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## Manipulation and dystopia in Oryx and Crake

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# Manipulation and dystopia in *Oryx and Crake*

**Nom : SEVERAC  
Prénom : Adeline**

UFR DE LANGUES ETRANGERES

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Mémoire de master 1 recherche - 12 crédits – Etudes Anglophones

Spécialité ou Parcours : PLC

Sous la direction de Catherine DELMAS

Année universitaire 2011-2012





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Ce mémoire s'intéresse à l'œuvre de Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*. Il a pour but de le définir comme un héritier du genre contre-utopique, tout en montrant cependant sa spécificité par rapport à d'autres œuvres contre-utopiques plus connues comme celles d'Orwell, Huxley ou Zamyatin. En revendiquant le modèle de la « speculative fiction », Margaret Atwood transcende la tradition en proposant une œuvre dont chaque élément est rattaché de près ou de loin au réel. Le deuxième élément d'analyse dominant dans ce mémoire est la manipulation, étudiée ici sous ses différentes facettes : manipulation génétique, manipulation du langage, manipulation dans les relations et au cœur même de la société.

Ce travail a donc pour ambition de montrer non seulement en quoi *Oryx and Crake* s'inscrit dans la tradition de l'anti-utopie, mais aussi de le définir comme une œuvre novatrice, dont la vraisemblance et la pertinence amènent le lecteur à un constat dérangeant sur notre société moderne afin de le faire réfléchir sur le monde qui l'entoure.

This dissertation focuses on Margaret Atwood's work *Oryx and Crake*. Its aim is to define the book as a heir to the dystopian genre, yet showing its specificity with regard to other more well-known dystopian works, such as Orwell's, Huxley's or Zamyatin's. Claiming her work to be a "speculative fiction", Margaret Atwood transcends the tradition by writing a work in which each aspect is connected with varying degrees to reality. The second point of analysis at stake in this dissertation is the manipulation, studied through different angles: the genetic manipulation, the manipulation of language, the manipulation in the relationships and the manipulation at the heart of the society itself.

The purpose of this work is therefore to show not only how *Oryx and Crake* is part of the dystopian tradition, but also to define it as an innovative book, whose impact on the reader, because of its verisimilitude and accuracy, is to give a disturbing assessment of our modern society to him, in order to make him question the world that surrounds him.

**Mots-clés :**

Margaret Atwood – *Oryx and Crake* – Contre-utopie - Manipulation

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## Introduction

The need for utopia has been felt right since society and civilization themselves came to exist. If the first well-known and claimed utopia is very often considered as *Utopia*, by Thomas More, the concept in itself goes back to Greco-Roman writings, by Homer, Plato, Aristophanes, then Ovid or Virgil, to mention only a few of them.<sup>1</sup> From that acknowledgement it could very likely be argued that utopia as a concept has, since people live in community and transferred their imagination into fiction, been a necessary outlet for people.

One of the first modern examples of utopia, and more importantly the first example that claims itself as being a utopia (hence the title) is, previously mentioned, *Utopia*, by Thomas More, depicting an ideal society on an imaginary island. He created the word utopia as a Greek neologism, from u (negation) and topos (place), meaning “no place”: somewhere that actually does not exist. The so-called novel was the very first occurrence of utopia as such and it shows the main feature of the concept: utopia is an ideal that is assumed not to exist, and which yet imagines a perfect society in which the failures and vices of our own would be erased. Paul Ricoeur describes utopia as having both a positive and a negative side, both a pathologic and a constitutive dimension. (Ricoeur 17). As it is assumed to be a non-existing concept, utopia allows the writer to say more than he usually could: he can go beyond the criteria of credibility and imagines a totally fantasist world. Yet the purpose of utopia remains very clearly rooted in the period in which it is written: according to Ricoeur, utopia claims for being recognized as such, and by representing a “nowhere”, it helps creating a totally new and free space in which we can think upon ourselves (Ricoeur 35).

The fact that utopia is clearly rooted in the society in which it is written, the fact that the writer is belonging to this society and reacting to it, to its darkest aspects in order to criticize them and try to find a way to overcome them, may explain the fierce interest writers have found in it from Thomas More’s *Utopia* on, and how the concept became more and more a literary genre on its own, with specific features, and how it evolved in a few centuries.

Indeed, utopia being in itself a whole concept and a set of thoughts, a way of seeing the world in a different manner and to question it, it nevertheless strongly belongs to the literary field. If Thomas More used *Utopia* partly in order to express his feelings towards

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<sup>1</sup> Gabel, Joseph. “Utopia”. <http://www.universalis-edu.com/encyclopedie/utopie/>. Accessed 22 May 2012.

Henry VIII's decision to break from the Catholic Church and the Papal authority, under the cover of the imaginary island of Utopia, further writers found in this the way to express by turn their own grieves towards the society to which they belonged and its flaws. Indeed, later on, writers, thinkers and philosophers, notably socialist thinkers from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, claimed themselves as writing utopias (as Saint Simon, or more obviously Fourier in France, but also Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, reacting to many aspects of the Victorian society). Later on, 20<sup>th</sup> century writers used more and more this literary genre, as a way to express their fears and worries about the totalitarian raise in European countries.

Yet, utopia became more and more overwhelmed by dystopia; therefore there we have to make a clear distinction between these examples of utopia: writings promoting an ideal society, constructed around the virtues dear to the writers, and freed from the vices they see in their own world, and the genre of the dystopia, directly linked with utopia but using the opposite device: imagining a society rooted in our own, but emphasizing its more striking failures. Lee Briscoe Thompson, when speaking about Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, pointed out this distinction: "Utopias imagine positive future societies which will have solved the problems of our current flawed world, while dystopias extend certain negative contemporary conditions to even grimmer future extremes. In either mode, the reader obviously must see clearly the connection between present reality and fictional future if the vision is to have power and point." (Thompson 19). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while utopias were an outlet for their writers from the totalitarian societies surrounding them and the conflicts, the tensions of the two World Wars, the emergence of concentration camps, the control of thoughts, restrictions of individual liberties and the growing fear of the other and suspicion resulting from them, dystopias precisely found inspiration in these and emphasized them to imagine and create even more totalitarian, alienating societies. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (and its utopian counterpart *Island*), Orwell's *1984* written in 1948 after the two world wars and having spent time in Spain during its civil War, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, written in response to the Russian Revolutions and his experience in World War I, are as many examples of the increasing development of dystopias in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to contemporary issues. In a more contemporary area, utopia and dystopia tend to reach a broader audience, from the values they vehicle and the pointing out of our flaws, respectively.

A prolific writer of poetry, novels and literary criticism, Margaret Atwood is a major figure of 20th century Canadian writings. Having obtained credibility and respect as a writer and

as an academic, she nevertheless reached a broader audience only with her first dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1987), in which she depicted a futurist theocratic totalitarianism ("For Atwood *The Handmaid's Tale* was, in booksellers' terminology, a 'breakthrough' into larger reading markets, a popular success that made Atwood, in a word, famous." (Thompson 13). In this society, named Gilead, women are categorized according to their ability for reproducing. The novel deals with the motifs of oppressive power, religious conservatism, women's place in society, and, to some extent, the representation of sexuality.

It seemed important to have a short focus on *The Handmaid's Tale* before moving forward to *Oryx and Crake*, as *The Handmaid's Tale* is the first world-wide-extent writing by Margaret Atwood, a dystopia based on a not-so-far future and deeply rooted in features of the writer's society. Both novels share the same framework, the same grounds. They are both located in the United States, and represent a society based on distinctions, differentiation. They both find their inspiration in present-day features which they emphasize. In this regard, it should be noticed that Margaret Atwood insists on calling her work "speculative fiction" (instead of the "science fiction" labeling often given to *Oryx and Crake*), arguing that "Science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen."<sup>2</sup> This distinction seems to confirm the idea that the story she wrote is supposed to be plausible and possible; she insists on the verisimilitude of this dystopian society she describes.

*Oryx and Crake* can easily be considered as following the utopian heritage of previous works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of canons of literature such as *1984*, *Brave New World*, or *We*. Indeed, the world described is based on a strong power and a clearly-defined society with strict rules, in a not-so-far future, in a society constructed on a supposedly utopian model, which finally appears to be too extreme and in which the main character happens not to feel fit in, and begins to question the model he has always known. Jimmy, the main character of the novel, is represented from his early childhood to the time of the narration, in which we readers find him isolated, alone, in a place apparently almost totally destructed, with for only company "Crakers" (strange partly human-like creatures) and the animal species originally created and bred by the genetic innovations of the society he used to live in; this in a double narrative: on the one hand we have Snowman, struggling to

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<sup>2</sup> Potts, Robert. "Light in the wilderness".  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/apr/26/fiction.margaretatwood?INTCMP=SRCH>. Accessed 5 April 2012.

survive after a presumed apocalypse, and, through his memories, we have another narration featuring Jimmy, who is none other than Snowman as a child. The two narratives finally intertwine as the story goes on, letting us understand the steps and reasons why Snowman eventually happened to end up there, through the description of the society in which he used to live.

Indeed, the model of society described is predominantly based on manipulation, which we could interpret in various ways in the novel: the manipulation in the genetic field, the manipulation of words and the manipulation of minds. Then it really follows the pattern of the canons of the dystopian writings we previously mentioned: the main character, an anti-hero figure who until then had adapted to the environment in which he lived, begins to question his society, yet supposed to be based on a utopian model, because he does not manage to fit its ideals and begins to see its flaws and failures. This society is grounded on the desire of a world structured on improvement and uniformity, through manipulation as we just mentioned. This motif therefore allows Margaret Atwood to question our nowadays society through her fiction, being as she claims a “speculative fiction”, therefore likely to happen in a close future.

If *Oryx and Crake* does not seem to be at first sight an absolutely innovative dystopia, having used some of the same patterns in her previous *The Handmaid's Tale*, or containing the same constitutive elements we may find in canons of dystopian literature; it is nevertheless very interesting to focus on the structure of the story and the devices used by Margaret Atwood, the way she constructed her fiction and the way she used manipulation as a central feature of her work. *Oryx and Crake* is not only another example of dystopia: from a society based on manipulation, on the desire to improve human life and humanity, she constructs a terrible reality which does not seem so far from ours, and through “speculative fiction”, she brings us to wonder about our own society and its vices, about our own vices, our own humanity and our responsibility as human beings. From the description of a hierarchical, purified society in which consumerism helps the standardization of people, the manipulation seems to surround Jimmy and be a central feature, concerning relationships between people, language and the genetic innovations; starting with a bleak assessment of Jimmy's society, Margaret Atwood eventually expects to strike the reader and to make him aware that the fiction she imagined was already underway in reality.

**PART I - THE PURSUIT OF PERFECTION, OF A CLEANSED AND  
HIERARCHICAL SOCIETY, THROUGH THE DESIRE FOR  
IMPROVEMENT**

*Oryx and Crake* follows the tradition of 20th century dystopias such as Orwell's, Zamyatin's Huxley's or Bradbury's, insofar as it features a society pursuing an ideal of perfection, through every sort of cleansing: the differentiation of people, categorization, and the broad acceptance of the loss of private life, and of increasing surveillance, in the name of improvement "for the greater good". The dystopian writings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are most of the time based on an oppressive – if not totalitarian – power with at its head an invisible, indistinct figure. If this specific aspect is not emphasized in *Oryx and Crake*, never mentioning a strong political power as such – nevertheless silently existing in every aspect of this society – yet the most striking characteristics of this society are its fundamental hierarchy, its anesthesia of any subversive feelings, and the legitimation of all the devices used to reach an always more perfect society: dystopia is apparent through the actual desire for an utopia which is capable of any device to reach its aim.

## **1 – The desire for a well-defined society: social distinctions and organization into a hierarchy**

One of the clearest aspects of the society pictured in *Oryx and Crake* is its clear structuration: people are all categorized, and separated according to norms that are neither questionable, nor even questioned.

This categorization is mainly linked to people's skills, and their progression at work. In the novel, we stay mainly focused on one side of this society: the biologic domain, the research related to it and the employment of people in that field. People working on genetic modification and scientific improvements, people with mathematic, scientific skills seem to be considered as the top of the social ladder, according to the importance given to scientific developments. The distinction is pushed as far as a clear rejection of the people who do not fit the standards of the society: Jimmy, as a "middle-range student" who is no genius in bio- or math-fields, and studies words and language at Martha Graham University, is considered as a failure: "the system has filed him among the rejects, and what he was studying was considered – at the decision making levels of real power – an archaic waste of time." (229). Jimmy's father, working in the genetic field, more specifically with "pigoons", in order to make them produce five to six kidneys for human transplantation, seems to be much valued as he gets headhunted by a branch of the company he works for, "NooSkins", therefore obtaining a promotion. The advantages and

consequences linked with this promotion give us an idea of the way the system works: the more people are valued as to their skills in the genetic field, the more gifted, materially speaking, they become. Indeed, with the promotion, the family has to move into a “Compound”, the “OrganInc Compound” (from the name of the corporation employing Jimmy’s father), with a better house as a result, but also another school for Jimmy, with a better level.

The organization of people into a hierarchy is emphasized by this separation in terms of space, which is itself heightened by “high walls around the houses” in the “pleeblands”. This distinction and clear separation between people is a common trait of dystopian literature: if we compare it with Orwell’s *1984*, we will remember that Winston Smith has a definite place in society, and that everyone has his own specific role to play (Winston works in the Ministry of Truth because he has a specific role to play in it, but he cannot have access to other Departments such as the Ministry of Love). In the same idea, in the previous dystopian fiction by Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the distinction is also clearly defined between people, and established upon specific skills: women’s fertility. In the Republic of Gilead, you are considered differently if you are a fertile woman, who can be pregnant (those are the Handmaids, such as the main character Offred), the women who are infertile but who are wealthy, and who are then Wives, and the others, who can neither be pregnant nor qualify to be Wives: the Marthas. Margaret Atwood follows the dystopian tradition of the caste system. In *Oryx and Crake*, separation and differentiation are developed to such an extent that there seems to be no way for people to overcome the boundaries fixed for them by their situation in society. In the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, utopia is defined, in its relationship with architecture, as “le désir d’arrêter le temps, de figer l’histoire, que ce soit au moyen de la présence persistante du monument ou grâce à une organisation sociale parfaite”<sup>3</sup>; this wish to create a perfect spatial organization is exactly what we can find in dystopias, and the social situation in *Oryx and Crake* precisely fits this definition. The spatial differentiation also means, as just explained, different living conditions, and different security, wealth or educational aspects. The separation of people is based on social relations, defining a new specific order for society (“Ce rapprochement [entre architecture et utopie] fonctionne également sur un autre plan, en retrait de l’organisation générale de la société: celui de la recherche de

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<sup>3</sup> Gabel, Joseph. “Utopia”. <http://www.universalis-edu.com/encyclopedie/utopie/>. Accessed 22 May 2012.

nouveaux rapports sociaux et familiaux. Comment repenser en effet la société sans s'interroger sur les transformations des relations entre groupes, familles et individus ?"<sup>4</sup>

The “pleeblands” are considered as lawless, as designed for people who do not deserve much more than a growling city considered as den for every possible vice and where people from the “Modules” or “Compounds” may sometimes come in order to enjoy themselves. They are directly referring to the poorest people in society (from the plebeians in Ancient Rome, being the people living out of the city, the poor citizens, as opposed to the patricians); above them are the “Modules”, where the middle class people, such as Jimmy’s family, live (before moving because of Jimmy’s father’s promotion). Finally, there are the “Compounds”, which are highly secured (security measures are heightened to such an extent that people cannot even move freely in or out of them, with “CorpSeCorps men” keeping a constant surveillance but also many material advantages.. The distinction is not only defined spatially speaking, but also this system is definite in everyone’s mind: there is no mention of any try to change things, to aim at any equality. Even at the world level, inequalities are striking and well-known, yet apparently irremovable. As a middle-class child, teenager, then young adult, Jimmy sees the world through the media such as television or websites, on which he can see the poverty of Third World countries, without being ever revolted by the striking inequalities with his own lifestyle and the country in which he lives (which is never named as such, but which, through different clues and mentions, is easily understood as being the United States). Sandy English, in an article from the World Socialist Web Site, points this out: “Social inequality is institutionalized. Most people in North America live in dingy communities called “pleeblands”, and hopeless poverty exists in other parts of the world”<sup>5</sup>. The fact that those inequalities are not even questioned may be linked with a disinterest from the part of people, due to their incapacity to question what surrounds them or to get outraged.

## **2 - An anesthetized, standardized and sanitized world**

Another motif of dystopias is, indeed, the shunning of people’s subversive feelings, of any kind of rebellion or just discontent. This might come from a general feeling of being under threat, from an oppressive and totalitarian power, but in the novel, the main cause for the

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<sup>4</sup> Gabel, Joseph. “Utopia”. <http://www.universalis-edu.com/encyclopedie/utopie/>. Accessed 22 May 2012.

<sup>5</sup> English, Sandy. “Is this a novel of genuine anguish?”. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/feb2005/atwo-f17.shtml>. Accessed 5 April 2012.



general lack of rebellion from the people living in it seems to be a general acceptance of what surrounds them, a non-questioning of the world they live in and of the decisions of their society. This general acceptance might be partly explained by a global assumption that they are only spectators of what happens around them, and by a constant exposition to images conveyed by the media: violence, pornography, the exemplification of the use of drugs, alcohol and of free sex, the cult of eternal beauty being part of it.

**a- The media and the broad acceptance of violence, vision of sexuality**

Indeed as we are acquainted with teenage-Jimmy and Crake, the description of their after-school occupations reflects the natural and broad exposition of people, even children, to violent or pornographic contents on the internet or simply television:

When they weren't playing games they'd surf the Net – drop in on old favourites, see what was new. They'd watch open-heart surgery in live time, or else the Noodie News, which was good for a few minutes because the people on it tried to pretend there was nothing unusual going on and studiously avoided looking at one another's jujubes.

Or they'd watch animal snuff sites, Felicia's Frog Squash and the like, though these quickly grew repetitious: one stomped frog, one cat being torn apart by hand, was much like another [...]

Or they might watch hedsoof.com, which played live coverage of executions in Asia. There they could see enemies of the people being topped with swords in someplace that looked like China, while thousands of spectators cheered. Or they could watch alibooboo.com, with various supposed thieves having their hands cut off and adulterers and lipstick-wearers being stoned to death by howling crowds, in dusty enclaves that purported to be in fundamentalist countries in the Middle East.

(94)

This excerpt concentrates the elements of violence we previously mentioned, broadcasting people's death, animal torturing, but also promoting an image of the world that does not even affect the viewers, presently Jimmy and Crake, who impassibly watch these programs without being moved. The overexposure of brutality, violence and suffering death seems to have anaesthetized the boys' feelings, letting them impervious to what it means. The websites the two boys visit are in the same vein: from the basic reality-show *At Home with Anna K.* featuring a young girl exposing her private life publicly, filmed from every possible angle in every possible situation (even and mostly in everyday trivial activities such as waxing) to "shortcircuit.com", "brainfrizz.com", "deathrowline.com", showing "electrocutions and lethal injections", or "nitee-nitee.com", an "assisted-suicide site". The

way death penalty is staged and watched by millions of people is another instance of the broadcasting of striking, psychologically violent images. To this violence we can also add the importance of voyeurism, from the constant immersion into someone's intimate life to the misery of persecuted people. This goes to such an extent that the two boys can watch the images of child pornography without being shocked. This overexposure, that should seem alarming to us as readers, is indeed emphasized by the non-reaction of the boys.

Another example of the broad acceptance of violence, of brutality, is the type of games the boys play: Extinctathon, Three Dimensional Waco (as a probable reference to the Waco siege in 1993 in Texas), Barbarian Stomp, Kwiktime Osama (reminiscent of Osama Bin Laden); most of them war games, and all of them evoking, one way or another, struggle, destruction, coupled with strategy. Therefore it appears that the boys' occupations are all related to violence; it becomes a game for them, a casual occupation, a way of chilling out. This is combined with another early exposure to alcohol and drugs: "At least he wasn't a drunk or an addict like a lot of boys his age, so touch wood." (66), and Jimmy and Crake commonly use weeds when they watch the programs previously mentioned on television or the internet. It is also linked to an early propensity to speak about sex and casually considering it: as a young boy in school Jimmy called one of his teachers "Melons" because of her breasts, as an instance.

All those elements have one common point: the accustomed behavior towards obscenity, in many different aspects, and the capacity of people to stay unmoved by what they see or live: speaking about *The Handmaid's Tale*, Barbara Hill Rigney points out that: "By remaining uninvolved, by maintaining innocence, the people of a nation have forfeited human rights, and become slaves in the near-future society of Gilead, an Orwellian dystopia dominated by the horrors of theocracy and puritanism" (Rigney Hill 113). The setting might not be the same in *Oryx and Crake*, yet the way people stay uninvolved seems extremely similar: the lack of reaction to violent contents clearly shows a will not to get emotionally involved, therefore this becomes a clear acceptance of the situation, of the inequalities; people stay focused on other occupations and interests, such as the desire to conform to this society.

#### **b- The cult of beauty and health**

Broad standardization of people is achieved through the wish of people to stay permanently young, or at least appearing as if they were. People must always look healthy, strong, even sporty, by any possible means. Medicine is much used for this purpose,

therefore pharmaceutical companies play on this desire, with, as some examples, the “NooSkins BeauToxique Treatment”, “Wrinkles Paralyzed Forever” or the “Fountain of Youth Total Plunge”.

The devices used are apparently common even though they imply surgery or quite extreme solutions such as “rasping off” the skin. This shows how extensively developed the means to stay beautiful are. This goes even further, with researches on the use of “pigoon” cells to replace human cells: genetic research is used for the benefit of companies such as NooSkins

The main idea was to find a method of replacing the older epidermis with a fresh one, not a laser-thinned or dermabraded short-term resurfacing but a genuine start-over skin that would be wrinkle- and blemish-free. For that, it would be useful to grow a young, plump skin cell that would eat up the worn cells in the skins of those on whom it was planted and replace them with replicas of itself, like algae growing on a pond. (62)

Medicine is considered as a common tool in order to get the body you wish to have, in any way: “cosmetic creams, workout equipment, Joltbars to build your muscle-scape into a breathtaking marvel of sculpted granite. Pills to make you fatter, thinner, hairier, balder, whiter, browner, blacker, yellower, sexier, and happier.” (291). Through these assumptions we could say that people’s desires and people’s happiness can be reached in this society only by reaching an ideal that each one has in his mind; and this model can be reached thanks to the innovations or pharmaceutical companies that make profit on people’s desire to get always “healthier”, always “more beautiful”, always “younger”. By playing on this cult of perfection, the corporations target a broad market of hopeful people, and control them by claiming the benefits of their products. This contributes to the standardization of society, through the desire of people to conform to a so-called perfection and through the takeover of the corporations over people. “Atwood, even as she ‘satirizes the excesses of the contemporary consumer culture,’ also shows the ‘corrosive effects’ of that culture on the moral development of her character Jimmy-Snowman [...]” (Bouson 127)

### **c- A constantly secured and sanitized society**

After the anesthesia of people’s revolt or rebellion, and the standardization of society, the overwhelming security, and surveillance are one last important feature of this society and of dystopian societies to a larger extent. In the novel, the use of security is strongly linked with the genetic innovations and the need for them to be protected from any exterior danger. Therefore, as we mentioned about the hierarchical separation of people in society, the Compounds are the most heavily secured places: they shelter all the genetic researches,

the discoveries and innovations. From the beginning of the novel, we have an exemplification and symbolization of this need for sanitization: the bonfire, “an enormous pile of cows and sheep and pigs” (18), in order to avoid possible diseases, the spreading of a virus. In order to avoid any risk, to protect the Compounds, there were “sterile transport corridors”, “high-speed bullet trains”, “foolproof procedures”, “CorpSeCorps men [...] on constant alert” (31-32). The Compounds are represented as “castles for keeping [people] nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside”, Jimmy’s father summarizes. These measures are explained by the fear of any disease that could destroy the genetic works inside the Compounds; even animals are created by genetic modification so that outside animals may not be a danger for the “pigoons”: the “rakunk” is a secured pet as it could not bring exterior diseases or “bioforms”. But they are also explained by the elitist division of the society, placing the most important and valuable elements of innovations in the Compounds, therefore protecting them from diseases, but also from suspected bad intentions some people might have. When Jimmy visits Crake at the Watson-Crick Institute, he experiences the tight security that surrounds it, sheltering the most eminent geniuses in society: he even has to go through a “neural impulse monitor” (231) to check if he indeed tells the truth about his visit.

If these security measures are claimed to have strictly defensive and protective purposes, yet their omnipresence becomes oppressive: when the family moves into the HelthWyzer Compound, security becomes stronger: there is a “tight security at the HelthWyzer gates – the guards were ruder, they were suspicious of everyone, they liked to strip-search people, women especially” (61) to such an extent that Jimmy’s mother grows suspicious: “According to Jimmy’s mother, their phones and e-mail were bugged, and the sturdy, laconic HelthWyzer house-cleaners that came twice a week – always in pairs – were spies.” (62). There the surveillance at work begins to become oppressing, and this feeling is emphasized when Jimmy’s mother runs away: she has to go through “gates” and “checkpoints”, she had to invent a whole story to have a reason to go out of the Compound, and then she is then wanted; Jimmy and his father are questioned by the CorpSeCorps guards, and, later on, this has consequences on Jimmy’s father career opportunities and Jimmy’s studies. Even the letters his mother sends him are read before being given to Jimmy, and she signs “Aunt Monica” so that the letters may reach him (“She must have known they’d be read by about a hundred snoops before ever getting to Jimmy, and that was right, because along came the Corpsmen after each one, asking who Aunt Monica was.” 77).

The desire for a better society therefore apparently needs social purification to be put into actual practice, and sets up restrictive rules and conditions in order to create an elite capable of carrying on the improvements supposed to benefit the greater number of people. The climax of this desire for improvement is to be found in the genetic research held and the innovations resulting from it.

### **3 – Scientific research and improvements: genetic manipulation “for the greater good”**

Indeed, as already mentioned, the society described in the novel is essentially focused on genetic innovations, praising purely scientific abilities. Improvement is considered to be achievable by genetic modification, for the sake of human beings.

#### **a- What specific developments are achieved**

First of all, the researches are mainly based on the wish to improve human health. The “pigoons” are raised with “rapid maturity genes” in order to grow five to six kidneys for human transplantation, as previously explained. NooSkins Corporation, where Jimmy’s father works, also works on a “neuro-regeneration project”: with “genuine human neocortex tissue growing in a pigoon” (63). These developments are claimed to help treating people suffering from diseases. Genetically modified body parts are supposed to put an end to misery: any accident, any injury become repairable.

The company, on the other hand, rears smaller “pigoons” for more aesthetic purposes, as also mentioned: their cells would be compatible with human cells, therefore might enter the composition of products to make the skin look younger. This kind of innovation is also potentially very attractive for people, ready for any device to “get a second kick at the sexual can” according to Jimmy’s father (62), and which is easily assumable, from the way society is extremely focused on healthy and young appearance. The innovations therefore clearly seem to fit the desire to reach a perfect society, with perfect people, and also perfect species.

Genetic modifications, once they begin, lead to further genetic modifications: another important field in which they are used is food. Indeed, genetically modified products may give much more food than the original raw materials: the Happicuppa beans, developed by a HelthWyzer subsidiary, “would ripen simultaneously, and coffee could be grown on huge plantations and harvested with machines” (210).

Finally, genetic manipulation goes as far as to breed animal species, creating new ones in order to keep the best characteristics of each species while avoiding their flaws. There are

the “rakunks”, from the breeding of raccoon and skunk (“no smell to it, not like a skunk” and “supposed to be calmer” than raccoons, 58); but also the “bobkittens” (bred from bobcat and kitten, “smaller than bobcats, less aggressive” (192), or the “wolvogs”, carrying characteristics of both wolf and dog. These animals were designed to fit better human beings, to be more “human-friendly”, with, therefore, an adaptation aim, to facilitate human life. This adaptation was also linked with the desire for security from the corporations, fearing the spread of “bioforms” in the compounds: the “rakunks” were specifically designed to be sure of not conveying exterior microbes or viruses in the research area, in order to take no risk of destroying them.

We can therefore say that genetic manipulation is the main tool used by this society to reach the ideal it aims at achieving. Every aspect of society is linked, at a different degree, to those innovations: improvement of human living conditions and well-being, yet meaning also severe drawbacks that put the genetic issue into perspective. The cult of perfection might mean important sacrifices.

#### **b- Drawbacks and ethical questions raised**

The first problem raised by genetic innovations is the constant escalation concerning its creations: every new species created is an attempt to correct the errors committed with a previous one. If we take the “rakunks”, they have been imagined as an acceptable pet in the Compounds, because of the vulnerability of scientific researches to disease; as for the “bobkittens”, they were designed “as a control, once the big green rabbits had become such a prolific and resistant pet” (192): they are supposed to be a solution to a problem raised by the creation of a previous species, the green rabbits. Yet themselves begin to be dangerous, they “soon got out of in their turn. Small dogs went missing from backyards, babies from prams; short joggers were mauled.” (193). Just like the rakunks, spreading and reproducing at a much greater rate than expected; and wolvogs “have simply killed all of [the dogs] who’d shown signs of vestigial domesticated status”. From these errors it is very likely to wonder to what extent these creations should be considered as beneficial or even just positive. Even the evolution of the creatures in themselves, without human control, seems extremely worrying: pigeons growing tusks, green rabbits breeding with wild ones and becoming a nuisance... In regard to the way some of the species have been imagined, the question becomes more and more accurate: some of them, like the rakunks, “begun as an after-hour hobby on the part of one of the OrganInc biolab hotshots” (57). The casual manner with which genetic modification is considered seems quite frightening in itself,

more obviously when the creations clearly appear dangerous: from “a cane toad with a prehensile tail like a chameleon’s”, to “the snat, an unfortunate blend of snake and rat” (57). Genetic manipulation, considered as a game, becomes an entertaining tool, making men “feel like God”. There the ethical question is raised of how far people can go in the name of improvement for the greater good, in the interest of the progress for the better, and what right we have to change nature as humans. “The novel is about hubris and humans playing god”<sup>6</sup> There seems to be no limit in this society for the sake of innovation: no law is regulating the inventions or scientific research. The blunders we previously mentioned might ask the question of where are the boundaries for genetic modifications, and if any device is acceptable: in the novel, everything is apparently acceptable.

One last ethic question is the actual purpose of the corporations leading scientific researches: from the sake of human well-being to a real desire for profit. This issue appears quite accurately in the discussion, becoming an ethical debate, between Jimmy’s mother and father, about the neuro-regeneration project; Jimmy’s mother considers the device as “immoral” and “sacrilegious”, convinced that the project is nothing more than “another way to rip off a bunch a desperate people”, and a way of “making life better for people [...] with money”. The link with the shape society has taken is clear there: from the desire for a purified, sanitized, and standardized society, people’s desires have been totally standardized, that is to say they all want to fit in this society, by any means, among which the recourse to the scientific developments of the corporations, from pharmaceutical products to genetic surgery. The corporations then can make profit of this system, which is impossible to be questioned as people have been, in a way, indoctrinated in a very insidious way, through every aspect of society.

The standardization of society is indeed easily identifiable as the consequence of the consumerism that surrounds people; the social purification, going hand in hand with the cleansing of any rebellious temptation, is achieved thanks to a broad manipulation of people’s desires and thanks to the affirmation that the innovations achieved with genetic science are the solution to every human issue.

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, Joan. « And pigs might fly.. ». <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/may/11/fiction.margaretatwood>. Accessed 5 April 2005.

**PART II – MANIPULATION AT STAKE, FROM A MANIPULATED  
SOCIETY TO CRAKE’S REVOLUTION**



Manipulation is indeed largely developed in *Oryx and Crake*, from power relations among the characters, to the manipulation of language and therefore of people's individuality and subjectivity. Crake himself is the embodiment of this manipulation, gathering a personal way of manipulating people surrounding him but also the hubristic desire of manipulating human beings to an irrevocable extent.

## **1 – Power relations and social manipulation**

Another staple of dystopia is the impossibility of having relationships based on genuine trust. Indeed, manipulation is used to such an extent that people do not dare to put their entire trust into someone, taking therefore the risk to be betrayed. Remembering *1984*, we know what difficulty Winston Smith has to be confident in Julia at first, and how he is finally fooled by O'Brien in whom he had full trust; in another fiction with a strong dystopian heritage, *We*, by Zamyatin, the main character, D-503, finds himself in an ambiguous situation in which he dares not at first trust I-330, the woman trying to tease his feelings and question the society in which he lives. Following the same pattern, Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* also defined complex relationships of which believing in someone else and trusting him was not the main characteristic. In the end of the novel, Offred accepts Nick's help when he offers her to escape, yet she does not know whether he is telling the truth as the car waiting for her is Gilead's secret police forces', Nick claiming that inside are Mayday members – an underground organization questioning Gilead's supremacy – coming to rescue her. In each of these cases, it is very difficult for the characters involved to be sure whether they are being lied to or not; and it is difficult for the reader to be sure of that as well. These trust issues are mainly linked with the importance of power relationships at stake in every dystopian society. Indeed, we often find out that, equality not existing as such, there is always necessarily one leader and one who is led. From that assertion we may then assume that manipulation is a constitutive feature of such a society, beginning as early as education at school.

### **a- Power relations and manipulation in the private sphere**

As previously mentioned, there are no trust relationships developing in the novel. At every level, there is always some distrust, and this statement is especially obvious as for the family sphere. Taking only Jimmy's family circle, we clearly see that confidence in each other is not clearly established. Jimmy's mother has been hiding her possible illegal activities from her husband, both of them spied by Jimmy thanks to his mini-mikes.

Concealment and distrust are both very much part of the manipulative issues developed. Trust issues were also what destroyed Crake's family, his mother having possibly betrayed his father because she was afraid of the consequences of her husband's compromising discoveries about HelthWyzer activities.

Besides, trust issues can be found in the relationship with Oryx: Crake, Jimmy and herself seem to be stuck in a kind of love triangle that we see from Jimmy's point of view. In this relationship, it is not possible to know exactly what the nature of Oryx's feelings is, neither are we sure of the exact nature of the relationship between her and Crake. This situation, making Jimmy uncomfortable, is partly explained by the lack of communication between the three characters, never speaking overtly to each other, therefore apparently never putting full trust upon one another. Yet this lack of complete comprehension of these relationships may also be explained by the fact that Oryx "exists in a relative emotional disconnect", according to Sandy English's writings.<sup>7</sup>

The society in which they live does not allow the characters to let themselves go to any confidence, and the loss of trust between people, meaning a loss of communication, might be both a factor for the establishment of hierarchy and a consequence of the power relations at stake and the manipulation of masses they imply.

At a personal level, we realize that the characters are indeed very manipulative and, in some ways, eager to have some power over someone else. Jimmy himself is to a certain extent a manipulative character: he knows how to use others to obtain what he wants. This is particularly true as to his relationships with women: he knows how to make them "feel useful"; he chooses "sad women, delicate and breakable, women who'd been messed up and who needed him."; comforting them, he expects that "a grateful woman would go the extra mile." (115). He also manipulates his mother in the sense that he wants to get a reaction from her, by any means, from making her laugh to making her cry. He wants her to feel something and manipulates her feelings until he gets what he wants. This is not the first time Atwood depicts a male character exercising power over women: "Men are dangerous, she perceives, not because they are intrinsically more evil than women, but because they are in control, because they have the power." (Rigney Hill 15) These power relations are extremely connected with man / woman relationships largely developed in various works by Atwood.

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<sup>7</sup> English, Sandy. "Is this a novel of genuine anguish?". <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/feb2005/atwo-f17.shtml>. Accessed 5 April 2012.

Again, in private aspects of society, manipulation and power relations have an important part to play: the games the two boys played in their early childhood are all focused on winning a total power upon the other and on manipulating the other to reach that goal: “They all used parallel strategies: you had to see where you were headed before you got there, but also where the other guy was headed. Crake was good at that game because he was a master of the sideways leap.” (45). It seems that manipulation and the assumption that one must have some power upon someone else is implanted from early childhood, but also that Crake already had some kind of predominance on Jimmy, playing games but also in a general manner treating him with superiority and condescension. He seems to make a fool of Jimmy, and this feeling gradually evolves, along with the novel, as Jimmy discovers Crake’s plan and then as he realizes that Crake made him responsible for his creatures once humanity is destructed. Jimmy’s sensation of being deceived goes along with the apparent naivety he embodies. Manipulation would therefore be a tool for powerful people to have power upon more credulous people.

#### **b- Power relations and manipulation in the Crakers’ community**

This vision of manipulation as using the credulity and lack of questioning of people to get authority and influence might be put in parallel with the way Jimmy cares about the Crakers, the human-like creatures that Crake created in order to replace human beings. Jimmy, being left alone with them by Crake’s will, and having renamed himself as Snowman, has to explain to them many abstract ideas and human features they do not know. Being created as extremely naïve creatures, they allow Jimmy to invent a whole mythology around Crake and Oryx, deifying them (against Crake’s will to erase any religious impulse, as we will subsequently see). He invents legends, myths around everything the Crakers do not understand, such as his watch, represented as a watch to listen to what Crakes says, to communicate with him; more often than not, they ask for explanation about their creation, to which Snowman answers with forged myths about chaos, the Crakers being the children of Crake and the animal kingdom being the children of Oryx. The legends he creates for them are first the pure product of his imagination, as if he could write a whole mythology on blank paper. Then he very quickly realizes that their naivety and absolute faith in him allow him to make them believe anything: “Now even when he’s caught in a minor contradiction he can make it stick, because these people trust him. He’s the only one left who’d known Crake face to face, so he can lay claim to the inside track.” (111). This acknowledgment appears quite frightening, as it basically

represents any kind of belief at work in society: people are able to believe facts they cannot actually prove. Plus, one can use the power and influence he has to manipulate the others for his own sake: Jimmy, as he can have any control he wants over the Crakers, can ask them for whatever he wants. Indeed, he asks them to catch him a fish once a week, in spite of Crake's will to avoid any "human predation", claiming that Crake decided it should be this way. For personal purposes, Snowman goes against Crake's will and the characteristics he expected the Crakers to have; in a way, he damages their purity. Yet, this statement must be moderated, as Snowman could have asked for much more from them (a fish every day for example) but did not. There is therefore no actual thirst for power on his part at first, though he then uses it. Snowman is both protective and manipulative with the Crakers, which makes an ambivalent figure of him. In a desperate attempt to explain to the Crakers what a toast is, which would mean explaining the concepts of bread, flour, electricity, or butter, he suddenly seems to ramble, digressing on toast in his thought:

*"Toast was an implement of torture that caused all those subjected to it to regurgitate in verbal form the sins and crimes of their past lives. Toast was a ritual item devoured by fetishists in the belief that it would enhance their kinetic and sexual powers. Toast cannot be explained by any rational means.*

*Toast is me.*

*I am toast."* (113)

This delirium seems to show how absurd a total influence can be: Snowman could explain anything to represent toast, the Crakers would believe in it. At the same time, he does not try to see to what extent this limitless power could lead him.

His relationship with the Crakers and the way he uses their naivety to both create a whole mythology and supply his food needs act like a parable for manipulation and power relations.

### **c- Power relations and manipulation in a broader sense**

If the society described avoids any confidence in the other, this is partly due to important power relationships surrounding it, exuding from each of its aspects. Every relationship seems to contain this power basis, this assumption that one has some power upon another. This is extremely obvious in the limitless power of the corporations creating the products people buy, as they have full control on the production, the further advertisement, and even people's needs. The scheme Crake explains to Jimmy, the fantasy he imagines and that we

finally understand as being a reality in the novel, the vicious circle created by the corporations in order to make money on people's will to conform to the models of the society, is the very illustration of the superpower of the corporations. By providing the pills everyone think they need to be healthy, the companies manage to spread other diseases helping them to keep their profits as people will then need other medicine, created, again, by themselves (249). The supremacy of the corporations is clearly identifiable as they employ the largest part of people – OrganInc employing Jimmy's father, students in Watson-Crick Institute, HelthWyzer, RejoovenEsense, AnooYoo... The fact that the corporations have total control over the needs of people, over their desires and over what they buy to fulfill them, shows how powerful they are in the society and how they can keep on developing without being questioned. The need to fit a model, the constant desire for health, beauty, and even sexual appeal is conditioned by these corporations, creating both the need and the solution. The power here resides in the fact that the corporations gather the whole influence available in society thanks to the system that works in a circle.

The influence even begins earlier: from school children seem to be raised with the idea that the hierarchy and social division we previously explained exist, and their skills will define them. What they learn seems more like mottos than actual lessons allowing personal thoughts: some sentences stayed stuck in Snowman's mind, such as "It is important [...] to ignore minor irritants, to avoid pointless repinings, and to turn one's mental energies to immediate realities and to the tasks at hand." (51), which looks like an extract from a conduct book. Or "It is the strict adherence to daily routine that tends towards the maintenance of good morale and the preservation of sanity." (5), which he feels he has already read. The Life Skills Class, which is among the lessons Snowman remembers the most, seems to be designed to make the children fit the ideals of their society, educating them as early as possible in the model, favoring the pupils with scientific skills: again, it is clear that this society is surrounded by science and genetic innovations. As pupils, as "naïve", "ingenuous" pupils– some sort of Crakers, eager to know and waiting for someone to explain the world – children can easily be manipulated.

Finally, on a larger scale, power relations are obvious in the imperialist ruling of the state in which Jimmy has grown up, America, over other countries. Indeed, we have already admitted that inequalities are accepted, at a state level but also at a world level. The country appears to be at the same time superior to any other – thanks to their innovations – and indifference to foreign misery is visible through the media, through the way other countries are considered – Middle East countries, Cuba, or Mexico – with simple

characteristics: respectively the executions retransmitted on TV, or products coming from the countries. The most striking experience of this world-scale manipulation is Oryx: first taken from her family and sold in a country she never mentions – saying she does not remember, yet possibly Asia according to some clues given throughout the text, and very likely to be a poor country – she is then reduced to selling flowers, to trapping sexual tourists and playing in children-pornographic filming when landing in America, here again exploited in kinds of prostitution services. She is the embodiment of how the world in which she lives manipulates people, not even considering them as much more than bodies: Oryx has never been considered as much more than simple merchandise, which is never questioned. Just as in other Atwood's fictions: "As men destroy women in the protagonist's Manichean vision of the world, so groups and nations destroy and oppress other groups and other nations" (Rigney Hill 48). This quote, first applying to *Surfacing*, appears as particularly accurate when we study *Oryx and Crake*. The oppression of some nations by others, here America being the imperialist state, is a recurrent theme developed by Atwood, and at the same time one important feature of dystopias, where oppression takes a large part.

Manipulating people in the end appears as making them think they have choice when they do not have, directing at the same time their desires and wills. Manipulation seems to be the main tool society has found to reign. In the divisive, standardized society we previously described, the means to assert the power and keep people from questioning the system is power, but power in disguise.

## 2 – Language

In Margaret Atwood writings, as well as in each dystopian writing, language plays a central part, being either questioned or sublimated as a tool for rebellion. The complexity of the use of language is parallel to the complexity of human thought, both being interconnected.

### a- Language as the only way to escape from society

In some aspects, language in *Oryx and Crake* is a tool for individuality, to escape from the standardization of society, at least if we focus on Jimmy. He is a word-lover, quoting famous sentences, using old words ("the odd words, the old words, the rare ones" 78). In a world where only mathematic skills are praised, his ability with words makes him a sort of rebel against the order of things. He differentiates – and so does everyone in this society –

numbers people from word people, qualifying himself as a “word person”. Barbar Hill Rigney states that “language, in itself, is the ultimate affirmation and the greatest revolution”, in Atwood’s writings (Rigney Hill 121). Language represents a way out of the society structured around genetics and skills only related with practical, usable knowledge. Language, words, and even arts in general (Martha Graham, where Jimmy then experiences his academic curriculum, is the representation of the world of arts, seen as useless and inferior in the society where Jimmy lives, but which shelters all the arts, especially related to words) are themes dear to Margaret Atwood. She praises language and arts as a way of escaping: “Seule la création artistique semble permettre à l’artiste d’échapper, pour une part, à la condition de victime.” (Leclaire 106). Moreover, more than a way of escaping, words and language are among the main tools of people’s responsibility in society. This responsibility of words and writing seems to be embodied in Jimmy, as a figure of the word-person, the artist, prisoner in a society that does not understand him and in which he no longer feels comfortable.

Not only is language a way of protesting, a way of escaping, it is also simply a way of existing. Through Jimmy’s story, one fundamental aspect of language emerges: it is the central feature of human beings. The possibility of the concepts related, of the imagination he develops faced to loneliness, of the memories that help him surviving instead of giving up, show the importance of language as intrinsically human; Karen F. Stein quotes Atwood: “the love of language, which has been with us for at least 35.000 years [...] helped to make us human in the first place (Stein 153).

#### **b- The alienation and alteration of language and through language**

Yet, the dystopian society does not seem to be compatible with language as a tool for personal development. Language is much more used as a tool to spread and give shape to the ideals and concepts of the society. In the novel, words are altered and modified to fit the genetic innovations, such as animal breeding – with the new names given by breeding two others, such as wolvogs, rakunks, bobcats – the corporations’ names or the products they develop: “In Jimmy’s world, scientists act as God while “word people” like Jimmy act as their preachers”. (Hengen 136) All of those are forged words designed to fit forged products: language must follow the aim of society. John Mullan in an article from *The Guardian* compares this “corrosion of language” with “Newspeak” in *1984* or with Russel

Hoban's *Riddley Walker*.<sup>8</sup> Language in this society is not considered as much more than a means to promote product and to develop the desires of people for the products coming from the corporations. Even Jimmy, from word-lover, becomes a "wordserf"<sup>9</sup>. He has to imagine the mottos and slogans for the AnooYoo Corporation, and therefore sells his gift to the alienating society. By doing so, he not only alters his passion for words and their meaning, but he also alienates himself, becoming a part of the system he precisely opposed by claiming his love for words instead of science. Margaret Atwood's main fear seems to be the use of language in order to manipulate people by being altered with conformism:

When I said that language was being bled I meant that if you listen to political speeches and government bulletins and so on and get "anti-personnel" when what they really mean is that it kills a lot of people, all the blood is being taken out of things to make them easier for people to deal with, less upsetting. Language ought to be upsetting if the things that it's talking about are intrinsically upsetting. (Ladousse 44)

This is exactly what happens in *Oryx and Crake*: language is being bled because of the use of it made by the corporations; the real meaning of words is of interest for no one; the simplification of the words, leading to "the reduction of language to a meaningless assemblage of sounds" (Ladousse 44) in Atwood's words, is the danger which the society is clearly heading to. Language is totally altered, as even Jimmy "abuses" and "degrades" it because of his job, (Hengen 137) because of what he does to words, the way he manipulates them, manipulates their meaning, and manipulates people through them.

The manipulation of language leads furthermore to the manipulation of thoughts. Having started the process of simplifying every concept, it becomes even easier to simplify people's range of thoughts, and therefore to make them believe everything you wish. This is the process at stake in Jimmy's society, but this is also, at another level, the process we can witness with the Crakers. Because of their restricted set of thoughts, conceptualization is very difficult for them: they can only understand what they clearly see, and even pictorial representation is a problem for them.

### 3 – Crake's hubristic fulfillment of limitless "improvement"

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<sup>8</sup> Mullan, John. « Words of hope ».

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/apr/14/margaretatwood?INTCMP=SRCH>. Accessed 1 April 2012

<sup>9</sup> Mullan, John. « Words of hope ».

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/apr/14/margaretatwood?INTCMP=SRCH>. Accessed 1 April 2012



If the society described in the book clearly shows the limitless innovations in the genetic field, forgetting every ethical or moral question, the climax of this hubristic desire of improving human beings, with the risk of totally altering the human in itself, is to be found in Crake's deed ("Crake's project is an extension of the kinds of technological innovation, such a gene splicing and xeno-transplantation, used by the top scientists of his society, who are well paid to conduct such research." (Stein 146)). From his wish of creating a species better than humans, of transcending the human species by creating a new species keeping the best of men and erasing his failures and flaws, he (almost) totally destroyed human life, leaving Jimmy in a kind of post-apocalyptic world, with apparently the Crakers for sole company. The Crakers have all the aesthetic features Crake thought important or just good, such as their green eyes, their various colors (each one has a different color, eradicating the risk for racism), the lack of beard (Crake found shaving boring)... They also gather other features, more technical, such as their way of reproducing (not based at all on courtship but on a system in which love does not exist, it is pure coupling; they are supposed not to have any belief in any god, as Crake despises deification; they are no predators, have no taste for killing – they even feel revulsion towards it; they have no property therefore no hierarchy or jealousy; in one word, they have no "destructive feature". Even concerning their death, the Crakers are originally regulated to die at age thirty, without any pain or suffering, therefore without any anguish about death, as human beings might have.

This desire of creating new life can be directly linked with the tradition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, dealing as well with the dangers of scientific improvements: from getting back to life to creating life, there is little difference in the ethical questions raised by the manipulation of the human body, and both Victor Frankenstein and Crake can be considered as "trickster-scientists" (Stein 142). Jimmy considers himself as the monster of Frankenstein, being left on his own, alone, in a devastated world, and claiming for his "bride of Frankenstein", as if he was himself the monster left on his own. The question raised by Crake's deed – as much as Frankenstein's – is the use of science, and their consequences also both raise the question of what right man has to manipulate man:

Both these narratives critique the misuse of science and expose the arrogance of Promethean scientists who not only seek to manipulate and control nature, but who also separate themselves from their communities and set themselves above ordinary people. Pride and rigidly narrow thinking lead both Frankenstein and Crake to pursue their misguided projects. (Stein 143)

The Crakers may be “perfect” in the fact that they live in a total harmony, without any violence, any vice, any flaw. They do not experience bad feelings, but there is a reason for that: they do not experience any feeling at all. The drawback for this apparent genetic innovation, this leap from humans full of failures and contradictions to these “Paradise models”, is their total absence of emotions. From a utopian desire we find a totally dystopian outcome. By creating a species better than humans Crake has finally destroyed humanity, from a species point of view but also from a conceptual point of view: along with the human species went language – precisely dear to Jimmy, and at the heart of humanity – arts, and other mental representations, and those were totally erased with the destruction of men. To this statement may be related the observation Jimmy makes about the game of Blood and Roses and its goal: “the Blood player usually won, but winning meant you inherited a wasteland.” (91). Crake generally won this game, as he apparently won his “game” over humanity, and the result is that Jimmy inherits a wasteland: an end that Jimmy already found “pointless” when they played in the old days. Indeed the question might be asked: what is the point of getting rid of humanity? To what extent can we go in the name of improvement? Karen F. Stein very accurately points that: “The fact that Crake uses genetic technology to re-engineer humans recalls Atwood’s description of speculative fiction’s exploration not only of the consequences of new technologies but also its investigation of the nature and limits of what it means to be human.” (Stein 147). There indeed comes the question of the goal Margaret Atwood wants to reach with *Oryx and Crake*, through “speculative fiction”, and through the scientific-grounded society and the bio-engineered Crakers.

#### **4 – The Manipulation of the reader**

If *Oryx and Crake* has effectively inherited aspects of the dystopian tradition in literature, the work is not subjected only to this dimension: Karen F. Stein calls the work “anti-utopian speculative fiction-adventure romance-Menippean satire” (Stein 155). Largely articulated around the motif of manipulation, through its diverse aspects in society, from the manipulation of masses in social spaces to the manipulation of language and thoughts, through the genetic manipulation which is at the heart of the novel, Margaret Atwood develops an oppressive society dealing with nowadays interests, pushing the experiment to an irrevocable outcome, in order to arouse our feelings. Part of the manipulation of the reader, Jimmy, as a anti-hero, a character in whom we can discern vices and failures, is

someone to whom it is possible to identify as readers: he was also manipulated by the society in which he lives, he has a responsibility in what happened, and yet becomes gradually aware of what is happening around him. One can easily identify to him.

*Oryx and Crake* is particularly striking as it is extremely rooted in our contemporary society. As mentioned from the beginning, utopias and dystopias share the feature of being inspired by their writers' contemporary concerns and features. Yet many of them create fictional future societies to set their stories, in which they disseminate recognizable elements of real. In Margaret Atwood's novel, as well as in her previous *The Handmaid's Tale*, the setting is not only recognizable, it is clearly identifiable. Even if less explicitly in the latter – Gilead is fictional yet is set within the boundaries of what was before the United States of America – in *Oryx and Crake*, the grounding of the story in the United States, and furthermore, in the future of our society as Margaret Atwood imagines it, is clearly explicit. The numerous references as for location that are made are part of the characterization of the novel, of its inscription in our reality as readers: we recognize New York as a futuristic New York; Jimmy makes references to Cuba, Mexico, and Middle East countries, to San Francisco, to Hudson Bay, but also to the Lake Okeechobee, to the Canary Islands, to the Everglades... This shows that Jimmy's society is indeed grounded on a reality, which gives force to the story, but also credibility: the fact that the elements of the fiction are recognizable makes the story even more relevant. There is no time indication, yet we might assume that the future is quite close, because of the interests and concerns we share with Jimmy's society. Indeed, all the ecological changes and catastrophes mentioned – the volcano in the Canary Islands, the Lake Okeechobee shrinking because of droughts, the Everglades ravaged by fires, the coastal cities erased because of tidal waves, June being the wet season with rains like monsoon – are extremely reminiscent of our contemporary concerns. One excerpt is particularly striking concerning the climatic change, in an accumulation that enumerates the environmental catastrophes in a terrific report:

Still, as time went on and the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes, and meat became harder to come by, some people had their doubts.  
(27)

Along with these environmental issues come the rarefied meat, the lack of real ingredients – mainly replaced by soy – and the extinct animal species (with which Jimmy and Crake play with the Extinctathon game).

The domination of pharmaceutical corporations might not be as extreme in our reality as in the novel, yet the fact we are constantly surrounded by a culture promoting consumerism and the pursuit of beauty and health through advertisement and popular culture is undeniable.

Even the genetic modifications and scientific concerns we analyzed are already present in our society, even if at an embryo-state: cloning or gene-splicing have been experienced, even if not to as such an extent as in the novel.

All these issues have an explicit echo in our present-day society; they are only emphasized to a greater extent. Our contemporary world is therefore represented in the novel, but viewed with a magnifying and distorting mirror, as through a magnifying glass. Margaret Atwood indeed grounded every single reference of her novel in the real state of things, in order to make her “speculative fiction” even more credible and striking.

Indeed, the question raised by the assessment we make when we finish and close the book is “what if?” Margaret Atwood herself raised the question: “The *what if* in *Oryx and Crake* is simply, what if we continue down the road we’re already on?” (Mark Bosco 16). The fact Margaret Atwood insists on calling her work “speculative fiction” is then understandable as the fact that she “invents nothing we haven’t already imagined or started to invent”. She uses the fictive environment of her book as a way to raise questions about our own status in society; quoting Yevgeny Zamyatin, she wrote in *The Guardian*: “We need the most ultimate, the most fearsome, the most fearless ‘Why?’ and ‘What’s next’”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Atwood, Margaret. “For God and Gilead”. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2003/mar/22/classicalmusicandopera.fiction?INTCMP=SRCH>. Accessed 1 April 2012.

## Conclusion

The dystopian tradition has generally been aiming at making people aware of the flaws and vices their societies tended to, emphasizing them and pushing them to an extreme extent thanks to their setting in a futuristic and fictional world, in order to make the readers aware of these flaws and vices, and in order to make the reader question his own society and the way it is heading. If we consider *Oryx and Crake* as part of the apocalyptic literature, as S.J. Mark Bosco does, we can claim that it indeed “impels the reader to act, to direct the future by transforming the there and now.” (Mark Bosco, 158). Indeed the writer’s will is to strike, to arouse the reader and leave traces of the fiction in his reality, in order to make things change: the writer uses “shock tactics” in order to awaken our feelings.

Dystopias, aimed at pointing out the flaws of their contemporary societies as we largely explained, are much part of the tradition of writing in order to move people’s feelings. Dystopias of the 20<sup>th</sup> century stayed mainly focused on the threat of totalitarianism and on “the political systems of nation-states” (Mark Bosco 161), influenced as they were by their historical background, by the totalitarian regimes in Nazi Germany, in the Communist USSR and the raise of nationalist and oppressive regimes in other European countries:

The dystopian novels that proliferated in the first half of the twentieth century, such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931), George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), imagined a dangerous and alienating future society controlled by the State or by self-interested elites within that network.” (Mark Bosco 160)

Contemporary dystopias, on the other hand, become much more interested in scientific aspects of our society, raising ethical questions and moral issues related to these scientific improvements. Science fiction and apocalyptic literature are therefore often employed as a way to back up the purpose of the dystopia. Creating fictional worlds, in which the current issues we are facing in our world are represented through a magnifying glass, is the staple of present-day dystopias: in 1985, *The Handmaid’s Tale* already dealt with contemporary themes such as the submission of women, fertility issues and religious fanaticism; Kazuo Ishiguro, with *Never Let Me Go* (2005), also explored the scientific field with another apocalyptic novel that we can also consider as a dystopia, about the question of cloning. In such literature, as well in the works previously mentioned as in *Oryx and Crake*, S.J. Mark Bosco points out that:

Through a doomsday scenario, the writer attempts to awaken in the public the need for personal vigilance and engagement in a contemporary world that has become unmoored from moral categories and in which our very humanity is under threat. (Mark Bosco 160)

Margaret Atwood indeed wants to awaken her readers, to make them vigilant: she creates in *Oryx and Crake* a society totally corrupted with consumerism, standardization, a hierarchical social order, and, at the heart of all of these, an uncontrolled desire for scientific innovation; a society that is so extreme, as to the use of genetic modification and humans playing gods, that it is shocking for the reader. Creating a new species and wishing to erase mankind, Crake, by pushing genetic research to the ultimate point, also erases what makes us human: language, complex range of thoughts, conceptualization, arts... The never-closed debate between Jimmy and Crake is the perfect illustration of the ethical questions raised in the book, with the eventual question: what makes us human in the first place? Atwood plays her role as a shocking author by first creating a society that strikes us with its apparently incredible features, then making us realize that everything she wrote already exists, or is on the verge of existing, in our present-day reality.

The catastrophes at stake in fiction are a common tool of dystopias and apocalyptic literature; yet, concerning Margaret Atwood, the bleak coloration generally prevailing in apocalyptic and dystopian literature is lightened by a strong sense of hope: in *Oryx and Crake*, in the end, everything is not totally lost. Jimmy/Snowman hears of, then sees, other human beings, just like him, meaning that the human race is not totally erased; meaning that language and all the concepts related have not totally disappeared; meaning that there is still hope. The open-endedness of the novel is also typical of the writer, as Robert Potts states in an article from *The Guardian*, but also a “political gesture”, emphasizing “moments when people have a choice”, and then “suspend[ing] the moment of decision.”<sup>11</sup>; just as she does with *Oryx and Crake*.

Margaret Atwood therefore not only wishes to make people aware about their own society, and careful about their own role in this society, she also sees “fiction writing as the guardian for moral and ethical sense of the community” (Bouson 13). She places herself in the position of the enlightening author, thus establishing herself in the continuity of politically involved authors, even if she does not exactly claim herself as being so (Hill Rigney 16). Her involvement in international associations, such as Amnesty International,

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<sup>11</sup> Potts, Robert. “Light in the wilderness”.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/apr/26/fiction.margaretatwood?INTCMP=SRCH>. Accessed 5 April 2012.

PEN International, and feminist causes, shows her not only a literary figure but also a political figure:

The facts and political realities, atrocities committed in the name of ideology, terrorism and brutality, become crucial for Atwood, 'not because the writer is or is not consciously political but because a writer is an observer, a witness, and such observations are the air he breathes' (Second Words, 394)" (Hill Rigney 16).

*Oryx and Crake*, as much as her previous and further writings, makes of Atwood the typical figure of the author involved in moral issues, and eager to bear witness of our society's flaws, to reach through her writings a broad audience who might be then capable of reacting by turn and be careful of the way society heads. Bouson reinforces this statement, stating that "Atwood, in her dual roles as the artist-trickster and the author-ethicist, sets out both to teach and delight." (Bouson 17) She is the perfect figure of the writer's will to move people, because she opens her reader's eyes to dangers that might surround them, yet keeping a hopeful tone, giving an outdoor to her heroes, leaving them with a choice: just as she leaves her readers with a choice, the choice to let "speculative fiction" become real or to keep a wary eye on what surrounds us, in order not to be manipulated.

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