OC p. 294). Crake replies by commenting about the demand for resources, which “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*” (OC p. 295). With the BlyssPluss Pill, therefore, the human race would have a better chance. However, the product was still at the clinical trial phase. “A couple of the test subjects had literally fucked themselves to death, several had assaulted old ladies and household pets, and there had been a few unfortunate cases of priapism and split dicks” (OC p. 295) – among many other failures

²⁴ The bonobo (*Pan paniscus*), our close relative, is another animal that Atwood deliberately kills in the novel. Nowadays, the species conservation status is “endangered” rather than “extinct” – but who knows about the future?

or side effects. Moreover, needless to say that they hoped to make lots of money with this invention; and at the expense of people from poor countries, naturally, like underdogs found in prisons and whorehouses – these were the subjects chosen for the clinical trials.

It would be the must-have pill, in every country, in every society in the world. Of course the crank religions wouldn't like it, in view of the fact that their *raison d'être* was based on misery, indefinitely deferred gratification, and sexual frustration, but they wouldn't be able to hold out long. The tide of human desire, the desire for more and better, would overwhelm them. It would take control and drive events, as it had in every large change throughout history (OC p. 295-296).

Neither Jimmy nor the reader is able to clearly understand Crake's exact position, "but whatever his nominal title – he'd been vague about that – he was obviously the biggest ant in the anthill" (OC p. 298). His second most ambitious project had been unfolding at the Paradise bubble-dome, an immense half-circle that could be seen in the distance. Already there, Jimmy could recognize the staff: they were all splice geniuses, Grandmasters from Extinctathon, the game they used to play as teenagers. Crake had advanced through Extinctathon over the years, becoming a Grandmaster in the game as well. Outside the screen, however, Crake was the grand Grandmaster, "the alpha wolf, the silverback gorilla, the head lion" (OC p. 300). Thus, the other people were there in order to serve him and his concepts; soon Jimmy would have to do the same. The ultra-secret initiative was called the Paradise Project and it was Crake's life's work: the creation of a tribe of eccentric human prototypes, that is, GMOs (genetically modified organisms). They were all naked; "at first [Jimmy] couldn't believe them, they were so beautiful. Black, yellow, white, brown, all available skin colors. Each individual was exquisite" (OC p. 302). When asked whether they would be robots, Crake explains that these "people are *sui generis*. They're reproducing themselves now" (OC p. 303). Even though they had a childlike appearance, most of them were adults, and they were programmed to die abruptly at age thirty, without getting sick. This was to avoid old age and its common anguishes, as well as overpopulation. But the group represented only the floor models to the service that RejoovenEsense would be soon launching at the market, a service that could be customized according to buyers' preferences.

They'd be able to create totally chosen babies that would incorporate any feature, physical or mental or spiritual, that the buyer might wish to select. [...] Whole populations could be created that would have pre-selected characteristics. Beauty, of course; that would be in high demand. And docility: several world leaders had

expressed interest in that. Paradise had already developed a UV-resistant skin, a built-in insect repellent, an unprecedented ability to digest unrefined plant material. [...] Compared to the Paradise Project, even the BlyssPluss Pill was a crude tool, although it would be a lucrative interim solution. In the long run, however, the benefits for the future human race of the two in combination would be stupendous. They were inextricably linked – the Pill and the Project. The Pill would put a stop to haphazard reproduction, the Project would replace it with a superior method. They were two stages of a single plan, you might say (OC p. 304).

Thus, the project would allow a family to choose among all the possible options in the genetic manipulation of its future baby – much more than we already have in IVF nowadays. Moreover, the Paradise models – also known as the green-eyed children of Crake or simply the Crakers – ate plants and recycled their own excrements. In addition to being herbivores, their sexual intercourse took place through polyandrous relations during limited periods. Thinking about the whole thing, though, it seemed unlikely for Jimmy that someone would want a child with such characteristics. “You’d be surprised how many people would like a very beautiful, smart baby that eats nothing but grass. The vegans are highly interested in that little item. We’ve done our market research” (OC p. 305), informs Crake. These humanoids engineered under Crake’s supervision were in fact an attempt at designing a post-human race, much more improved in comparison to regular human beings, that is, creatures designed to replace humanity in the nearby future. The project involved the alteration of the ancient primate brain in order to eliminate what Crake calls “destructive features”, like hierarchy, territoriality, family trees, marriages, weapons, clothing, symbolisms (kingdoms, icons, gods, or money), etc., “the features responsible for the world’s current illnesses. For instance, racism – or, as they referred to it in Paradise, pseudospeciation – [which] had been eliminated in the model group, merely by switching the bonding mechanism: the Paradise people simply did not register skin color” (OC p. 305).

Next, Jimmy discovers that the Paradise models have a teacher, someone responsible for teaching notions of botany and zoology, “someone who could communicate on their level. Simple concepts, no metaphysics” (OC p. 309). Among the group, the teacher had no clothes on, because it would be something odd to them. Surprisingly, she was the girl Jimmy and Crake had discovered in a child pornography website when they were youngsters – the little kid Jimmy could never forget – or at least a woman who could be her.²⁵ “Now she was no longer a picture – no longer merely an image. [...] Suddenly she was real, three-dimensional. [Jimmy] felt he’d dreamed her” (OC p. 308). Crake has known her ever since post-grad when

²⁵ In fact, it is never clear to the reader whether the kid and the woman are the same person. Only Jimmy/Snowman is very sure about it, since his recollections insist on the idea.

he encountered her through Student Services, which provided students with everything they wanted in terms of women. Then he offered her a position in Paradise. “She was delighted to accept. It was triple the pay she’d been getting, with a lot of perks; but also she said the work intrigued her. I have to say she’s a devoted employee” (OC p. 310). Jimmy was extremely disappointed to realize that his lifetime secret love was now the personal prostitute of his own friend. “Knives were going through him. No sooner found than lost again. Crake was his best friend. Revision: his only friend. He wouldn’t be able to lay a finger on her” (OC p. 310); she was forbidden.

Like the other employees in Paradise, the woman had to pick a name from an extinct animal, so she took Oryx Beisa²⁶ – pseudonym we learn about at the very beginning in the novel through Snowman’s recollections. Jimmy tries hard not to show any interest in Oryx, but he is not able to find an efficient antidote against her. But then she seduces him, and a risky love triangle is suddenly established among the geek scientist, the goof adman, and the phantasmagoric woman. Oryx admits to Jimmy that he is just a pastime whereas she admires Crake. “Crake is my boss. You are for fun” (OC p. 313). Crake was her hero; Jimmy was nothing. However, it seemed that Crake did not know about them, “maybe he was too mesmerized by her to notice anything; or maybe, thought Jimmy, love really was blind. Or blinding” (OC p. 313). Besides, “she was the best poker-faced liar in the world, so there would be a kiss goodbye for stupid Crake, a smile, a wave, a closed door, and the next minute there she would be, with Jimmy” (OC p. 314). Moreover, sometimes Jimmy “suspected her of improvising, just to humour him; sometimes he felt that her entire past²⁷ – everything she’d told him – was his own invention” (OC p. 316).

Oryx was also helping Crake to sell the BlyssPluss pill, and Jimmy was often worried about her travelling around the world to do so. All of a sudden, Crake asks him to take his place if anything happens to him. Oryx does the same thing, “If Crake isn’t here, if he goes away somewhere, and if I’m not here either, I want you to take care of the Crakers. [...] They are like children, they need someone. You have to be kind with them” (OC p. 322). The first

²⁶ Reference to the East African Oryx (*Oryx beisa*), a species of antelope, which is another animal that is not extinct these days, although its conservation status is “near threatened”.

²⁷ The reader has access to Oryx’s sad life story when it is revealed that she comes from a poor village of some distant, foreign country, “a village in Indonesia, or else Myanmar? [...] It wasn’t India though. Vietnam? [...] Cambodia? [...] It didn’t matter” (OC p. 115). Her mother had too many children, so she sold Oryx and her brother to a man who used to visit the community in order to pick beautiful kids. However, “there was Crake’s story about her, and Jimmy’s story about her as well, a more romantic version; and then there was her own story about herself, which was different from both, and not very romantic at all” (OC p. 114). Furthermore, we should remember that all these episodes are filtered by Snowman, who is no longer Jimmy in the present layer of the narrative, therefore having more fragmented memories.

thing that comes to Jimmy's mind is the idea that they would be running away together. However, the situation was much more serious than that. Once Crake was off-site, and Oryx was travelling in a sort of business mission, Jimmy, now in command, started to receive the bulletins about an epidemic. The first episode took place in Brazil, "far enough away" (OC p. 324). Then "Taiwan, Bangkok, Saudi Arabia, Bombay, Paris, Berlin. The pleeblands west of Chicago" (OC p. 324). Jimmy realizes that it was something big, not only a few isolated plague spots. According to the news, "the symptoms were high fever, bleeding from the eyes and skin, convulsions, then breakdown of the inner organs, followed by death. The time from visible onset to final moment was amazingly short. The bug appeared to be airborne, but there might be a water factor as well"²⁸ (OC p. 325). Later on, Oryx calls Jimmy in panic and reveals that the virus was in the pills she was giving away; Crake had used Oryx as an instrument to sell the product all over the world, spreading the lethal virus and turning everything into his own Extinctathon.

"By midnight the hits were coming almost simultaneously. Dallas. Seattle. New New York. The thing didn't appear to be spreading from city to city: it was breaking out in a number of them simultaneously" (OC p. 325). In order to protect the Paradise models, and since nobody knew the incubation period, Jimmy decides not to let anybody else in. Crake appears drunk in Jimmy's videocell and tells him not to worry, that everything was under control. However, it was nothing less than a worldwide plague. "The keep-calm politico speeches were already underway, the stay-in-your-house megaphone vehicles were prowling the streets. Prayer had broken out" (OC p. 327). Jimmy was still waiting for Oryx to come back, but without hope, when Crake appeared again, this time outside the door. Jimmy had followed Crake's orders in the event of a bio attack and sealed the airlock, not letting him in. Crake then tries to explain that both of them are immune due to the vaccines they had taken to go to their adventures through the pleeblands. Jimmy keeps discussing with Crake, but Oryx was with him. So Jimmy takes his spraygun and decides to open the door. And then follows the climax of the story,

Crake's beige tropicals were splattered with redbrown. In his right hand was an ordinary storeroom jackknife, the kind with the two blades and the nail file and the corkscrew and the little scissors. He had his other arm around Oryx, who seemed to be asleep; her face was against Crake's chest, her long pink-ribboned braid hung down her back. As Jimmy watched, frozen with disbelief, Crake let Oryx fall

²⁸ Water contamination brings to mind Romero's *The Crazies* (1973), whose plot also revolves around an epidemic.

backwards, over his left arm. He looked at Jimmy, a direct look, unsmiling. “I’m counting on you,” he said. Then he slit her throat. Jimmy shot him (OC p. 328-329).

After this episode, Jimmy undergoes a time of seclusion, sealing the inner door shut and leaving all the rest outside, including the corpses. “Crake and Oryx lay intertwined in the airlock; he couldn’t bear to touch them, so he’d left them where they were” (OC p. 338). Locked inside, he tries hard to keep himself drunk, using what is left of all alcoholic drinks. When someone calls looking for Crake, hoping that he could figure the thing out, Jimmy simply says, “My advice is, look in Bermuda. I think he went there with a lot of cash” (OC p. 339). In the end, everything contributes for him to become apathetic in all senses. He even considers some social interaction with the Crakers, “help them invent the wheel. Leave a legacy of knowledge” (OC p. 339), but he could not. For him, a conversation with them was like “some demented theology debate in the windier corners of chat-room limbo” (OC p. 340). Yet, three times a day he checked on them. While people were becoming carcasses little by little, Jimmy was still confined, sleeping, sitting for long hours doing nothing, following the news. Things were totally out of control; the chaos was immeasurable.

The riots in the cities as transportation broke down and supermarkets were raided; the explosions as electrical systems failed, the fires no one came to extinguish. Crowds packed the churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples to pray and repent, then poured out of them as the worshippers woke up to their increased risk of exposure. There was an exodus to small towns and rural areas, whose inhabitants fought off the refugees as long as they could, with banned firearms or clubs and pitchforks. [...] Street preachers took to self-flagellation and ranting about the Apocalypse, though they seemed disappointed: where were the trumpets and angels, why hadn’t the moon turned to blood? Pundits in suits appeared on the screen; medical experts, graphs showing infection rates, maps tracing the extent of the epidemic (OC p. 340-341).

People had given the virus a name, JUVE – Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary. Then came the proliferation of conspiracy theories and the several recommendations of no use. “The worst of it was that those people out there – the fear, the suffering, the wholesale death – did not really touch him” (OC p. 343). Jimmy also spent his time wondering about Crake’s motivations. “Did he set up the grand finale as an assisted suicide, had he intended to have Jimmy shoot him because he knew what would happen next and he didn’t deign to stick around to watch the results of what he’d done?” (OC p. 343). Had he been a lunatic or an intelligent man, after all? Had he been just mean or had he been simply ahead of his time? “Meanwhile, the end of a species was taking place before [Jimmy’s] very eyes. Kingdom,

Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species. [...] *Homo sapiens sapiens*, joining the polar bear, the beluga whale, the onager, the burrowing owl, the long, long list” (OC p. 344). In addition, Jimmy even considers suicide, but he has no energy for that – or no courage. “Perhaps he failed to take seriously his own despair” (OC p. 344). After some weeks, there is total silence, and Jimmy is completely alone, obsessed over his vanished world, lost amid too many unanswered questions, and with the undesirable task of being the guardian of the Crakers. “Finally there was nothing more to watch, except old movies on DVD” (OC p. 344). He starts to think that it is time to leave the Compound.

Inside Paradise proper, the Crakers were munching up the leaves and grasses faster than they could regenerate, and one of these days the solar would fail, and the backup would fail too, and Jimmy had no idea about how to fix those things. Then the air circulation would stop and the doorlock would freeze, and both he and the Crakers would be trapped inside, and they’d all suffocate. He had to get them out while there was still time, but not too soon or there would still be some desperate people out there, and desperate would mean dangerous (OC p. 345).

For better or for worse, the world within the confines of the Compounds was about to end. If in the past “to be ‘at home’ [implied] living within a policed enclosure” (RAO, 2006, p. 109), Jimmy would have to find another meaning to the word “home”, since life in a policed enclosure no longer made any sense. Leaving the Compounds was certainly a risk, but was compulsory for him and the children of Crake to stay alive. Thus, Jimmy draws up a sort of action plan for them to move elsewhere. One of the last things he does inside Paradise is to write a letter, in case someone comes looking for answers. He was a romantic optimist, after all. He then explains that the lethal virus was created in the Paradise dome by gene splicers guided by Crake and was later inserted in the BlyssPluss pill. However, he does not finish writing down his speculations about Crake, and the letter remains incomplete – until Snowman finds it during a visit to the old Compound some time later. Analyzing the words of his former self, Snowman decides to ignore them. “It’s the fate of these words to be eaten by beetles” (OC p. 347), which reverberates his disbelief in finding another possible survivor, the letter being therefore unlikely to have a future reader.

2.2 The Utopian Imagination

By presenting some futuristic visions, one may say that some of Atwood's novels are apparently detached from reality and free from historical influences. Silly mistake. As Somacarrera remarks (2006, p. 44), "Atwood has confessed that her ideas about power do not come from literary theory, but rather from reading Shakespeare and books about history and politics, as well as observing historical changes". Thus, history really has a great impact on her writing process, even if this impact can only be felt subtly. Furthermore, "her close attention to people and relationships in a particular historical and social location gives her novels the appeal of traditional realistic fiction, even when she is presenting futuristic visions like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*" (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 8). Besides the appeal of realistic fiction, the historical backgrounds of these novels – far from uninteresting, by the way – have some significant resonances to the construction of the storylines.

The Handmaid's Tale, fiction about an American theocracy, was written some years after an Atwood's trip to Afghanistan. There, she met people that would soon face a war; then she wrote the novel somewhat inspired by this trip and these local people. "Would I have written the book if I never visited Afghanistan? Possibly. Would it have been the same? Unlikely" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 207). Moreover, the novel curiously started to be written in 1984, while Atwood was in West Berlin, when "the city was [...] encircled by the Berlin Wall and its inhabitants felt understandably claustrophobic" (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 86). During the stay, she "also visited East Berlin, as well as Poland and Czechoslovakia, and [she] thus had several firsthand experiences of the flavor of life in a totalitarian – but supposedly utopian – regime" (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 86-87). As Atwood recalls, George Orwell became a direct model for her in the real 1984, the year in which she began writing her own first dystopia. However, as one may have noticed, the influence of Orwell was only the beginning. "By that time I was forty-four, and I'd learned enough about real despotisms – through the reading of history, through travel, and through my membership in Amnesty International" (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 146).

In addition, the brilliance of *The Handmaid's Tale*, as Staines (2006, p. 21) points out, "rests in the creation of a future that is a too logical extension of many dimensions of the present, the horrors her heroine witnesses not far removed from the contemporary atrocities depicted in J. M. Coetzee's South African fiction or from the narrow rules of the religious right in the United States". Similarly, *Oryx and Crake* presents a futuristic extension of some

dimensions of the present; and it was precisely during a historical change that the novel took form. The year? 2001. Atwood was still on a book tour for her previous novel, *The Blind Assassin*. In Australia, while “taking a break in Queensland to do some bird-watching with friends”, she “unaccountably found [herself] beginning another novel” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 186). It was while looking “at the red-necked crakes scuttling about in the underbrush that *Oryx and Crake* appeared to [her], almost in its entirety” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 284). Atwood recalls that she had not planned “to begin another novel so soon after the previous one. [...] But when a story appears to you with such insistence, you can’t postpone it” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 284).

For sure, nothing comes out of nowhere, and she had been thinking about *what if* scenarios for almost all her lifetime. “I grew up among the scientists [...]. Several of my close relatives are scientists, and the main topic at the annual family Christmas dinner is likely to be intestinal parasites or sex hormones in mice, or, when that makes the nonscientists too queasy, the nature of the universe” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 284-285). Thus, she had been clipping “small items from the back pages of newspapers for years, and noting with alarm that trends derided ten years ago as paranoid fantasies had become possibilities, then actualities” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 285). Atwood, therefore, did not postpone the insights for a new story and continued to write *Oryx and Crake*. Several chapters of the book were written on a boat in the Arctic, “Where [she] could see for [herself] how quickly the glaciers were receding” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 285). Some time later, when she was sitting in the Toronto airport imagining the continuation of her brand new fiction, something shocking abruptly happened in the real scenario.

In ten minutes my flight would be called. An old friend of mine came over and said, “We’re not flying.” “What do you mean?” I said. “Come and look at the television,” he replied. It was September 11. I stopped writing for a number of weeks. It’s deeply unsettling when you’re writing about a fictional catastrophe and then a real one happens. I thought maybe I should turn to gardening books – something more cheerful. But then I started writing again, because what use would gardening books be in a world without gardens, and without books? And that was the vision that was preoccupying me (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 285).

Under these circumstances, “the *what if* of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, What if we continue down the road we’re already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who’s got the will to stop us?” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 285-286). So, it seems that the world of *Oryx and Crake* was what had been worrying Atwood at that time. Fortunately,

writing about something that scares you is a way to get rid of the uncomfortable sensation of fear and vulnerability. As she asserts, “It’s not a question of our inventions – all human inventions are merely tools – but of what might be done with them; for no matter how high the tech, *Homo sapiens sapiens* remains at heart what he’s been for tens of thousands of years – the same emotions, the same preoccupations” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 286). It is true that Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* does not present a story that revolves around terrorism pure and simple, but rather around bioterrorism – among other issues, of course. However, after September 11, it seems that we have gained another dystopian scenario, and this historical fact has somehow resonated in fiction. As a result, despite the subtle similarities, the possible coincidences between fiction and reality are nonetheless terrifying. “He was in shock. [...] The whole thing seemed like a movie. Yet there he was, and there were Oryx and Crake, dead, in the airlock. Any time he found himself thinking it was all an illusion, a practical joke of some kind, he went and looked at them” (OC p. 342). Jimmy’s reaction in front of television as the epidemic spread resembles our own reaction while watching the World Trade Center collapse. For many people, that image felt like a scene from a movie.

Why is it that when we grab for heaven – socialist or capitalist or even religious – we so often produce hell? I’m not sure, but so it is. Maybe it’s the lumpiness of human beings. What do you do with people who somehow just don’t or won’t fit into your grand scheme? All too often you stretch them on a Procrustean bed or dig a hole in the ground and shovel them into it. With so much stretching, hole-digging, and shoveling going on as the twentieth century ground on, it was difficult to place faith in the construction of utopias, literary or otherwise. It became much easier to depict awful societies not as the tawdry Before side of an After happy-face future but as the much worse thing we might instead be heading toward. The future societies imagined by mid-and late-twentieth-century writers, and indeed by early-twenty-first-century ones, are much more likely to be dark than bright (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 84-85).

Of course, Atwood’s dark futuristic societies are in accordance with this tendency. As it was already mentioned elsewhere, “the twentieth century could be seen as a race between two versions of man-made Hell – the jackbooted state totalitarianism of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the hedonistic ersatz paradise of *Brave New World*, where absolutely everything is a consumer good and human beings are engineered to be happy” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 148). People were keeping their eyes on 1984. But in America, as Neil Postman (2006, p. xix) notes, “the year came and the prophecy didn’t [...]. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares”. The author thus stresses the possibility that, rather than Orwell’s, Huxley’s visions were more accurate.

Whereas in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* people are dominated by inflicting pain, in *Brave New World* they are dominated by inflicting pleasure. In addition, Postman points out that it is easier for us to recognize and to oppose an Orwellian world, since “everything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the gates begin to close around us” (POSTMAN, 2006, p. 156). Thinking about a Huxleyan world, in contrast, “what if there are no cries of anguish to be heard? Who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? To whom do we complain, and when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles? What is the antidote to a culture’s being drained by laughter?” (POSTMAN, 2006, p. 156). In view of that, Huxley was trying to tell us, in the end, that “what afflicted the people in *Brave New World* was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking” (POSTMAN, 2006, p. 163).

Postman’s conjectures refer to the Age of Television, when TV was the main source of amusement for people. This is the frame he parallels to Huxley’s consumer society, in which entertainment prevails over everything else. His ideas, however, are perfectly applicable to other media nowadays, like the Internet, a significant aspect of *Oryx and Crake*. While reading the novel for the first time, I could visualize a sort of “brave postmodern world”, in which people *amuse themselves to death* mainly through the Web, whether by means of violence or pornography. By the way, the similarities between Huxley’s and Atwood’s novels go beyond that. The dystopian futuristic London of the former shares many similitudes with the dystopian futuristic *not exact place* of the latter. First, the division of society into segments: primitive civilization (reservation and the pleeblands) and modern civilization (London and the Compounds). Secondly, the division of society into categories: Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas, Epsilons, savages, numbers people, words people, and the Crakers. Then, an innovative drug to let people “happy”: *soma* and the BlyssPluss Pill. Finally, the shock between science (Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Center, the Compounds, Watson-Crick Institute) and humanities (reservation, pleeblands, and Martha Graham Academy). The Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Center, where eggs are exhaustively multiplied and children are conditioned, works similarly to the high-tech bubble dome where the Paradise Project unfolds. In these laboratories may lie the worst danger of misuse of science. Huxley (2007, p. 198) admits that “every discovery in pure science is

potentially subversive; even science must sometimes be treated as a possible enemy”.²⁹ Moreover, in both stories, humanities and arts lose prominence to the materialism and pragmatism of scientific events. As a result, the whole enterprise of science goes against both the humanists John the Savage and Jimmy in defense of old values and morality. None of them belongs anywhere, as they find themselves trapped in between two realms. In the end, the first gets himself killed, and the second inherits a wasteland.

Thus, Huxley’s and Atwood’s novels build an interesting dialogue with our contemporary technological culture, where consumerism and alienation play a major role. “In the Huxleyan prophecy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours” (POSTMAN, 2006, p. 155). However, I have been wondering that Orwell’s visions did not lose their force whatsoever. When we read a book or watch a movie like *The Hunger Games*, for instance, we see Orwell’s power back again. Still, a more recent example in the actual scene: Edward J. Snowden’s disclosure of the National Security Agency’s (N.S.A.) surveillance activities and large collection of data. According to Michiko Kakutani (2014, electronic information), the saga of Snowden “revealed the Orwellian dimensions of the National Security Agency” inasmuch as it exposed “the agency’s colossal reach and indiscriminate vacuuming up of information about people’s phone calls, emails and contacts”. Thus, surveillance seemed to have become outdated, but it came back to frighten people – or it never ceased to exist after all. For this reason, maybe Orwell is as good a prophet as Huxley is. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in the late 1980s, “it seemed for a time that *Brave New World* had won – from henceforth, state control would be minimal, and all we’d have to do was go shopping and smile a lot, and wallow in pleasures, popping a pill or two when depression set in” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 148). With no doubt, a burlesque culture had been established, and state control was not a real preoccupation anymore. However, despite the irrefutable significance of Huxley’s insights still today, perhaps there is no longer a dispute between literary dystopias now, especially in the aftermath of September 11. There is no point in having them.

²⁹ This comparison between *Brave New World* and *Oryx and Crake* – as well as other points in the whole discussion – inevitably brings to mind Baudrillard’s *The Transparency of Evil*, especially in regards to themes like promiscuity, drugs, prophylaxis, cancer, artificial intelligence, operational whitewash, and terrorism. Baudrillard describes the invisible threats and fears that we cannot explain or whose source we cannot pinpoint. Despite having been published more than twenty years ago, it is still a useful handbook to understand our culture.

[...] With the notorious 9/11 World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks in 2001, all that changed. Now it appears we face the prospect of two contradictory dystopias at once – open markets, closed minds – because state surveillance is back again with a vengeance. [...] Lots of countries have had their versions of it – their ways of silencing troublesome dissent. Democracies have traditionally defined themselves by, among other things, openness and the rule of law. But now it seems that we in the West are tacitly legitimizing the methods of the darker human past, upgraded technologically and sanctified to our own uses, of course. For the sake of freedom, freedom must be renounced. To move us toward the improved world – the utopia we're promised – dystopia must first hold sway. It's a concept worthy of doublethink³⁰ [...] (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 148-149).

Taking the impact of September 11 into account, all of this is to say that *Oryx and Crake* builds what seems to be a new sort of dystopia, something blurred and with a social design difficult to scrutinize. But, of course, every dystopia presents its own complexities. The problem – or great triumph – of a dystopia written in the twenty-first century is the fact that it will have increasingly double-meanings, which may be something symptomatic of our own controversial social designs. That is why Atwood's concept of *ustopia* makes so much sense these days. On the one hand, we see an organized technocratic society in *Oryx and Crake*, wealthy, clean, which invests very hard to achieve beauty and longevity within its metropolitan centers. They have the top scientists and the top researches, and the top security forces to assure their physical integrity. In short, they have everything they need and more. On the other hand, they have renounced freedom (the freedom they have inside is artificial) at the same time that the unjust system produced a horde of excluded citizens – these, in turn, impoverished and ironically free in the external world. As well as the outside, the apparent perfect universe of the large corporations is not free from violence and manipulation. At last, there is no dichotomy of good and evil in the novel.

Furthermore, as Postman asserts (2006, p. 155), “there are two ways by which the spirit of a culture may be shriveled. In the first – the Orwellian – culture becomes a prison. In the second – the Huxleyan – culture becomes a burlesque”. Why not have both? As Atwood's fiction brilliantly proves, the burlesque culture might be a prison and vice-versa; or better, we may not be able to distinguish which is which and the people who represent one or the other. In a society where everything is melded, the Compounds and the Pleeblands seem to lose their specificities to some extent. Ambiguity also embraces the characters, inasmuch as “the manipulators are often the manipulated and the seeming victims are often engaged in the victimization. Atwood's fiction does not comply with fixed categories and her use of humour

³⁰ *Doublethink*: “the act of holding two opposite opinions or beliefs at the same time; the ability to do this” (HORNBY, 2008, p. 458). The word was coined by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

and irony contribute to the complexity of the text” (LABUDOVÁ, 2010, p. 136). For this reason, “as is typical for all Atwood’s books, most of the characters in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* function simultaneously as victims and victimizers, manipulators and manipulated” (LABUDOVÁ, 2010, p. 141-142). The novels may be interpreted then as a never-ending competition among everything and everyone.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the Compounds prevail over the Pleeblands, and then we have the story being told from the perspective of the elite, which is characterized by coldness and masculinity.³¹ And the most prominent characters in the novel are men: Jimmy and Crake – Oryx is only three-dimensional for Jimmy, for the reader she works as a kind of apparition.³² As a true male figure, Jimmy is described as a sex addict. He deals with the impossibility of human communication and “rather satirizes any indication of his true emotions. [...] Coming from a broken family, he is unable to have a true relationship with people (women in particular): he ignores them, ridicules them and victimizes them in a parody of love affairs” (LABUDOVÁ, 2010, p. 139). Concerning the relationships with women, Jimmy describes himself as “a lost cause”, “emotionally dyslexic”, and “an emotional landfill site” (OC p. 190). He uses his personal dramas for women to feel sympathy for him. The only girl he loved was Oryx – an elusive woman who does not even seemed real.³³ Jimmy just feels superior to Crake in sexual terms, since women find Crake intimidating. Although apathetic, Jimmy seems a reasonable guy; he values arts and words, after all. However, being a “words person” in the story means to be an outcast, living in a society filled with highly logical, scientifically oriented people. Because of that, Jimmy is considered the “neurotypical”, that is, “minus the genius gene” (OC p. 194). Even born to a genetic engineer’s family and living in the wealthy Compounds, he does not identify with science; he is interested in obsolete words instead. In reality, he “is caught between the old world of Shakespeare’s words and ‘the brave new world’ of virtual reality” (LABUDOVÁ, 2010, p. 138).

Even though we know that Jimmy “appreciates the books lying otherwise unread in his Academy’s library, we also know that they have provided him only with the insight that their

³¹ The Pleeblands are well explored in *The Year of the Flood*, in which we have the story being told from the perspective of the underprivileged masses. In opposition to the Compounds, well described in *Oryx and Crake*, where the coldness of science dominates the plot, one might say that the Pleeblands, with many female characters, are warm and feminine.

³² Since this research has science and its male characters as focus, not including an investigation about Oryx was a necessary choice. For an analysis of the female characters in *Oryx and Crake*, see Fiona Tolan’s “*Oryx and Crake: A Postfeminist Future*” (2007).

³³ Jimmy had other girlfriends from the Pleeblands too, such as Brenda and Amanda, characters that appear in major roles in *The Year of the Flood*.

wisdom is being universally ignored. His is a culture not of reflection but of consumption” (HENGGEN, 2010, p. 135). Thus, keeping in mind that many of Atwood’s characters are multidimensional, we cannot assume Jimmy as a heroic figure, either. Though we can see Jimmy as a victim, he is a co-conspirator, as well. He “becomes victim of Crake’s domination and manipulation. Crake’s best friend becomes an accomplice, as he assists Crake to promote The BlyssPluss Pill which is infected with the deadly virus. [...] Paradoxically, Jimmy’s slogans helped Crake to sell the lethal pill” (LABUDOVÁ, 2010, p. 143). So, in spite of the fact that “numbers people” have greater influence in Atwood’s society, a “words person” is who actually induces lots of people into dying. Besides the many vices, Jimmy is pessimistic and has a limited view. He can also be seen as a backstabbing friend in regards to Crake once he gets involved with Oryx – but only if we assume that Crake did not know about Jimmy’s platonic love for her, otherwise Crake is the one who would be cutting Jimmy’s grass. Howsoever, one cannot deny that Jimmy is ethical and a very likeable character. Thereby, he can be interpreted as a lazy person with unexpected powers – powers that he himself is unaware of – who comes to be the clumsy and improbable hero of the novel.

If Jimmy is apathetic, Crake is the personification of coldness. As the geek and genius (or mad) scientist³⁴, he has a dominant role in the plot. He is cynical, calculating, and manipulates everything and everyone around him. “Crake’s Compounds are characterized by material comfort, purely scientific approaches, and emotional blankness” (LABUDOVÁ, 2010, p. 141). Besides, “manipulators manipulate feelings of human beings as well as genes in laboratories” (LABUDOVÁ, 2010, p. 142). Whereas Jimmy is addicted to sex, Crake does not care at all about it; he is always in another planet, at a higher intellectual level, detached from any emotional situation.³⁵ For him, falling in love is “a hormonally induced delusional state” (OC p. 193). Instead, he is addicted to violence; through computer games and websites, Crake worships violent circumstances, always vibrating with topics like the extinction of entire populations. It is not fortuitous that he turns out to be a bioterrorist in the end. However, neglecting the violent and malicious aspect, we could even assume him as a literary realization of Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory*, since both of them are geeks who demonstrate absolute social ineptitude. Besides, both are rigidly logical, egocentric,

³⁴ Taking into account Crake’s deceitful personality, some scholars have described him as a *trickster-scientist*, which may be a reference to the archetypal figure of the trickster. See Jung’s “On the Psychology of the Trickster-Figure” (2004).

³⁵ Besides talking about his father’s death without demonstrating any emotion, it is interesting to stress that Crake finds it “impressive” to watch his own mother agonizing to death inside an isolated area after she has been contaminated by a strange bioform.

indifferent, but with sense of humor. In his “dark laconic clothing” (OC p. 75), Crake “was very smart – even in the world of HelthWyzer High, with its overstock of borderline geniuses and polymaths, he had no trouble floating at the top of the list” (OC p. 76). For his entertaining cleverness, Crake comes to be a very likeable character too. As Dvorak (2006, p. 124) remarks, “the characters embodying the mocked ideas or values are stylized to the verge of caricature”. As example, the author cites Crake’s pedantic scientist erudition. Maybe Crake is a version of Sheldon in the future. The main difference is that Sheldon has childlike qualities, being therefore way too naive to be equaled to Atwood’s genius villain.³⁶

From significant inventions to the mad scientist who sets himself above ordinary people, literature is full of examples of good use of science and, perhaps on a larger scale, misuse of science. It is possible then to place Crake alongside many literary scientists, like Shakespeare’s Prospero, Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus, Hawthorne’s Aylmer, Verne’s Professor Lidenbrock, Wells’s Dr. Moreau, Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll, Lovecraft’s Dr. Herbert West, among many others. Nonetheless, probably the most remarkable is Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, for the reason that “from *Frankenstein* onwards scientific discovery is as much a threat as it is a promise” (BOTTING, 2002, p. 279). Thus, the mad scientist archetype acquired prominence most notably with Shelley’s work, to which *Oryx and Crake* is often compared. The analogy is so strong that Crake already became *Crakenstein* in my mind. The novel, “written when contemporary scientific advances in bioengineering are on the brink of creating new life forms, participates in the tradition that Shelley began, reminding us again of the power and danger of science and technology” (STEIN, 2010, p. 143). Both Victor Frankenstein and Glenn Crake(nstein) “employ the cutting-edge technologies of their time periods to create new humanoid creatures, but the technology available to Frankenstein is more limited than that available to Crake” (STEIN, 2010, p. 143). However, whereas Frankenstein is naive and inconsequent, Crake is distrustful, unsentimental, has focus on marketing and obsession with destruction. Victor, on the other hand, is just a curious young man trying to test nature and its limits as well as his capacity to create new things. He acts on impulse, unlike Crake, who does not act without a previous scheme.

The context in which he works differs from Frankenstein’s. Shelley’s scientist must work alone; his project is an anomaly. In contrast, Crake’s project is an extension of

³⁶ In the same way that Glenn/Crake, it has been asserted that Sheldon displays many traits of Asperger’s. Even though his behavior may be consistent with the syndrome, the creators of the TV series have admitted that they did not create the character based on it.

the kinds of technological innovation, such as gene splicing and xeno-transplantation, used by the top scientists of his society, who are well paid to conduct such research. Furthermore, his amorality and his purported focus on products for profit are commensurate with the amoral profit-driven ethos of the pharmaceutical companies that control a large segment of his society's economy (STEIN, 2010, p. 146-147).

Anyhow, Stein's (2010, p. 153) conclusion is that "the tragedies in both of these books stem from the scientist-characters' lack of balance, their neglect of emotion and their over-reliance on reason and science".³⁷ Indeed, this is the opinion shared by many critics, who see Atwood's novel as a warning against the potential dangers of science. However, some would like to disagree with this pessimistic view of science as a negative force, as J. Johnston (2012, p. 14), who believes that "it is important that we instead ask a more difficult question; what can Atwood's story tell us about the potential benefits of science? A positive reading of the biotechnological advancements at the Corporations is certainly possible". In the author's opinion, such reductive readings disregard the fact that "[...] it is the Corporations and not a genetically engineered overclass who are responsible for social division" (JOHNSTON, 2012, p. 11). As a positive example of scientific breakthrough, he cites the pigoon project, something beneficial for organ transplantation. Also, he points that there are ethical scientists in the novel, like Sharon, Jimmy's mother, who abandons the Compounds as she starts to disagree with their procedures. Furthermore, the author believes that "Crake's disastrous plan is only made possible by the absence of an effective governing practice. While Stein may be correct in diagnosing the scientist-characters' 'lack of balance' as one root cause of society's eventual collapse, what is certain is that proper scientific regulation would have brought that imbalance in check" (JOHNSTON, 2012, p. 19).

Concerning her scientific inventions, Atwood has a thought-provoking response, "It's in my books because it's in life" (ATWOOD apud SOMACARRERA, 2006, p. 54). As we already know, she presents creations that seem futuristic. However, some of them are not just possibilities for the future, as they are already becoming actualities. The pigoon project, for instance, is based on real-life experiments. A team of Japanese scientists has already gotten a black pig pancreas growing inside a white pig. The goal is to get a human organ to do the same some years from now. On the one hand, "this is one of the holy grails of medical research: the ability to reproduce a human organ that is genetically identical to the person who needs it. It could mean an end to donor waiting lists, and an end to problems of organ

³⁷ Stein's comparison between *Frankenstein* and *Oryx and Crake* can be found in "Problematic Paradise in *Oryx and Crake*" (2010).

rejection” (WINGFIELD-HAYES, 2014, electronic information). On the other hand, “animal rights activists object to the idea of pigs, sheep or goats being used as human organ factories. Many more feel uncomfortable about the idea of pig-human hybrids” (WINGFIELD-HAYES, 2014, electronic information). According to the author, it brings to mind *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. But, “whatever the ethical debate, for the hundreds of thousands of people around the world waiting for a new kidney or liver, the prospect of being able to make one to order is an astonishing thought” (WINGFIELD-HAYES, 2014, electronic information).

Another example are the ChickieNobs, the headless chickens that grow multiple breasts, legs, and wings, other genetically engineered creatures presented in the novel. The fact that they do not have heads “[solves] a problem for animal rights workers: as their creators say, ‘No Brain, No Pain’” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 92). Atwood (2011, p. 92) also points that “since *Oryx and Crake* was published, the Chickie Nob solution has made giant strides: lab-grown meat is now a reality, though it is probably not in your sausages yet”. A similar project in real life, the “Headless Chicken Solution”, proposes “a new system for the mass production of chickens that removes the birds’ cerebral cortex so that they don’t experience the horrors of being packed together tightly in vertical farms. [...] The brain stem for the chicken would be kept intact so that the homeostatic functions continue to operate, allowing it to grow” (SOLON, 2012, electronic information). André Ford, who idealized the system, proposes it for two reasons, “to meet the rising demand for meat, particularly poultry, and to improve the welfare of the chickens by desensitizing them to the unpleasant reality of their existence” (SOLON, 2012, electronic information). According to him, “the realities of the existing systems of production are just as shocking, [...] but they are hidden behind the sentimental guise of traditional farming scenes that we as consumers hold in our minds and see on our food packaging” (FORD apud SOLON, 2012, electronic information). This is another case in which people have divergent opinions. Are these creatures still animals or are they pure and simple simulacrum? If they do not suffer – “without annoying heads that register pain and perhaps have ideas about what constitutes a proper domestic bird’s life” (HARAWAY, 2008, p. 268) – is everything ok? Yet, as Haraway (2008, p. 268) states, “Design away the controversy, and all those free-range anarchists will have to go home. But remember, Chicken squawks even when his head has been cut off”.

Thus, it seems to me that these projects involving animals have also been a concept worthy of doublethink. Moreover, “Atwood also cautions that *Oryx and Crake* is not anti-science, for science, in her view, is a neutral tool” (STEIN, 2010, p. 146). Perhaps the novel

does not show clearly the different perspectives of scientific breakthroughs, but it at least makes the reader consider their benefits and their possible dangers while associating the story to our current way of life. In this sense, the novel does not lend itself to be a simple warning against the dangers of science, but a satiric portrait of a controversial society that has many things to do with our own. As Johnston stresses in regards to *Oryx and Crake*, “the divided society we are presented with serves as a cautionary vision not of the consequences of genetic engineering, but of a scientific process appropriated and dominated by the interests of business” (JOHNSTON, 2012, p. 12). Therefore, an important thing to ponder is that the real threat – inside the novel and outside its pages – is not science itself, but the way we handle it instead.

With this discussion about the ambiguity of the characters as well as negative and positive views that the novel may allow in regards to science, we are back one more time to Atwood’s concept of *ustopia*. Atwood had never done anything like it before; her previous fictions had been realistic. But then she found herself writing utopias/dystopias of her own. “Tackling a ustopia was a risk. But it was also a challenge and a temptation because if you’ve studied a form and read extensively in it, you often have a secret hankering to try it yourself” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 86). If we consider the ruined picture created by Atwood – either before or after the catastrophe –, *Oryx and Crake* is clearly dystopian. Combining some sort of Orwellian prison and Huxleyan burlesque, we have a destructive social design – comic, most of the time, but still destructive. “[...] almost the entire human race is annihilated, before which it has split into two parts: a technocracy and an anarchy” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 91). The Pleeblands represent the anarchic part of the system, where savagery, famine, dirt, disorder, poverty, and ignorance subjugate the citizens. Apparently, they are all free, but then we realize that the lack of walls does not necessarily imply freedom. The Compounds, on the other hand, represent the technocratic part of the system, a world underlined by abundance, beauty, longevity, civility, cleanness, order, wealth, and intelligence. Here, the existence of walls does not necessarily imply security.

However, as Atwood also said, each “dystopia contains within itself a little utopia, and vice versa” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 90). In *Oryx and Crake*, maybe the Crakers might be seen as the ultimate hope to humankind. On the one hand, “there is a little attempt at utopia in it as well: a group of quasi-humans who have been genetically engineered so that they will never suffer from the ills that plague *Homo sapiens sapiens*” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 91). Also, as it will be exposed in the next chapter, they are not monsters, but genuinely good beings. On the

other hand, the Crakers are designer creatures. “But anyone who engages in such design – as we are now doing – has to ask, How far can humans go in the alteration department before those altered cease to be human? Which of our features are at the core of our being? What a piece of work is man, and now that we ourselves can be the workmen, what pieces of this work shall we chop off?” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 91). In a sense, “the designer people have some accessories I wouldn’t mind having myself”, such as “built-in insect repellent, automatic sunblock, and the ability to digest leaves, like rabbits. They also have several traits that would indeed be improvements of a sort, though many of us wouldn’t like them. For instance, mating is seasonal: in season, certain parts of the body turn blue, as with baboons, so there is no more romantic rejection or date rape”. Finally, “these people can’t read, so a lot of harmful ideologies will never trouble them” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 91-92). Thus, it is complicated to arrive at a decisive conclusion when something like the humanoids can be seen by different angles. This is definitely a good example of the mood crossover utopia + dystopia, since it is possible to have ambiguous reactions while analyzing the Crakers. Although we may mistrust them, they are friendly and quite familiar, like improved versions of ourselves.

It’s interesting to me that I situated the utopia-facilitating element in *Oryx and Crake* not in a new kind of social organization or a mass brainwashing or soul-engineering program but inside the human body. The Crakers are well behaved from the inside out not because of their legal system or their government or some form of intimidation but because they have been designed to be so. They can’t choose otherwise. And this seems to be where utopia is moving in real life as well: through genetic engineering, we will be able to rid ourselves of inherited diseases, and ugliness, and mental illness, and aging, and ... who knows? The sky’s the limit. Or so we are being told. What is the little dystopia concealed within such utopian visions of the perfected human body – and mind? Time will tell (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 94-95).

Crake has consciously created his own virus with the aim of using it as a biological weapon, and then the majority of living humans vanished from the world due to the hemorrhagic fever virus, something resembling Ebola. Even though we may see the dystopian qualities of his attempt, he has a utopian vision as well, inasmuch as he craves a world without wars, famine, racial and sexual tensions. Thus, he has thought up the death of the entire civilization – including his own –, leaving his genetically modified mammals as inheritance to the planet. Apart from the readings that we might assume in regards to the character, this whole picture is in accordance with something that was mentioned previously:

in order to achieve the promised utopia, we need first to face the harms of dystopia. As Jameson (2009, electronic information) asserts in a review about *The Year of the Flood*, “my current feeling is that the post-catastrophe situation in reality constitutes the preparation for the emergence of Utopia itself”. However, maybe waiting for utopia is waiting for Godot, an endlessly wait for something that may never arrive. Let us not forget that the “good place” represents at the same time the “no place”.

In regards to time, Atwood does not make it clear in which year the plot of *Oryx and Crake* takes place. However, the attentive reader can find some clues throughout the novel. Howells (2005, p. 173) points out that “though Jimmy/Snowman’s retrospective opens like a fairy tale with ‘once upon a time’, it actually has a very specific temporal location, beginning with his childhood memory of the huge bonfires of slaughtered cattle, which will remind readers of images from the foot-and-mouth epidemic in Britain in 2001”. According to Gussow (2003, p. 2), Atwood “said that Snowman was born around 1999, and is 28 at the beginning of the novel”. Moreover, in Howells (2006) and Wisker (2012) we have the information that the novel opens around the year 2025. On the one hand, truth is that a specific year is never mentioned in *Oryx and Crake*. In *The Year of the Flood*, on the other hand, the year twenty-five is presented as the year when the cataclysm takes place; but it could be 2025, 3025, 4025, and so forth. Anyway, as readers know that these Atwood’s novels explore a near future, to accept something around the year 2025 is the most plausible alternative.

In regards to space, several scholars have pointed the fact that *Oryx and Crake* does not explore a national disaster, but a global catastrophe. This is true if we consider the global consequences of Crake’s megalomaniac project of bioterrorism. Nevertheless, the trigger must have been pulled in a specific place, that is, the virus must have been created within the boundaries of a particular country. For those who believe that the novel takes place in Canada, I have to say that it probably does not. According to Howells (2005, p. 170), everything happens “in a devastated landscape on the east coast of the United States”. For Wisker (2012, p. 157), the novel is a “dystopian satire on the American Dream of consumerism and technology replacing social and moral engagement”. Wisker (2012, p. 147) also remembers that Atwood, “with her scathing Canadian view of the US, likes to use it for her dystopias. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is set in Cambridge, Massachusetts”. Gussow (2003) shares the same opinion, arguing that events take place in Massachusetts, near Boston. “It had to be a place with fairly low-lying coastal areas, which could be flooded by the melting of glacial ice and

by a tidal wave,' [Atwood] said" (GUSSOW, 2003, p. 2). Has someone thought that Snowman wore a Red Sox baseball cap by chance? In addition, about the reasons for Atwood's choice of the United States, "her answer to this question after writing *The Handmaid's Tale* might also serve for *Oryx and Crake*: 'The States are more extreme in everything... It's also true that everyone watches the States to see what the country is doing and might be doing ten or fifteen years from now'" (HOWELLS, 2006 p. 163).

There are allusions to the United States in the novel – whether cities, states or other more specific places – like Harvard (OC p. 173), the Lincoln Memorial (OC p. 181), Cleveland (OC p. 216), Texas (OC p. 244), "New New York" (OC p. 287), San Francisco (OC p. 315), etc. Moreover, Showalter (2003, electronic information) states that "Jimmy seems to be an American male, and has tastes and habits Atwood usually despises, but she makes him a convincing Holden Caulfield kind of guy – unselfconsciously libidinous, slangy, funny, raunchy and gross". So, why does not Atwood make clear the country where *Oryx and Crake* takes place? A possible response comes from Jameson (2009), who supports the idea that the term "American" is no longer required for us to understand that we are in front of the United States – or some fictitious place that at least resembles it. More to the point, Atwood herself asserts that ustopias are "not-exactly places, which are anywhere but nowhere, and which are both mappable locations and states of mind" (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 75). Etymologically, the word *ustopia* may not have a meaning, but we can go further and propose one just for fun right away: *ustopia*, from the Greek *topos* 'place' and the English *US* 'United States'. We have then a utopia/dystopia set in the United States of America, a world seemingly ideal, perceived as such by many within and without, yet with great flaws.

This then is the world of Atwood's dystopia, for which, in this global near future, the term American is no longer necessary. Its colors have a loathsome pastel quality, like drugstores; its bunny suits and fluffy fabrics reflect the bad taste of infantile mass production; the bloody physical violence is that of cartoons rather than Hitler. If there is aesthetic pleasure here, it is that of a syrupy nausea that repeats on you; so that the end of the world has some of the cleansing, bracing effect of sand and waste landscape, of the seashore (JAMESON, 2009, electronic information).

Finally, the past of the narrative is marked by the pre-catastrophic scenario, the ustopian imagination, in which we see a technocratic society obsessed with physical perfection and longevity – or, at a higher level, immortality. Notions of true or false, real or imaginary are blurred. In fact, the entire social design of *Oryx and Crake* seems simulated,

starting with the furniture, which “was called *reproduction*. Jimmy was quite old before he realized what this word meant – that for each reproduction item, there was supposed to be an original somewhere” (OC p. 26). Resorting to Baudrillard’s ideas, Howells (2005, p. 176), affirms that “in Atwood’s satirical vision of a world where everything is a reproduction of a vanished original, human beings are alienated not only from their environment but also from themselves”. In this synthetic world, almost everything is for sale, and there is no State to control the citizens inasmuch as the power is concentrated in the hands of the great Corporations and their private security forces, the CorpSeCorps³⁸. As Somacarrera (2006, p. 55) reminds us, “there is no mention of government at all in the novel – but [power] is spread through the social system via the corporate power of global capitalism”. Also, “power is invisible but more tangible than ever” (SOMACARRERA, 2006, p. 55).

In addition, this society is characterized by the elimination of the middle class. Hence, economic and intellectual disparities, as well as the lack of safe public space, allow for limited alternatives: people have to live either in the fortified Compounds of the techno-elite, or in the open and lawless Pleeblands, the urban jungle of the masses, which generates “strong demarcations between inside and outside” (RAO, 2006, p. 109). Furthermore, “the very word ‘Compound’ suggests the compression and annihilation of the anarchic freedom that characterizes the Pleeblands” (COLE, 2005, p. 6). As a result, we have a strong hierarchy, those who are wealthy on one side and those who are deprived on the other. “Life in the Compounds where Jimmy and Crake grew up is coerced and controlled – though in a soft and seemingly privileged manner” (RAO, 2006, p. 108). This way of life might be seen, therefore, either as utopian or dystopian, depending on the reader’s point of view.

³⁸ As it is informed in *The Year of the Flood* (2010, p. 25), “they’d started as a private security firm for the Corporations, but then they’d taken over when the local police forces collapsed for lack of funding, and people liked that at first because the Corporations paid, but now CorpSeCorps were sending their tentacles everywhere”.

3 A NARRATIVE SET IN THE PRESENT

3.1 *Oryx and Crake: In the Savagery of a Wasteland*

What marks the transition of the past time to the present time in the narrative is the episode in which Jimmy finally decides to take the children of Crake out of the Compounds. This is the last recollection Snowman has of his past condition, that is, the last memory involving the life in the Compounds that the reader has access to in the novel. “On the second Friday of March – he’d been marking off the days on a calendar, god knows why – Jimmy showed himself to the Crakers for the first time” (OC p. 348). They were curious about his presence and his clothes. He presents himself as Snowman, since “he no longer wanted to be Jimmy, or even Jim, and especially not Thickney [...]. He needed to forget the past – the distant past, the immediate past, the past in any form. He needed to exist only in the present, without guilt, without expectation. As the Crakers did. Perhaps a different name would do that for him” (OC p. 348-349). The Crakers start to make questions; they wanted to know where Oryx was and where Snowman came from. He promptly answers that he came from the place of Oryx and Crake, which is the starting point to a whole mythological story he would develop to explain things to the tribe throughout the novel. He then explains that Oryx and Crake had sent him to take them to a different and better place, where there would be more to eat.

“Why is your skin so loose?” said one of the children. “I was made in a different way from you,” Snowman said. He was beginning to find this conversation of interest, like a game. These people were like blank pages, he could write whatever he wanted on them. “Crake made me with two kinds of skin. One comes off.” He took off his tropical vest to show them. They stared with interest at the hair on his chest. “What is that?” “These are feathers. Little feathers. Oryx gave them to me, as a special favor. [...] “Yes. We see. But what are feathers?” (OC p. 349).

And so the Crakers would continue asking questions, and Snowman would have fun by making up the most bizarre replies. He “marvelled at his own facility: he was dancing gracefully around the truth, light-footed, light-fingered. But it was almost too easy: they accepted, without question, everything he said” (OC p. 350). The Crakers were not his business, but he was now in charge for them; they needed him – and he needed them, in spite

of everything. After having planned the itinerary, Snowman would take the children to the seashore, “where he himself had never been. It was something to look forward to: at last he would see the ocean” (OC p. 350). On the coast, the Crakers would “feel at home [...], and certainly there would be lots of edible foliage. As for himself, there would surely be fish” (OC p. 350). The evening before the departure, Snowman gives a talk about how the journey would be, thinking about the various dangers they could face on the way, but prefers not to mention things in detail for the Crakers not to be scared with the unknown.

In the dawn light he punched in the door code for the last time and opened up the bubble, and led the Crakers out of Paradise. They noticed the remains of Crake lying on the ground, but as they had never seen Crake when alive, they believed Snowman when he told them this was a thing of no importance – only a sort of husk, only a sort of pod. It would have been a shock to them to have witnessed their creator in his present state. As for Oryx, she was face down and wrapped in silk. No one they’d recognize. The trees surrounding the dome were lush and green, everything seemed pristine, but when they reached the RejoovenEsense Compound proper, the evidence of destruction and death lay all around (OC p. 351).

The whole picture of death and destruction alarm them, and Snowman explains that it is all part of the chaos. “Crake and Oryx are clearing away the chaos, for you – because they love you – but they haven’t quite finished yet” (OC p. 352). Along the way, some infected and disintegrating individuals pop up asking for help. Snowman shoots them all. “He was worried about contagion – could the Crakers get this thing, or was their genetic material too different? Surely Crake would have given them immunity. Wouldn’t he?” (OC p. 352). However, the Crakers were not able to understand what Snowman had done with those people; they just “looked on in wonder”. Snowman tries to clarify their doubts by saying that all those bad things were part of “a bad dream that Crake [was] dreaming” (OC p. 352) on their behalf, so they would not have to suffer with such bad visions. Thus, they carry on with their journey, walking “together through No Man’s Land”, “the women and children hand in hand, several of them singing, in their crystal voices, their voices like fronds unrolling” (OC p. 353).

Subsequently, they go through the streets of the pleeblands and “during the afternoon storms they took shelter; easy to do, as doors and windows had ceased to have meaning. Then, in the freshened air, they continued their stroll” (OC p. 353). The Crakers still had to be instructed in many ways, and Snowman “knew what an improbable shepherd he was. To reassure them, he tried his best to appear dignified and reliable, wise and kindly. A lifetime of

deviousness came to his aid” (OC p. 353). Finally, they reach the shore, where “the leaves of the trees were rustling, the water was gently waving, the setting sun was reflected on it, pink and red. The sands were white, the offshore towers overflowing with birds” (OC p. 353-354). It was a very different setting from the previous necropolis they had gone through around the Compounds. In that place, there was life over again. “What is this place called?” (OC p. 354), ask the children. “It is called *home*” (OC p. 354), announces Snowman, which means that he had managed to find another meaning to the word – or he thought he had.³⁹

Two or three months after reaching the coast, we can follow Snowman in his daily routine. “Out of habit he looks at his watch – stainless-steel case, burnished aluminum band, still shiny although it no longer works. He wears it now as his only talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time” (OC p. 3). In addition, he is now barefoot and wears a “dirty bedsheet around himself like a toga”, an “authentic-replica Red Sox baseball cap” (OC p. 4), and his sunglasses with one lens missing. He watches the Crakers picking up flotsam; they keep some items as their treasures. Snowman prefers to keep himself isolated. But “sooner or later [...] they’ll seek him out where he sits wrapped in his decaying sheet, hugging his shins and sucking on his mango, in under the shade of the trees because of the punishing sun. For the children – thick-skinned, resistant to ultraviolet – he’s a creature of dimness, of the dusk” (OC p. 6). And they always come chanting, but they never stand too close. “Is that from respect, as he’d like to think, or because he stinks?” (OC p. 6). This time, they want to show their treasures, objects like a hubcap, a piano key, a bottle, a plastic BlyssPluss container, a computer mouse, etc. “Snowman feels like weeping. What can he tell them? There’s no way of explaining to them what these curious items are, or were” (OC p. 7). He simply says that the objects are things from before, keeping “his voice kindly but remote. A cross between pedagogue, soothsayer, and benevolent uncle” (OC p. 7). Moreover, Snowman felt a bitter pleasure with his dubious label.

The Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumors and through its backward-pointing footprints. Mountain tribes were said to have chased it down and killed it when they had the chance. They were said to have

³⁹ The sequence of this episode – in chronological terms – is the beginning of the book, when Snowman is introduced to the reader. The sequence – in terms of chapters to come – is the continuation of Snowman’s life on the beach. Hence, in both cases the reader is indeed in the present time of the narrative, with the beginning and the ending of the novel complementing each other as a puzzle.

boiled it, roasted it, held special feasts; all the more exciting, he supposes, for bordering on cannibalism (OC p. 7-8).

The Crakers still maintain a certain curiosity about Snowman's appearance. "Every so often they ask him to take off his sunglasses and put them on again: they want to see whether he has two eyes really, or three" (OC p. 7). However, they do not know whether to be afraid of him or not, because they cannot fully understand his nature. Even so, they make up their own stories about him, trying to understand a being that is so unlike them. In one aspect, they are absolutely right: Snowman is all alone.

Snowman was once a bird but he's forgotten how to fly and the rest of his feathers fell out, and so he is cold and he needs a second skin, and he has to wrap himself up. No: he's cold because he eats fish, and fish are cold. No: he wraps himself up because he's missing his man thing, and he doesn't want us to see. That's why he won't go swimming. Snowman has wrinkles because he once lived underwater and it wrinkled up his skin. Snowman is sad because the others like him flew away over the sea, and now he is all alone (OC p. 8-9).

Now and then Snowman feels the need to hear human voices – voices like his own. Thus, by being alone he sometimes imitates animal sounds, "he laughs like a hyena or roars like a lion – his idea of a hyena, his idea of a lion. [...] Or he grunts and squeals like a pigoon, or howls like a wolvog" (OC p. 10). He feels better after that. Yet "everything is so empty. Water, sand, sky, trees, fragments of past time. Nobody to hear him. 'Crake!' he yells. 'Asshole!' [...] 'You did this!' he screams at the ocean" (OC p. 11-12). Besides having to face a very hot climate – retreating into the forest because of the unbearable sun at noon or trying to protect himself from the afternoon storms –, Snowman is now amid wild animals, those brilliant inventions the scientists had made in the labs in order to have fun. "So he'd moved to the tree. No pigoons or wolvogs up there, and few rakunks: they preferred the undergrowth" (OC p. 39). Perhaps there were better ways of occupying his time, like making a chess set, playing games with himself, keeping a diary, making lists. "It could give his life some structure. But even a castaway assumes a future reader, someone who'll come along later and find his bones and his ledger, and learn his fate" (OC p. 41). However, he "can make no such assumptions: he'll have no future reader, because the Crakers can't read. Any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past" (OC p. 41).

Despite all that, Snowman has his moments of joy as, for instance, a little talk to a caterpillar. "There will never be another caterpillar just like this one. There will never be

another such moment of time, another such conjunction. These things sneak up on him for no reason, these flashes of irrational happiness. It's probably a vitamin deficiency" (OC p. 41). Nevertheless, maybe he could do a more useful thing as focus on his living conditions, since "there's room for improvement in that department, a lot of room" (OC p. 42). But he spends too much time cursing Crake or daydreaming about Oryx. "Get me out! he hears himself thinking. But he isn't locked up, he's not in prison. What could be more *out* than where he is?" (OC p. 45). The paradoxes of life. He also hates the replays he often has of his past and he cannot bear the increasing dissolution of meaning. "Hang on to the words. [...] The odd words, the old words, the rare ones. *Valance. Norn. Serendipity. Pibroch. Lubricious.* When they're gone out of his head, these words, they'll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been" (OC p. 68).

As a way to distract himself or even to mock Crake, Snowman gives continuity to his mythological stories. Life on Earth is explained having Oryx and Crake as kinds of deities. Whereas the tribe are the children of Crake⁴⁰ – "*Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango*" – the animals are the children of Oryx – "*the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words*" (OC p. 96). To complete this particular fable, Snowman points that the egg full of words "*hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk*" (OC p. 96). But the Crakers are never satisfied. As little kids who excitedly wait to listen to bedtime stories, they are fond of repetition. Snowman also pretends to hear a little voice inside his watch, a voice that knows everything and give instructions – Crake's voice. "Crakedom", "Crakiness", "Crakehood" (OC p. 96): Crake was gone but is still the center of attention as ever.

In exchange for more and more stories – mainly those related to the day of creation, when Crake made the "Great Emptiness" in order to get rid of the chaos –, the children bring a fish, grilled and wrapped in leaves, to Snowman every week. He really feels very hungry, but he had initially asked for only one fish – an order of Crake, according to him – so he does not ask for more. "There's something to be said for hunger: at least it lets you know you're

⁴⁰ Crake had named his children after eminent historical figures, like Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, Eleanor Roosevelt, Empress Josephine, Leonardo da Vinci, Madame Curie, Napoleon, Sacajawea, Simone de Beauvoir, Sojourner Truth, among others. "It had all seemed innocent enough, at the time" (OC p. 100).

still alive” (OC p. 95). About eating a creature of Oryx, he told them that it is her wish, inasmuch as “she needs the bones of her children so she can make other children out of them” (OC p. 101). About the adulation of Crake, Snowman was annoyed, but Crake playing the role of God was his own fabrication. Moreover, “Crake was against the notion of God, or of gods of any kind, and would surely be disgusted by the spectacle of his own gradual deification” (OC p. 104). Somehow, Snowman had his vengeance. It would not be worth revising the mythology at this point. “He is Crake’s prophet now, whether he likes it or not; and the prophet of Oryx as well. That, or nothing. And he couldn’t stand to be nothing, to know himself to be nothing. He needs to be listened to, he needs to be heard. He needs at least the illusion of being understood” (OC p. 104).

Anyway, it is not comfortable for Snowman to occupy the position of a mere ancestral of the Crakers. “He’s what they may have been once. *I’m your past*, he might intone. *I’m your ancestor, come from the land of the dead. Now I’m lost, I can’t get back, I’m stranded here, I’m all alone. Let me in!*” (OC p. 106). They do not let him in of course; he is not one of them. But at least they show some respect. “He’s served his evolutionary purpose, as fucking Crake knew he would. He’s saved the children” (OC p. 107) in any case. As the ultimate outcast, “he’s tired of being himself, he wants to be someone else. Turn over all his cells, get a chromosome transplant, trade in his head for some other head, one with better things in it” (OC p. 109). At the time of Compounds, it would be a conceivable thing to wish; now it is just ridiculous. “He doesn’t know which is worse, a past he can’t regain or a present that will destroy him if he looks at it too clearly. Then there’s the future. Sheer vertigo” (OC p. 147). One of his recurrent desires on the seashore is to have beer, aspirin, and Scotch at hand. In addition, “he wishes he had something to read. To read, to view, to hear, to study, to compile” (OC p. 148), after all he used to be erudite. “*Erudite*. A hopeless word. What are all those things he once thought he knew, and where have they gone?” (OC p. 148).

Truth is that he is slowly starving to death, and depending on a fish a week is awful. Because of hunger, he begins to hallucinate. “What he needs to do is concentrate. Prioritize. Whittle things down to essentials. The essentials are: *Unless you eat, you die*. You can’t get any more essential than that” (OC p. 152). For this reason, he decides to walk back to the RejoovenEsense Compound where still might be provisions, since people did not have enough time to clean out the supermarkets when the epidemic broke out. It would be an expedition to look for supplies. Two or three days. Also, it would be necessary to tell the Crakers about his journey, so they would not find it strange when he disappeared out of the blue. The white lie

was that he was going to see Crake, and nobody else was allowed to go with him (one of the Crakers' favorite idea was the possibility of going to see their creator). "Snowman blames himself: he shouldn't have told them such exciting lies at the beginning. He'd made Crake sound like Santa Claus" (OC p. 160). He continues to envy Crake, because "he too would like to be invisible and adored. He too would like to be elsewhere. No hope for that: he's up to his neck in the here and now" (OC p. 162). And, in the here and now, while some members of the tribe copulate, he just witnesses, wishing to have a company. "Why am I on this earth? How come I'm alone? Where's my Bride of Frankenstein?" (OC p. 169). No bride, no friend, no one. For the moment, he should think only about his own survival and do whatever necessary.

The buildings that didn't burn or explode are still standing, though the botany is thrusting itself through every crack. Given time it will fissure the asphalt, topple the walls, push aside the roofs. Some kind of vine is growing everywhere, draping the windowsills, climbing in through the broken windows and up the bars and grillwork. Soon this district will be a thick tangle of vegetation. If he'd postponed the trip much longer the way back would have become impassable. It won't be long before all visible traces of human habitation will be gone (OC p. 222).

Despite being certain about the vanishing of all traces of human habitation sooner or later, maybe Snowman still believes that he is not the last human being alive. Maybe there are others like him anywhere, hiding, keeping themselves alive somehow. In this ruined scenario, he faces the scalding sun and the asphalt almost burning beneath his feet. Finally, he reaches RejoovenEsense, "where he'd made so many mistakes, misunderstood so much, gone on his last joyride" (OC p. 225). First, he needs to find some food and then he breaks into a house and starts to look for it. Though feeling like a burglar, he takes a bourbon bottle, sardines, two packs of cashews, aspirin, a bar of soap, a toothpaste, a new sheet to replace the filthy one, flashlight, a couple of candle ends, some matches, two knives, and a small cooking pot. Moreover, "he can't resist the mirrors in the places he breaks into, he sneaks a peek at himself every chance he has. Increasingly it's a shock. A stranger stares back at him, bleary-eyed, hollow-cheeked, pocked with bug-bite scabs. He looks twenty years older than he is. He winks, grins at himself, sticks out his tongue: the effect is truly sinister" (OC p. 231).

The next step would be seeking a functional spraygun in the Paradise bubble-dome arsenal to keep him safer. After all, the pigoons are in all places. "Those beasts are clever enough to fake a retreat, then lurk around the next corner. They'd bowl him over, trample him, then rip him open, munch up the organs first. He knows their tastes. [...] Some of them

may even have human neocortex tissue growing in their crafty, wicked heads” (OC p. 235). In addition, there were other animals to worry about, as the luminous green rabbits, a prolific and resistant pest with carnivorous desires, now out of their cages and into the wild. However, apart from the animals, a tempest seemed to be approaching. Fortunately, Snowman can find a shelter to protect his head. “What if there are rats in here? There must be rats. What if it starts to flood? [...] The lights go out. Now he’s alone in the dark. ‘So what?’ he tells himself. ‘You were alone in the light. No big difference.’ But there is” (OC p. 237). This is probably one of the most desperate moments he undergoes during his journey, and the reader is invited to be scared as well. At this part, it is possible to feel the darkness while there must be some strange creature inside and a devastating twister outside. Snowman is then caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Dark clouds have come boiling up from the south, blotting out the sun. This isn’t the usual afternoon storm: it’s too early, and the sky has an ominous greenish-yellow tinge. It’s a twister, a big one. [...] The advance winds hit, stirring up debris on the open field. Lightning zips between the clouds. He can see the thin dark cone, zigzagging downwards; then darkness descends (OC p. 235-236).

The next day, Snowman continues his expedition in the Compounds zone. On the way, twenty or thirty pigeons are lurking. “Now they’re all looking up at him. What they see is his head, attached to what they know is a delicious meat pie just waiting to be opened up. [...] His guts are cramping, he must be really scared, though he doesn’t feel it; he’s quite calm” (OC p. 268- 269). He finds an alternative way to escape the pigeons. Furthermore, there are several decomposing cadavers around, and he providentially goes through a kitchen, whose cupboards hide “chocolate in squares, real chocolate. A jar of instant coffee, ditto coffee whitener, ditto sugar. Shrimp paste for spreading on crackers, ersatz but edible. Cheese food in a tube, ditto mayo. Noodle soup with vegetables, chicken flavor. Crackers in a plastic snap-top. A stash of Joltbars. What a bonanza” (OC p. 272). To restore even more his unexpected happiness, he also finds two unopened bottles of beer, “real beer!” However, the most stimulating thing he can find in one of the cupboards is a windup radio.

This one looks undamaged, so he cranks the thing up. He doesn’t expect to hear anything, but expectation isn’t the same as desire. White noise, more white noise, more white noise. He tries the AM bands, then the FM. Nothing. Just that sound, like the sound of starlight scratching its way through outer space: *kkkkkkkk*. Then he tries the short-wave. He moves the dial slowly and carefully. Maybe there are other

countries, distant countries, where the people may have escaped – New Zealand, Madagascar, Patagonia – places like that (OC p. 273).

All at once, there is an answer, a man's voice speaking a language that sounds like Russian. "Snowman can't believe his ears. He's not the only one then – someone else has made it through, someone of his own species. Someone who knows how to work a short-wave transmitter" (OC p. 273). Unfortunately, he cannot manage to answer the man's message using the radio. "Still, he feels buoyant, elated almost. There are more possibilities now" (OC p. 274). He is now so entranced – mainly because all the food and the voice on the radio – that he has forgotten for a few minutes that he had cut his foot somewhere else. The wound is aching, but there is not much blood in it. "Now it's reminding him: there's a jabbing sensation, like a thorn" (OC p. 275). In any case, "he'll just have to cross his fingers, wish for luck: an infected foot would slow him right down. He shouldn't have neglected the cut for so long" (OC p. 275-276). At night, he goes to sleep thinking about Crake and wondering whether it would have made any difference if he had killed his frenemy earlier. He could have saved Oryx. "*If only* haunts him. But *if only* what? What could he have said or done differently? What change would have altered the course of events? In the big picture, nothing. In the small picture, so much" (OC p. 318).

Considering the entire expedition, in day one there were the hike to RejoovenEsense and the twister, in day two Snowman was trapped by the large herd of pigoons, so "this must be the third day" (OC p. 278) and he has to get a move right now. He then takes some water, sugar, half-dozen Joltbars, and some objects that he might need far ahead. "There's a pair of sunglasses too, so he discards his old single-eyed ones" (OC p. 278). Yet he forgets to pick up the radio. Outside, "the sun is well up. He'd better hurry, or he'll fry. He'd like to show himself to the pigoons, jeer at them, but he resists this impulse [...]" (OC p. 280). Finally, he reaches the Paradise bubble-dome; he still needs to find a spraygun there in the arsenal. That place would not bring back good memories though. "Crake's emergency storeroom. Crake's wonderful plan. Crake's cutting-edge ideas. Crake, King of the Crakery, because Crake is still there, still in possession, still the ruler of his own domain, however dark that bubble of light has now become. Darker than dark, and some of that darkness is Snowman's. He helped with it" (OC p. 333). Then he sights what was left of Oryx and Crake.

[...] They're scattered here and there, small and large bones mingled and in disarray, like a giant jigsaw puzzle. Here's Snowman, thick as a brick, dunderhead, frivol, and

dupe, water running down his face, giant fist clenching his heart, staring down at his one true love and his best friend in all the world. Crake's empty eye sockets look up at Snowman, as his empty eyes, once before. He's grinning with all the teeth in his head. As for Oryx, she's face down, she's turned her head away from him as if in mourning. The ribbon in her hair is as pink as ever. Oh, how to lament? He's a failure even at that (OC p. 335).

Snowman finds the storeroom afterwards. "He locates the medical-supply shelves, roots around. Tongue depressors, gauze pads, burn dressings. A box of rectal thermometers, but he doesn't need one of them stuffed up his anus to tell him he's burning up" (OC p. 335). He also finds some antibiotics and a bottle of Crake's supergermicide. He takes the medicine, and "the next morning his foot is somewhat better. The swelling has gone down, the pain has decreased. When evening falls he'll give himself another shot of Crake's superdrug. He knows he can't overdo it, however: the stuff is very potent" (OC p. 337). Still inside the storeroom, "he has cold ravioli in tomato sauce and half a Joltbar, washed down with a warm Coke. No hard liquor or beer left, he'd gone through all of that during the weeks he'd been sealed in here" (OC p. 337). After eating, he finds the letter Jimmy had written months before. His former self "must still have had hope, he must still have believed that the situation could be turned around, that someone would show up here in the future, someone in authority; that his words would have a meaning then, a context" (OC p. 346). Disregarding the letter, Snowman packs whatever he can carry of the room, "the rest of the food, dried and in tins, flashlight and batteries, maps and matches and candles, ammunition packs, duct tape, two bottles of water, painkiller pills, antibiotic gel, a couple of sun-proof shirts, and one of those little knives with the scissors. And the spraygun, of course" (OC p. 357). Now he can finally go back *home*.

Back to the seashore, he is exhausted, but instead of going to rest up in his tree, he walks with difficulty towards the village in order to show the Crakers he is fine. "They're sitting in a semi-circle around a grotesque-looking figure, a scarecrowlike effigy. All their attention is focused on it" (OC p. 360). He wonders what that thing might be. "It has a head, and a ragged cloth body. It has a face of sorts – one pebble eye, one black one, a jar lid it looks like. It has an old string mop stuck onto the chin" (OC p. 360-361). And then comes the big surprise: the scarecrow was there to represent himself. "We made a picture of you, to help us send out our voices to you" (OC p. 361), says one of the Crakers. Snowman suddenly remembers Crake's words, "*Watch out for art. [...] As soon as they start doing art, we're in trouble*". In Crake's opinion, "symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall. [...]"

Next they'd be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war" (OC p. 361). Besides, they demonstrate to believe that Crake lives in the sky. Where were these beliefs coming from? He does not remember having mentioned the sky, but maybe he has on one occasion. Moreover, the Crakers are interested in Snowman's voyage. One of them notices that he is hurt, and they offer him a fish.

Already the children are destroying the image they made of him, reducing it to its component parts, which they plan to return to the beach. This is a teaching of Oryx, the women tell him: after a thing has been used, it must be given back to its place of origin. The picture of Snowman has done its work: now that the real Snowman is among them once more, there is no reason for the other, the less satisfactory one. Snowman finds it odd to see his erstwhile beard, his erstwhile head, travelling away piecemeal in the hands of the children. It's as if he himself has been torn apart and scattered (OC p. 363).

Shortly after this outlandish episode – after Snowman has eaten the fish the Crakers had kindly brought to him – one of them (Abraham Lincoln) informs that others like Snowman had come to the beach. Apparently, they had not appreciated the abrupt meeting with a savage tribe of unknown creatures. "Snowman's heart is going very fast now, with excitement or fear, or a blend" (OC p. 365). They were three. Previously, while coming back to the village, Snowman had noticed a smoke signal in the distance, so maybe that is where the strangers are at this moment. "His mind is racing; behind his half-closed eyes possibilities flash and collide. Maybe all will be well, maybe this trio of strangers is good-hearted, sane, well-intentioned; maybe he'll succeed in presenting the Crakers to them in the proper light" (OC p. 366). However, perhaps "these new arrivals could easily see the Children of Crake as freakish, or savage, or non-human and a threat" (OC p. 366). Now, trying to find these new people was a sort of mission he would have to face with great responsibility. The worst part was the dreadful chance of not returning; after all, he was still hobbling in pain and did not know what the strangers would be capable of doing with him.

He hobbles across the beach to the water's edge, washes his foot, feels the sting of salt: there must have been a boil, the thing must have ruptured overnight, the wound feels huge now. [...] He'll wear nothing but his baseball cap, to keep the glare out of his eyes. He'll dispense with the sunglasses: it's early enough so they won't be needed. He needs to catch every nuance of movement. [...] He's not ready for this. He's not well. He's frightened (OC p. 371- 372).

Those people did not know about his existence, so he would have an advantage insofar as they would not be expecting someone like him. “That’s his best chance. From tree to tree he limps, elusive, white, a rumor. In search of his own kind” (OC p. 372). Then he notices some footprints in the sand. Also, it is already possible to smell the smoke and hear the voices. “Sneaking he goes, as if walking through an empty house in which there might yet be people. What if they should see him? A hairy naked maniac wearing nothing but a baseball cap and carrying a spraygun. What would they do? Scream and run? Attack? Open their arms to him with joy and brotherly love?” (OC p. 373). They were sitting around a fire – two men and a woman, all thin and battered-looking – and they have a spraygun with them as well. “They’re roasting something – meat of some kind. A rakunk? Yes, there’s the tail, over there on the ground. They must have shot it. The poor creature. Snowman hasn’t smelled roast meat for so long. Is that why his eyes are watering? He’s shivering now. He’s feverish again” (OC p. 373).

Thinking positively, Snowman was no longer the only human being in the savagery of a wasteland. Perhaps the others “could listen to him, they could hear his tale, he could hear theirs. They at least would understand something of what he’s been through” (OC p. 374). However, Snowman is a vacillating coward. He does not know how to proceed in a situation like this. “He could finish it now, before they see him, while he still has the strength. While he can still stand up. [...] But they haven’t done anything bad, not to him. Should he kill them in cold blood? Is he able to? And if he starts killing them and then stops, one of them will kill him first. Naturally” (OC p. 374). In doubt, he stands there, whispering to the empty air, chatting with the voices in his head. “From habit he lifts his watch; it shows him its blank face. Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go” (OC p. 374). In order to know what happens next it is necessary to read the continuation of the trilogy – and even so maybe the reader cannot find the answers he/she is looking for. By finishing like this, *Oryx and Crake* joins, therefore, Atwood’s list of open-ended novels.

3.2 Armageddon Has Only Begun

In the times of the Compounds – what I refer here to as the utopian imagination – “the Compound-dwellers appear as part of an elite that resembles a feudal aristocracy, convinced of their own divine right to rule over the plebeians” (JOHNSTON, 2012, p. 12). However, it is possible for the reader to perceive that in the present of the narrative, that is, in the aftermath of the man-made catastrophe, a clear division between Compounds and Pleeblands no longer makes sense. The two dominions remain physically separated, but both become ruins, and, in death, all their inhabitants are finally equal. According to Crake, “all it takes [...] is the elimination of one generation. One generation of anything. Beetles, trees, microbes, scientists, speakers of French, whatever. Break the link in time between one generation and the next, and it’s game over forever” (OC p. 223). In his attempt at creating a game over circumstance, the world indeed becomes a wasteland. Crake’s reasoning is that he is bravely saving intelligent life from an inexorably dying society. So, from one perspective, he is a bioterrorist, from other, he is a visionary man. But, despite the way the reader may interpret this particular character and what he has done, the end had arrived – or so we were told.

As Atwood (2011, p. 93) points out, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* “have sometimes been described as ‘apocalyptic,’ but in a true apocalypse everything on Earth is destroyed, whereas in these two books the only element that’s annihilated is the human race, or most of it”. Thus, we can relate the apocalyptic imagination of Atwood’s novels to what Isaac Asimov calls *catastrophes of the fifth class*: “the possibility that human life might continue, but that something would happen that would destroy civilization, interrupting the march of technological advance and condemning humanity to a primitive life – solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short – for an indefinite period” (ASIMOV, 1979, p. 14). Moreover, Atwood believes that “what survives after the cataclysmic event is not a ‘dystopia,’ because many more people would be required for that – enough to comprise a society” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 93). Nevertheless, “the surviving stragglers do [...] have mythic precedents: a number of myths tell of an annihilating flood survived by one man (Deucalion in Greek myth, Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh epic) or a small group, like Noah and his family” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 93). In the case of *Oryx and Crake*, we have Snowman, who turns out to be an improbable Messiah in the story. As Fromm (1990, p. 313) reminds us, “the prophets have faith that in spite of all errors and sins, eventually this ‘end of days’ will arrive, symbolized by

the figure of the Messiah” (FROMM, 1990, p. 313). Perhaps Snowman does not see himself in this position, but in regards to the Crakers, he certainly plays this major role.

After the plague, Snowman is “in a devastated New New York where Paradise has been Lost once again” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 188), and the green-eyed children of Crake are now his own children in a way. In his own Paradise Lost, his routine encompasses several abilities: to avoid the carnivorous hybrid animals, like wolvogs and pigoons; to deal with the actual weather, its burning sun and frequent storms; to overcome pain, thirsty and hunger; to invent numerous stories to tell the Crakers; and perhaps the most important, to control his memories – or try to, at least. Howsoever, he is all alone. “‘Now I’m alone,’ he says out loud. ‘All, all alone. Alone on a wide, wide sea.’ One more scrap from the burning scrapbook in his head” (OC p. 10).⁴¹ But even before the plague, Jimmy prefers to be alone, since he had faced disappointments in relation to his family, the disappearance and subsequent execution of his mother, meaningless sexual interactions, and, of course, prejudice for not being a man of science. He is, then, an outcast from the very beginning.

Desperate to become someone else after the whole tragedy that he has luckily survived – or not – he adopts a dubious label for himself: the Abominable Snowman, since, to the others (or even to himself), he looks like a menacing monster from an endangered species that will eventually disappear. The sudden decision to denominate himself like this only intensifies his previous outcast condition. Afterwards, he decides to keep the *abominable* to himself, like a mocking little secret. We can imply several meanings from the label *Snowman*. First, the appropriation of the mythological figure, the Yeti, an ape-like cryptic creature that inhabits the Himalayan region of Nepal and Tibet. Similar to the Bigfoot in North America or to the Loch Ness Monster in Scotland, it is regarded by people as a legend, given the lack of conclusive evidence, of course. The picture of monstrosity and hidden legendary being is applicable to what Jimmy became: an outsider who is inadequate to the new post-human environment inhabited by new species. Secondly, *Snowman* represents a way to show the inadequacy of whiteness, since among the other creatures he is the last representative human being, but more, the last white human being.⁴² Thirdly, the new name means a denial, as if he could erase history and forget the past in order to exist somehow in the present, with no expectations or remorse, with a new self, detached from his former one. However, as we see in the novel, *Snowman* believes “he’s humanoid, he’s hominid, he’s an aberration, he’s

⁴¹ The scrap is a reference to some verses from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

⁴² See Davis’s “‘A White Illusion of a Man’: Snowman, Survival and Speculation in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*” (2007).

abominable; he'd be legendary, if there were anyone left to relate legends" (OC p. 307). In a post-human phase of history, he exchanges his position with the animals and the Crakers; whereas they represent the regular beings, he is now the monster, the dissimilar creature. Moreover, *Snowman* may be also a reference to the dummy made of snow.

Maybe he's not the Abominable Snowman after all. Maybe he's the other kind of snowman, the grinning dope set up as a joke and pushed down as an entertainment, his pebble smile and carrot nose an invitation to mockery and abuse. Maybe that's the real him, the last *Homo sapiens* – a white illusion of a man, here today, gone tomorrow, so easily shoved over, left to melt in the sun, getting thinner and thinner until he liquefies and trickles away altogether (OC p. 224-225).

Furthermore, in the time of the Compounds, going outside was a death sentence for many reasons; one of them was because of the meteorological conditions. It was no longer possible to distinguish between the seasons of the year because of global warming. However, this situation is even worse for Snowman now, into the wild, where there is no air-conditioning or any other device to avoid the hot weather. "Noon is the worst, with its glare and humidity. At about eleven o'clock Snowman retreats back into the forest, out of sight of the sea altogether, because the evil rays bounce off the water and get at him even if he's protected from the sky, and then he reddens and blisters" (OC p. 37). There are also the rainstorms every day. "He awakes to thunder and a sudden wind: the afternoon storm is upon him. [...] Sometimes there are hailstones as big as golf balls, but the forest canopy slows their fall" (OC p. 44). Considering this wilderness scenario, *Snowman* is also an ironic way to refer to an element that no longer exists in that overheated place, snow. (We have to admit that the image of a "Snowman" living on a beach – whether the cryptic creature of the legend or the dummy with the carrot nose – is something at least strange.)

According to Earl Ingersoll (2009, p. 112), Snowman "may be the most recent in a long line of fictional characters representing The Last Man. And as a Crusoe-figure thrown back on his ingenuity in exploiting the materials at hand to survive, Snowman also draws on the recent obsession in popular culture with The Survivor". He is then a castaway tragic figure caught in a world of debris, scavenging for food and haunted by memories. The recollections of the past, mainly those related to Oryx, contribute to his new embodiment, because there cannot be progress without regression. "Like an exile he is in that liminal condition between longing and belonging. [...] He is in a state of suspension between two dimensions: a past he cannot recover and a future which is unimaginable. As a liminal figure he is in a state of

suspended time [...]” (RAO, 2006, p. 109-110). At first, his only salvation is his power with words, which has a sort of reassuring effect. Being a words person still lacks any practical application, but it is something at least comfortable insofar as Snowman, as well as other Atwood’s central characters, suffers from a compulsion to narrativize.

In the post-catastrophe world he finds himself in a vertigo of sense which tries to such him in and from which he is constantly trying to escape. He feels as if he is on the border of a cliff above a precipice where it would be too dangerous to look down. Yet unpredictably, words also preserve their meaning at times and allow Snowman to tell, remember, think over his story, on how he got where he is now, in the narrative present. Words are also a salvation, a way to remind him that he is still human and alive; they become like stones fastened to his body in order to prevent him from falling down into the abyss of non-sense (RAO, 2006, p. 111).

Snowman prefers to live on the top of a tree. Thus, his detachment has to do with geography, but on a larger scale, with his conscience. Isolation is a way of escaping from a world to which he does not belong anymore, and being alone becomes compulsory in order to recover. The character’s displacement before, but especially after the plague, impedes any rooting and leads him to be an eternal errant being. Although his memories can mean a step forward, at the same time, they prevent him from being in contact with other creatures and facing a new life, constructing new memories. As *The Last Man on Earth*, blaming Crake for the destruction, Snowman closes himself, because, initially, he cannot see in the Crakers a real opportunity of communication, just a joke of destiny. The fact that he talks to them sometimes does not mean that he is involved in social interaction. He refuses, or just does not understand his position as the last survivor. He does not assume that the maintenance of civilization depends on his willingness to continue his life and to teach the creatures that remain in that landscape. He talks to the humanoids because he had promised Oryx not to abandon them, not because he wants to, since his total apathy and lunacy make him to desire to be alone until death. Snowman seems to feel comfortable in this invisible human position, almost enjoying the status of monster that he attributes to himself.

However, after this denial phase, Snowman finally accepts a more direct contact with the humanoids, because, after all, what remains in that wasteland are people and their ability to communicate. He also feels compelled to protect the benign tribe, because he had promised Oryx to do so. Moreover, he does it for other reasons: he somehow needs someone to listen to him and he takes the opportunity to have his revenge against Crake. Crake would have hated the job he was doing with his Paradise models. For this reason, Snowman gives continuity to

his mythological stories, presenting Oryx and Crake as kinds of deities.⁴³ He becomes then a prophet and mythographer; he even has fun by doing it.

Yet the psychological need to talk and to tell, to remember and to imagine (all the things associated with the narrative impulse) remains in Snowman. He talks to the Crakers, though in his public capacity as Crake's prophet, improvising a version of the Genesis myth with Crake as God creator and Oryx as Earth Mother [...]. Through storytelling he teaches the Crakers the rudiments of symbolic thinking. And the Crakers love his stories, which makes us wonder if the primitive human brain is hard-wired not just for dreaming and singing as Crake had discovered, but for narrative as well (HOWELLS, 2006, p. 171).

The green-eyed children of Crake “have been engineered to possess unusual genetic features and to lack the emotional complexities of humans” (STEIN, 2010, p. 143). However, even engineered with such characteristics, the Crakers start to ask for origin stories and to develop symbols and rituals, a fact that Crake could not expect. “They're up to something though, something Crake didn't anticipate: they're conversing with the invisible, they've developed reverence. Good for them, thinks Snowman. He likes it when Crake is proved wrong” (OC p. 157). What would have annoyed Crake even more is the episode in which they make a scarecrowlike effigy of Snowman, since he has tried very hard to prevent the quasi-humans from developing symbolic thinking. These events only prove that the Crakers are as able to have emotions, needs and vulnerabilities as any human being. And so they can follow the footsteps of Snowman, learning and valuing the old things that will be necessary in a devastated landscape where science does not take place any longer. Snowman “sees himself as a kind of human lexicon, the last repository of a language that will vanish when he dies” (OC p. 154), then, whether he likes it or not, he needs to pass on all his knowledge.

Furthermore, considering that the Paradise models cannot avoid myths and stories – despite the fact that they have been projected not to have creativity –, they possibly represent a last hope, a last chance for Earth to continue existing. And, along with Snowman and the Crakers, it seems that we, as readers, are back once more to a storytelling primitive campfire. We have, therefore, the conservancy of language once Snowman becomes its guardian. He is then the savior of narrative – the stories themselves, like the books he used to save in the past

⁴³ We have, therefore, an intricate meaning for the title of the novel. First, Oryx and Crake are a reference to extinct animals in the story; secondly, they are the nicknames of two important characters; and finally, when Snowman transforms them into deities, they bring us to God and Mother Nature. Like this, we have a cycle that begins with dead creatures, passing by their resurrection through the characters, and culminating in the death of these same characters – who are going to live again through the focalizer's memory.

– and of narration as well – the right of people to continue telling stories. What Crake did not foresee was the fact that the creatures were more human than he could possibly imagine, and that they would restart, along with Snowman, the ancient tradition of storytelling, conferring status to words over again.

Contradicting the vision that genetically modified organisms might be nothing less than monsters, the Crakers are peaceful vegetarians. They “establish a small, egalitarian community which is absent of any form of racism or hierarchy [...]. Besides, their herbivorous diet allows them to maintain a peaceful existence without the need for hunting or agriculture [...]” (JOHNSTON, 2012, p. 22). Also, “the art and rudimentary form of religion they have developed by the end of the narrative demonstrate their capacity for free will, negating any argument that the Crakers appear to be nothing more than automatons” (JOHNSTON, 2012, p. 22). For these reasons, “the deterministic notion that splicing human with animal DNA will necessarily produce a foreign, inhuman and essentially undesirable new species is invalidated by the congenial Crakers” (JOHNSTON, 2012, p. 26). A common question readers may ask themselves is about the possible harms these noble savages could do to the remaining humans. However, we could ask the opposite, “Do the surviving human beings [...] represent a dystopic threat to the tiny utopia of genetically modified, peaceful, and sexually harmonious New Humans that is set to replace them?” (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 93).

The great moment for Snowman in this phase of the story is his journey back to the Compounds, which is an unconscious search for the invisible. The function of the expedition is not only seeking food and supplies, but also confronting the past and acknowledging his responsibility in the events. “His wasteland journey leads him back to the heart of darkness where he has to confront his own skeletons in the closet, the bodies of Oryx and Crake [...]. In his crisis of moral realization he is forced to confront his own complicity in Crake’s genocidal Project [...]” (HOWELLS, 2006, p. 172). In addition, as Davis (2007, p. 7) points out, “of concern to all readings is Snowman’s responsibility to his situation: is he a victim of circumstance or architect of his own downfall?” Paradise is now a tomb, where Crake’s remains are scattered on the ground. “Best friends from school-days, later business partners and rivals in love, betrayers and betrayed, murderers both, and finally the dead and the living dead [...]” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 176). As a living dead, Snowman “carries the mark of his moral myopia with him into the post-human world, for his sunglasses are missing one lens” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 176). However, along the expedition in the Compounds, he finds a new pair of sunglasses, this time with the two lenses. “He’s grateful for his new two-eyed

sunglasses” (OC p. 283). This episode, therefore, symbolizes a change, since Snowman is not “blind” anymore. Now he has two eyes (or four, if we consider the view the Crakers have about him, with two skins because of the clothes and three eyes because of the previous broken glasses).

In consonance with Snowman’s new vision is his decision to go back to the Crakers, something the reader cannot anticipate. From the moment that he decides to return to his former home, the world of the Compounds, the reader is led to believe that he is never coming back to the seashore. However, the beach indeed became his home, and he does return. Shortly after his comeback, he is welcome by the Crakers and soon discovers that other humans are around, and then he has another mission: try to find these people and see whether they represent a threat or not. Snowman “emerges as a morally responsible man and the novel’s unlikely hero, who regards the prospect of entering again into human relationships with a kind of fearful excitement” (HOWELLS, 2006, p. 169). Taking into account that the novel is open-ended, as Howells (2006, p. 173) also states, “what we think Snowman will do and what the others might do depends on how we read the complexities of human nature [...]”. Thus, “should his approach to the strangers be that of peacemaker, or negotiator, or killer?” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 183). For the author, the answer to this question is “left tantalizingly open to the reader’s speculation at ‘zero hour’ as Jimmy/Snowman steps forward into the future and out of the novel” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 183). Indeed, at the end of the novel, the reader is not able to decide whether the strangers represent a threat and what Snowman is going to do. Snowman “faces not only the real pain in his foot and the possibility of his near death but also the question of choice, moral responsibility and the chance of entering again into human relationships. By finding out that there are more people alive, he is pushed into the three-dimensional reality and ‘zero hour’ time again” (LABUDOVIĆ, 2010, p. 141).

The watch is an important object in the narrative. Both the opening and the ending of the novel use the object as a sort of symbol to demonstrate the irrelevance of official time. As the story is open-ended, we can perceive a certain sense of circularity, as if the protagonist were trapped in a cycle. The opening of the last chapter is itself a sort of reprise of the novel’s first chapter. Initially, they seem to bring exactly the same sequence of text, but they do not. Nevertheless, the repetition of the same pattern of text indicates the circularity of the narrative. The zero hour at the very beginning of the novel might be seen as the end of history, since the reader was just presented to the post-catastrophe scenario, as if the point in

which time stops to be counted were revealing the inexorable oncoming of the end. It is like being at a place after the end. Moreover, the possibility of reverting time, not starting from the origin, but by subtraction, starting from the end, can be applied to the narrative, since it begins by presenting the final events in the story: Snowman uselessly examining the hours. The zero hour at the end of the novel, on the other hand, might be interpreted as a moment for decisive action, that is, the need for a new beginning.

This is in consonance with the meaning of the word *apocalypse*, which does not imply necessarily an end, but a moment of revelation. And finding other human beings who survived the epidemic was certainly a revelation for Snowman. In addition, despite the fact that its original meaning points to a different notion, another word used with a negative connotation today is *catastrophe*. “The word ‘catastrophe’ is from the Greek and it means ‘to turn upside down.’ It was originally used to describe the denouement, or climactic end, of a dramatic presentation and it could, of course, be either happy or sad in nature” (ASIMOV, 1979, p. 13). Since in dramatic presentations the tragic mode is usually more remarkable than the comic one, the negative meaning of *catastrophe* became more notorious. Moreover, as we can see in Garrard (2012, p. 95), “the drama of apocalypse is shaped by a ‘frame of acceptance’ that may either be ‘comic’ or ‘tragic’”. Accordingly, “if time is framed by tragedy as predetermined and epochal, always careering towards some final, catastrophic conclusion, comic time is open-ended and episodic” (GARRARD, 2012, p. 95). As an example of the tragic mode, we have Malthusian scenarios. Also, the author affirms that “the rhetoric of catastrophe tends to ‘produce’ the crisis it describes, as in the Malthusian depiction of extreme poverty as ‘famine’” (GARRARD, 2012, p. 114). In this sense, *Oryx and Crake* has more to do with comic apocalyptic narratives, those narratives that functionally inform the reader, without causing panic or extreme reactions towards the possibility of an end. The novel works, therefore, in the comic mode.

In the introduction of this thesis, I quoted Susan Sontag’s (1986) declaration about science fiction movies, when she states that the core of a good science fiction film is the aesthetics and imagery of destruction. Accordingly, Mick Broderick (1993, electronic information) affirms that “by necessity and definition, the apocalyptic imagination requires an imagination of disaster. Armageddon becomes an apocalyptic *raison d’être*: the forces of good and evil are destined to battle each other”. However, Broderick (1993) also defends that an imagination of disaster requires an imagination of *survival* as well. In his opinion, “[...] the sub-genre of SF cinema which have entertained visions of nuclear Armageddon concerns

itself primarily with *survival* as its dominant discursive mode” (BRODERICK, 1993, electronic information). Therefore, “[...] a discernable shift away from an imagination of disaster toward one of survival is evident” (BRODERICK, 1993, electronic information). Of course, both authors are referring to the cinema, but I consider their collocations valid because I believe they can be applied to other contexts. One of the ideas behind *Oryx and Crake* is precisely an imagination of disaster being overcome by an imagination of survival – and who knows Atwood, even just a little, also knows that survival is an essential topic in her fiction. All this has to do with the central idea of this entire research: Armageddon as a moment of inception, that is, by no means a final point in the journey.

From the Hebrew *Har Megiddo*, the term *Armageddon*, in the Book of Revelation, points to a place, it is a reference to a “hill of fruits; mountain of Megiddo” (BIBLE, 1769, electronic information). This is a symbolic place where the great battle shall be fought, “the scene of the final conflict between Christ and Antichrist” (BIBLE, 1769, electronic information). As a dictionary entry, *Armageddon* appears as “1 (in the Bible) a battle between good and evil at the end of the world. 2 a terrible war that could destroy the world” (HORNBY, 2008, p. 69). The general usage, therefore, points to a notion of a final battle, any end-of-the-world situation. Thus, disregarding the original idea of a locus, this research also makes use of the word in a sense of end. Nonetheless, as I said at the beginning of this thesis, in a twenty-first century context, words like *Hecatombe*, *Armageddon*, and *Apocalypse* – and now we can add *Catastrophe* to the list – do not denote necessarily an end, but a development model collapsing, a metaphor for something else, a paradigm shift.

According to Garrard (2012), a blank apocalypse is an *eschaton* without a utopia to follow. This is certainly not the case of *Oryx and Crake*. Even though the novel is open-ended, its circularity points to a resumption for the human race – or at least to a new beginning with the green-eyed children of Crake as protagonists of history. In the last pages of the novel, the struggle has only begun, since we do not know what is going to happen with Snowman once, and if, he decides to confront the others of his kind. Since every ending presupposes a new beginning, Armageddon, in the sense of a final battle, has indeed only begun. Furthermore, Armageddon has only begun because we have other two novels in which Atwood’s apocalyptic utopian narrative continues to unfold, *The Year of the Flood* (2009)

and *MaddAddam* (2013), which may suggest the safeguard of the future of humanity within the bounds of the novels.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Considering *MaddAddam* trilogy, another “beginning” was announced just before the final adjustments of this thesis: Darren Aronofsky is going to adapt Atwood’s book trilogy as an HBO series. “HBO has put in development drama series *MaddAddam*, executive produced by Oscar-nominated *Black Swan* helmer Darren Aronofsky through his Protozoa Pictures banner. The project, based on Margaret Atwood’s book trilogy *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013), is being developed as a potential directing vehicle for Aronofsky. *MaddAddam* marks the first project to come out of the three-year first-look deal the filmmaker and his Protozoa Pictures inked with HBO in January” (ANDREEVA, 2014).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Margaret Atwood has been considered for the Nobel Prize in Literature many times, including in 2013, when her fellow citizen, Alice Munro, won the prize. It is possible that this fact has increased Atwood's chances to win on a future occasion. According to Macpherson (2010, p. 15), Atwood sells "and sells well – and the commercial aspect of celebrity cannot be overestimated. Moreover, the very fact that Atwood can package and sell her collected book reviews and occasional writing – work that is really only of interest because of its connection to Atwood-as-author – suggests just how much force she has in the literary (and business) world". Once I started my research on her oeuvre, I immediately noticed her force and influence in the literary field⁴⁵ – and even beyond. In an attempt to understand the successful reception of *Oryx and Crake*, which, at that time, was one of her most recent novels published, I came up with the primary idea that resulted in this thesis. I can say now that exploring this particular novel was a giant challenge, but also a source of entertainment.

In general terms, *Oryx and Crake* is described as a cautionary tale about genetic engineering and the environment or as an apocalyptic novel that functions both as literary fiction and social criticism. However, there are other labels in contention, such as anti-utopian novel, adventure or castaway romance, speculative or science fiction novel, satirical novel, postmodern dystopia, etc. For the purposes of this research, we can even consider calling it an (apocalyptic) *ustopian novel*. But, apart from the several designations, the novel is for sure a great literary achievement. By bringing different topics like genetic engineering and bioethics, bioterrorism, radical climate changes, dwindling resources, endangered species, sexploitation, consumerism, alienation and violence, manipulation and power, the novel constructs a great apocalyptic scenario like those that seem to proliferate in popular culture. Besides being compared to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the novel still is associated with works like Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (perhaps in the sense that Jimmy/Snowman's tale may be a fabrication). But, of course, the intertextual relations between *Oryx and Crake* and previous literary works are numerous – not to mention other media.

⁴⁵ Atwood's influence can be felt too in her effort to keep in touch with her readers, whether through her website, interviews on YouTube, or her account on Twitter.

According to Slavoj Žižek (2011, p. x), our “global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point” whose “‘four riders of the apocalypse’ are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions”. To a certain extent, all of these issues appear in *Oryx and Crake*, which makes the novel an appropriate commentary on contemporary anxieties of society. Thus, in addition to being a great literary achievement, it is a valuable piece of social criticism. I confess that I am still not sure if we can consider the latest novels by Atwood as postmodern, but, in any case, “postmodern literature situates itself squarely in the context of its own reading and writing as social and ideological actualities” (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 10) – which complements the interpretation of the novel as social criticism in consonance with Žižek’s statements.

Thinking about every chapter developed in this thesis, I may say that the first was developed to show: a) an overview of Atwood, since she was a new figure to me and probably to eventual readers who might be in contact with this text; b) a discussion about genres, in order to prove that *Oryx and Crake* can be interpreted within the bounds of science fiction, speculative fiction, and apocalyptic fiction (as well as other genres that might eventually pop up); c) a combination of utopia and dystopia, viewed by me as moods inside the narrative – which was an interesting debate for me, since I had the opportunity to work with the new concept of *ustopia*. In addition to presenting a multifaceted author, the first chapter, therefore, proposed crossovers and a blurring of boundaries for many concepts, something I am glad to have had the opportunity to do, since it deconstructs things a little, putting in doubt some ideas we took as unshakable. After all, nothing can be stanch in literature, since we deal with an abstract matter, open to many particular interpretations. Of course, the insistence on examining fictional genres seems strange when we are trying to prove that genres are all mixed up and boundaries are meaningless. However, in order to deconstruct something, we should construct it first.

The second chapter explored the novel according to the past of the narrative, the pre-catastrophe scenario, in which the social design may be read as a ustopian imagination, combining utopian and dystopian qualities, whether in terms of scientific breakthroughs, extreme advances in technology or even in terms of ambiguous constructions of characters, for instance. We have then a “brave postmodern world” dominated by “Crakenstein”, the trickster-scientist who heads a society split into scientific and humanistic discourses – social

imbalance that certainly contributes to announce a disaster. We also explored the possibility that the story takes place in the United States, which grants a further meaning to the term *ustopia*. Finally, what calls attention in this specific chapter is how (almost) everything is worthy of doublethink, that is, susceptible to positive and negative readings – Atwood herself affirms that novels are in general ambiguous and multifaceted. “[...] how can you define a ‘good’ society as opposed to a ‘bad’ one if you see good and bad as aspects of the same thing?” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 93). Moreover, the possible associations we can establish to our own social design are at least unsettling. In other words, the novel does not necessarily imply a moral tale or clairvoyant warning – as many scholars and critics have been sustaining – but a portrait of society that has some contemporary application.

The third chapter, on the other hand, explores the present of the narrative, through which the novel opens. As Atwood mentions elsewhere, this is not a dystopia, since in this post-catastrophe scenario there are not enough people left to comprise a society, what is left instead is a wasteland where there are only remnants of a social organization that no longer exists. However, as well as dystopias, apocalyptic themes might raise disturbing questions about our present. Snowman’s saga throughout the seashore, whether in the company of the quasi-humans or alone, makes us consider how living another life after an “end” would be, how to start everything from a “zero hour” would be. Ironically, after the catastrophe, when science does not take place anymore, it is a neurotypical who survives and incorporates “the last repository of a language”. So, “even as Atwood asks readers of *Oryx and Crake* to speculate about the disastrous prospects that may confront humanity in the not-so-distant future, she also, in a gesture true to most apocalyptic fiction, offers in the closure of her novel a surprising revelation of belief in a future of humankind” (BOSCO, 2010, p. 171).

With the two times in the narrative, it seems that we have two different stories, one carried by Crake, and the other carried by Jimmy/Snowman. Thus, the novel would have another double, one character predominating in the past while the other predominates in the present. In this sense, the past and the present of the narrative complement each other – a structure that resembles the Old and New Testaments. The first dimension is somehow responsible for the existence of the second, and the second sheds lights on the first. Then we see the connection between *ustopia* and Armageddon. Both dimensions confer artistic expression to the profound anxieties of contemporary men. Also, both are born out of crisis and can make us reevaluate some social, political, ethical, and aesthetical preoccupations of our age. What do representations of *ustopia* and apocalypse reveal about our contemporary

culture, fears and anxieties towards the future? Why are they themes so prolific nowadays – perhaps in a similar proportion to gothic images? Although man has always been fascinated by the idea of the end of the world, or a new beginning, right now catastrophe and gloomy alternate versions of our history are very much in fashion. These themes continue to proliferate in popular culture and to challenge our imagination simply because we need them to clarify our empirical world and its political life. Literature makes possible a wider projection and a deep understanding on complex issues, as is the case of *ustopia* and *Armageddon*, promoting even optimistic readings about so spectral contents. As Atwood (2011, p. 211) exemplifies, “we are not only what we do, we are also what we imagine. Perhaps, by imagining mad scientists and then letting them do their worst within the boundaries of our fictions, we hope to keep the real ones sane”.

This research on *Oryx and Crake* came to finish with a positive perspective of the novel. First, because we can go further and propose another significance to the term *ustopia*. Besides being a mixture of utopia and dystopia as well as a possible veiled criticism on the United States, it could mean something more sensitive: *ustopia*, from the Greek *topos* ‘place’ and the English *us* ‘we’ (or ‘our’). We have then a *topos* for *us*, our own place, which means that such a place can be whatever we long for. Good or bad or both, it does not matter; it is up to us to decide in which kind of realm we want to live. The same holds true in regards to *Armageddon*, which does not have to be a negative and decisive battle. *Armageddon* is then a symbolic word that refers to our constant daily struggles, and that is why *Armageddon* has only begun, both within Atwood’s trilogy and outside its pages. As the epigraph of this thesis states, “when art becomes apocalyptic, it reveals”, the art explored here in the form of an apocalyptic literary text showed itself as an absolute revelation, within its own domains and even beyond.

Through the study of *Oryx and Crake*, this thesis did manage to demonstrate several things, such as the interpenetration of science fiction, speculative fiction, apocalyptic fiction, utopia, and dystopia – and how representative of that Atwood’s work is. Furthermore, the thesis indicated that the concept of *ustopia* has the potential to be established as a new fictional genre in the future. Since the proposition of *ustopia* suggests the combination of utopia and dystopia, as well as acknowledges that most utopian and dystopian realities are only perceived as such due to the point of view of the narration and the reader’s interpretation, it seems natural that it might become a useful notion from now on. It is evident, therefore, that not only *Armageddon* has begun, but also any investigation on *ustopia*.

The examination of several concepts all together has to do with the fact that *Oryx and Crake* is too ample to be reduced to only one frame of reference or theoretical line – as well as its author, as I have commented throughout the text. The novel enables so many interesting readings, and from different angles, that trying to restrict its multiple content would be a sort of heresy. In addition, I was much helped by the valuable insights Margaret Atwood could provide as literary critic, theorist, and commentator. In the long run, Atwood became my primary source, mainly through the books *Writing with Intent* and *In Other Worlds*, works worth reading not just due to their contents, but also due to the entertainment they are able to offer to the reader. Recently, after a declaration about the original plans she had in regards to some characters in *Harry Potter*, J. K. Rowling was blamed by her fans for having said too much. People did not like when she revealed that the story was not supposed to be like that. This means that some fans disapprove literary writers who give too many clues about the characters and the plot. I had the same impression when I first read Atwood's texts about her own fiction. But then I realized that she was not there intending to dictate the rules, she was actually having fun by exploring her own fiction from the other side. On one occasion, I was thrilled when she was about to answer a very difficult question revolving the universe of *Oryx and Crake*, when she simply said, "As it is always the reader rather than the writer who has the last word about any book, I leave that to you" (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 93). For this reason, she has my total respect and admiration.

A strange thing to confess in the end of a thesis is that there is no ending whatsoever. Years of research provide many issues to ponder, and to acknowledge that many things must stay out in order to let others in is a very difficult learning process. With time, we understand that it is impossible to consider every single approach to the topic we develop, and that a book like *Oryx and Crake* will maybe never stop saying something important to people. At a certain point, though, it is necessary to stop writing or talking about such book and let it show its own words by itself, in its own way. This is my last page for now, but this certainly neither represents a final or decisive interpretation of the novel nor a comprehensive text that says all the things I have in my mind at the moment. Further, from reviews, articles and essays to books, theses and dissertations, there is a considerable number of research on Margaret Atwood's work around the globe. However, not many take place in Brazil. Therefore, I hope this research, only one more among so many others that celebrate the author's oeuvre, can be helpful to academic readers in general, but mostly to our country and university, where Atwood has not yet found a noteworthy space in literary studies.

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