

# The Reality behind Doomsday: A Study of Crisis Writing in *Oryx and Crake*

Duan Qiuxia<sup>1</sup> & Wang Ru<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Languages School, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China

Correspondence: Wang Ru, Foreign Languages School, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China.

Received: October 29, 2024

Accepted: December 11, 2024

Online Published: December 19, 2024

doi: 10.5539/elt.v18n1p20

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v18n1p20>

## Abstract

*Oryx and Crake*, as a typical dystopian scientific fiction, depicts incredible technology myth. Yet technology supremacy ultimately pushes human beings to the extinction during a pandemic. From the perspective of the tradition of crisis writing, this paper takes Margaret Atwood's classic dystopian novel *Oryx and Crake* as the object of study, and analyzes how Margaret Atwood exposes the imbalance between human beings and nature, deterioration of social institution and deprivation of humanity. She sharply criticizes the reality of contemporary western society behind the natural, technological and ethical crises throughout rich imaginations in this “revelatory” fable. On this basis, the unique aesthetic connotation of this novel is revealed.

**Keywords:** *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood, crisis, reality

## 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood has been an influential Canadian author in the world of literature since her debut in western literary stage. Since the 1960s, Margaret Atwood has been writing poetry, short stories, novels, and works of literary criticism, which have been widely recognized by Western critics and readers. *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood's typical dystopian novel in 2003, depicts a bleak apocalyptic scenario in which human beings are allowed to do whatever they want with technology and then reap the following consequences. The protagonist, Snowman, reflects on his past, including his complicated relationship with Crake and Oryx. Crake creates the Crakers to replace human beings, leading to a catastrophic end for human civilization. The novel explores themes including ethical decay, environmental collapse, and potential danger of scientific advancement. As Lisa Appignanesi remarks, “*Oryx and Crake* is Margaret Atwood at her best—dark, dry, scabrously witty, yet moving and studded with flashes of pure poetry. Her gloriously inventive brave new world is all the more chilling because of the mirror it holds up to our own” (Margaret Atwood, 2004). The novel provides an early warning of possible ecological crisis in a post-apocalyptic world, particularly the realities faced with human beings at the turn of the century, which could lead to the overall destruction of the earth's ecology. The publication of *Oryx and Crake* has attracted considerable attention and criticism. Western studies have focused on its themes like dystopian literature, moral issues and postmodern aspects. In ‘It’s Game Over Forever’: Atwood’s Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in *Oryx and Crake*, Bouson Brooks (2004) points out that Margaret Atwood skillfully interweaves the characters' traumatic experiences in a multilayered structure (Bouson Brooks, 2004). Stephen Dunning (2005) concludes that the discourse science in *Oryx and Crake* proves to be destructive in the novel's development (S. Dunning, 2005). Katherine Snyder (2001) suggests a similarity between trauma theory and dystopian speculative fiction by examining *Oryx and Crake*. There are also a number of domestic studies on *Oryx and Crake*, those of which are from the perspective of ecocriticism (K. Snyder, 2001). Cai Huan (2007) argues that the novel profoundly exposes the dual dangers of technological advances which mainly refers to destruction of nature and total alienation of human beings (Cai Huan, 2007). Zhang Ping (2010) explains his ecological philosophy from the perspective of ecocriticism, calling for a balance between humanism and technology supremacy, advocating that Atwood harbors an equal love for natural ecology and human society (Zhang Ping, 2010). Taking *Oryx and Crake* as an object, Gao Caixia (2008) analyses the relationship between scientificity and literariness of ecological warning novels, and highly affirms the ecological early-warning function and aesthetic value of *Oryx and Crake* (Gao Caixia, 2008). Pan Shouwen (2006) believes that the novel actually doesn't explore in-depth discussion on ecological issues, but instead insinuates and criticizes the

contemporary rotten western culture, which shows a strong humanistic concern (Pan Shouwen, 2006). Yang Lixin (2007) thinks that the novel depicting the doomsday of mankind in the style of black humor shows the writer's deep reflection on the alienation of civilization, and also reveals her lament for the decline of humanities in the post-modern society (Yang Lixin, 2007). By warning and criticizing the consequences of technological abuse in the doomsday, Ding Linpeng (2017) expresses his concern for the future of society and states that the fate of mankind depends on controlling humanbeing's reckless pursuits for rationality and consumerism (Ding Linpeng, 2017). The novel was published at a time when the SARS virus was sweeping the globe. Margaret Atwood conveys a concern for the fate of human beings, utilizing her imagination to make predictions of the future. The Covid-19 is still like a cloud over the planet, and will it come back in a different form? If human beings are faced with a biochemical crisis one day, what will happen to the fate of human beings? The world in *Oryx and Crake* seems to be an "apocalyptic" preview of the future, but numerous reality problems it reflects are equally worthy of attention with strong warning significance and practical significance. From the perspective of crisis writing, this paper aims to explore how Margaret Atwood, from the view of Jimmy, the humanistic protagonist, criticizes the imbalance between human beings and nature, deterioration of social institution and deprivation of humanity behind the natural, technological and ethical crises.

## 2. Natural Crisis: The Deformity and Pathology of Western Industrial Civilization

Natural Crisis appears to be salient in *Oryx and Crake* and the doomsday can be traced to modern environmental problems. The book is a double-line compound structure in its narrative technique. It means Snowman narrates many scenes happening before and after the catastrophe again and again. Through shifts in perspective, the author skillfully navigates between different historical and present moments, presenting a consciousness flow among Snowman's memories, hallucinations, and dreams. It flashbacks the friendship and growth of Jimmy (Snowman) and his best friend Crake. At the beginning of *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman is the only one left on the earth, surrounded by barrenness, "The shrieks of the birds that nest out there and the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sound almost like holiday traffic" (M. Atwood, 2004). Inducing factors of deteriorating ecosystems are hidden in Snowman's past memories. In fact, before this catastrophe, the ecosystem was already in jeopardy. When Jimmy was a child, the climate became abnormal: "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" (M. Atwood, 2004). As a result of global warming, sea levels skyrocketed, volcanoes erupted, giant tsunamis continued, East Coast cities were washed away, New York was completely "new".

Human beings are not unfamiliar with the destroyed natural environment, for it even exists in our real life. Apparently, although human beings are aware the importance of environmental justice, human beings only give priority to various interests. The fragile ecosystem of the earth has been suffering unprecedented damage. The deterioration of the ecological environment in the book even makes readers wonder whether they are in the virtual world or the real world. The author's narrative follows Snowman's thoughts, allowing readers to piece together the apocalyptic scenes before the catastrophe through the intertwining past and present. In Snowman's memories, it was a time when biotechnology and genetic engineering led the entire human technology and controlled human development. Genetically modified plants and animals have always been a part of Jimmy's growth. Jimmy's parents, working at OrganInc Farms, participate in the pigoon project, which aims to provide transplant organs for humans. Experts nowadays warns decision-makers of potential detriment over ethics and moral problems if abusing natural resources continues. In this book, abusing genetic engineering leads to the mass death and even Snowman (Jimmy) ultimately limps from tree to tree in search of his own kind. Human beings' privilege over the nature has completely disappeared. Jimmy's best friend, Crake, a scientific genius, later is admitted to Watson-Crick University due to his research. When Jimmy goes to visit his best friend's college, the wide range of genetically modified plants and animals is eye-opening, such as the genetically engineered chickens to provide humans with "muscle", "wolvogs" as humankind's guard, the new Happicuppa bean that can be harvested by machine and ripen simultaneously, and so on. Promoted by the myth of technology, Nature has become a vast uncontrolled experiment. Nature was reduced to mere production material, and the Earth was transformed into a pure resource supply zone. Such arrogant behavior, towering over nature, gives Crake a god-like feeling. In the pursuit of maximum benefits and minimum costs, technology gradually is not only a means of increasing productivity, but it has been completely reduced to a tool for the manipulation of materialistic values and utilitarian worldviews. In just 50 years, many animals have suffered a mass extinction. "It helped to have the Madd Addamprintout of every extinct species, but that gave you only the Latin names, and anyway it was a couple of hundred pages of fine print and filled with obscure bugs, weeds, and frogs nobody had ever heard of" (M. Atwood, 2004). Such descriptions are abundant, depicting a natural environment critical to

human survival that is now in ruins. Like human genetic diversity, the fragmentary biodiversity that survived to 2100 has also become much more geographically simplified (Wilson Edward, 2003). Due to the destruction of natural ecosystems by humans, many species' adaptations have disappeared and fail to survive on the earth. Despite the fact that human beings lay emphasis on saving endangered species, many species today are still disappearing, as is mentioned above. The reducing numbers of species before and the extinction even greatly shock hum beings. The protagonist Crake even creates Crakers to replace human beings.

Regarding the final tragedy, clone technology and ChatGPT have aroused human being's fear, so Atwood's allegorical novel is implying that the destructive path of nature's civilization can no longer be reversed. The ecological doomsday is only getting closer and closer to human beings, implicitly criticizing the ecological problems caused by industrial civilization. As Fu Jun (2003) comments on this book, cloning of animals, genetically engineered animals, and research on mixing human and animal stem cells are no longer speculative concepts in literature (Fu Jun, 2003). Our modern society always fancy an incredible a sustainable future in harmony with nature, while Atwood depicts a doomsday, when human being is on the edge of extinction based on the current environmental support. With her keen perception, Margaret Atwood captures the hidden dangers behind these technologies and deconstructs human beings' blind optimism towards their reckless manipulation on the nature. These unrestrained exploitation scenes are not imagination but real aftermath of humanity's uncontrollable desires. Margaret Atwood's profound concerns serve as a wake-up call for today's environmental ethics issues. The natural ecological crisis is not only a potential issue of future technological development but also reflects the deformities and pathologies that modern western industrial civilization cannot conceal.

### **3. Technological Crisis: Institutional Deterioration of Human Society**

#### *3.1 Imbalance between Arts and Technology*

Developed technology has not only accelerated the deterioration of the earth's ecological environment, but also caused the institutional decay of human society. In the future world of *Oryx and Crake*, the only yardstick of a person's value is whether he has a good command of technological knowledge. Jimmy is a teenager with a love for language and art but he hardly can be recognized in that technologically oriented society. When admitted to a liberal art college, he is aware that after graduating from the college, "Window-dressing was what he'd be doing, at best-decorating the cold, hard, numerical real world in flossy 2-D verbiage." (M. Atwood, 2004). His best friend Crake is top of the class. The bidding for him by the rival EduCompounds at the Student Auction is brisk, and finally he is snatched up at a high price by the Watson-Crick Institute. In a society that disregards philosophy, literature and art, and only pursues commercial interests and technological development, the value of human beings is understated. Culture nourishes the natural nature of the mind. However, in the era dominated by scientific supremacy, the function and value of culture have been completely replaced by practical science. In the era of digitalization, almost any paper resource has an electronic version that is easy to store and apply, and all kinds of arts can be created by digital means. As a consequence, many thread-bound books have been abandoned and Shakespeare's plays and other historical classics have gone unnoticed. Practicality and instrumentality of disciplines have become the mainstream of society. The genius Crake, who has gained much attention even claims it necessary to guard against the arts when he created a new life form Craker that would replace humans, keeping Crakers away from engaging in related forms of literature and arts such as chanting and performing. Technological domination shapes distorted value system, while symbolic thinking leads to degeneration. Art would be followed by writing, hierarchy, and even war, thus repeating the fallen path of the humans' beings. In this fictional world, the entire structure of society is completely out of balance. What's worse, Craker the new form of human civilization, after mankind's self-destruction, bears no humanistic aspects under the control of Crake. The technologically dominated society has deviated from the core of human existence, reflecting the contemporary western society's general belief in instrument rationality and disregard of value rationality.

#### *3.2 Supremacy of Rationality*

In the future, there is a clear boundary line between the rich and the poor. The ordinary people live in the malls, which are heavily populated and are a breeding ground for all kinds of crimes. The elite class lives in the compounds, where they have the best technological tools and develop the newest products in order to obtain high profits from the miscellaneous city. The supremacy of science and money prevails here. Anyone who violates these unwritten principles will be doomed. Jimmy's mother is a biologist living in the compound. When she realizes that gene grafting is a blasphemous technology, she fights back and eventually manages to escape from the compound, but is ultimately killed by the dictatorship for treason. Crake's father discovers that his company is intentionally creating and spreading new viruses and antibiotics to make high profits, when he gathers all the evidence to disclose the truth, he is pushed off a viaduct. The rule of science and technology is completely

reduced to a tool of utilitarianism and commerce, and any action that violates the supremacy of technology is ultimately self-defeating. It is a society that develops only materially and not at the same time in a corresponding degree spiritually. It is like a ship that has accelerated and has a damaged rudder. It is out of control and heading for disaster. Crake is not subject to ethical constraints, and lives a life without moral restraints, lacking in the cultivation of humanities such as excellent philosophy, literature, and the arts. Combined with unfortunate personal experiences in his childhood, various reasons endow him a perverse character. He eventually becomes an extremely dangerous person and conducts destructively. His conduct is in accordance with the mainstream trend. His abnormality also reflects man's indifference and instrumentalization towards others and depravity of humanity drives him to conduct endless projects recklessly by abusing technology and endanger human beings themselves (Liu Yi, 2005). Another protagonist Oryx, from an extremely poor village in Asia, is bought by traffickers from undeveloped countries at a very small price and sold to the so-called civilized world. Yet, she becomes a victim of child prostitutes and the pornographic entertainment industry. Comparing Oryx to a tool, "Atwood's male observers try to impose on women a definite and containable shape or shapes to their liking" (Deery, 1997). Unfortunately, Oryx is unaware of the oppression she suffers in this patriarchy society, even thinking to herself, "it was better than where I lived back home, at least I had food to eat" (Margaret Atwood, 2004) and ends up becoming an accomplice and a victim of spreading virus. The child pornography and sexual slavery she experiences as a young girl not only reflects imbalance between men and women in North American and western societies, but also criticizes sexual violence and political violence in the context of ecological resource depletion and existential crisis. The real problems in the society have been intensifying. Individuals are gradually losing their humanity, and instead become like Pavlov's dogs, who only gurgle and drool towards fame and interest without social morality. Margaret Atwood builds a future technological world fantasized by human beings, but exposes all the possible evils of human beings in the present society. In addition to her pessimistic attitude towards science and technology, Margaret Atwood owns a global consciousness and concerns human beings' existence. In *Oryx and Crake*, she criticizes numerous present institutional problems, including the retreat of arts, the decay of morality and the speechless marginalized groups.

#### 4. Ethical Crisis: The Abyss of the Spiritual Wasteland

Commenting on her *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood states that "The essence of humanity has not changed over hundreds of thousands of years---the same emotions and the same concerns" (Zhang Mo, 2003). *Oryx and Crake* also focuses on emotion and affection of human beings. However, in the future world described in *Oryx and Crake*, human affections are depicted as detached and indifferent. Dominance of rationality closely follows the developed technology. While all people pursue technological supremacy, their soul has been programmed. To a certain extent, they have lost the right to love and be loved in this materialistic society, which are perfectly shown in three protagonists in the novel.

Jimmy grows up in a family with a lack of familial affection. His mother frequently forgets his birthday. It is only after being reminded by Jimmy, a teenager who has not yet completely involved into the society, that she buys birthday gifts. His father also just sends him an e-birthday card or something simple. Jimmy is also trapped into the fights between his parents over pigoon and often attempts to avoid them as much as possible. Tragically, Jimmy's closest friend is a genetically engineered animal, a "rakunk." He is no longer afraid of their tense confrontations, merely finds them tedious. The repressive family atmosphere and a lack of love make Jimmy's spiritual world empty and despairing, leading to his abnormal relationships during college. Eventually, he is even engaged in an unhealthy and fragile relationships with Oryx and Crake. Oryx from Southeast Asia is forced to shoot erotic films, Jimmy and Oryx watch her live stream videos, immediately fell deeply in love with her and becomes addicted to it. In fact, people involving "cybersex" don't need to take any responsibility by pondering and picturing. All of them can achieve snackable sexual satisfaction. Jimmy and Crake, on the other hand, are always playing an online game that involves mass murder and genocide. The violence in it makes them blind to the scenes that trample on their humanity. Obviously Jimmy's family and social relationships have deprived him of his basic human nature. In order to survive on the edge of extinction, he doesn't hesitate to shoot Crake and a large number of his fellow human beings. His apathy and selfishness reflect that spiritual order is replaced by material order, thus making the blind pursuit of martial life suppress the desire for the beauty of real life, which further aggravates human disorientation and existential anxiety.

As a genius in science from a young age, Crake grows up in an uncaring family. When his father, who is the embodiment of justice, is murdered because he prevents the rich from pursuing business interests. Crake's investigation reveals that his mother and father are indirectly responsible for his father's death, Crake, who has a Hamlet-like upbringing, becomes cold and unconcerned. When a deadly virus infects his mother, he witnesses her disintegration without mercy. Crake holds hatred towards the society, his despair for civilization is

deep-rooted, and he is pessimistic about the future of human beings. He wants to eliminate the differences among human beings, so he creates the craker perfect and thoughtless beings, who undertakes the extreme action of destroying human beings. The other protagonist, Oryx, comes from an impoverished village in the Third World. In such a village, extreme poverty means that any child receiving special treatment is likely to be sold by their parents. Oryx is sold multiple times and forced into sex work before being chosen by Crake as his assistant and outlet for his desires. Oryx believes: "Love was undependable, it came and then it went, so it was good to have a money value, because then at least those who wanted to make a profit from you would make sure you were fed enough and not damaged too much" (M. Atwood, 2004). Having suffered family transaction and patriarchal oppression at a young age, Oryx has given in to reality at a young age and become cynical like Crake throughout her lifetime. Jimmy, Crake, and Oryx are three typical representative victims of the ethical crises in this empty society.

Spiritual wasteland and ecological imbalance are rampant. What's more, some people, in an attempt to maintain youth and beauty, will sell their homes, children, or even their souls in exchange for wealth and fame. The despairing society makes full use of technology to dominate everything. Jimmy once comments on Crake, "He'd grown up in walled spaces, and then he had become one. He had shut things out" (M. Atwood, 2004) Crake's existence state serves as the classic epitome of individuals in that fictional world, whose souls are trapped within the high walls constructed by technology. In the virtual world, human beings, as the promoter of technological advancement, are subsumed by technology, losing all their luster and becoming slaves to technology. Their souls and spirits are entirely deprived, and their flesh are easily destroyed by invaders like they abuse other beings. They are both constructors and victims of the "technological supremacy" system. Through this fictional future, Margaret Atwood reflects the real present society, where capitalist commercialization estranges human relationships and pushing modern individuals into the abyss of the spiritual wasteland.

## 5. Conclusion

*Oryx and Crake* is a parable that presents a post-human society where nature has been severely damaged, technological supremacy has been fully permeating throughout the society, materialism has enslaved the human mind, and the whole society has been completely out of order. The problems it reflects also epitomize the imbalance between human beings and nature, institutional deterioration of human society, and the spiritual wasteland faced by contemporary human beings. Given existence of humankind, the consequences of social disorder, ecological imbalance, and spiritual wasteland are extremely severe. As a writer who is concerned about the fate of all human beings, Margaret Atwood intends to raise awareness about human being's existence by depicting the doomsday scene precisely. Not only does it allow readers to reflect on natural crisis, technological crisis and ethical crisis that human civilization is facing nowadays, but also encourages them to seek solutions to potential problems in the future to get rid of the existential dilemma.

## References

- B. Brooks. (2004). 'It's Game Over Forever': Atwood's Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in *Oryx and Crake*. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 139-156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989404047051>
- Cai H. (2007). Technocracy and Eco-disaster: an Analysis of Dystopian Eco-novel *Oryx and Crake*, *World Literature Review*, (1), 126-129.
- D. June. (1997). Science for Feminists: Margaret Atwood's Body of Knowledge. *Twentieth Century Literature*, (4), 470-486. <https://doi.org/10.2307/441746>
- Ding L.P. (2017). Technology, Consumption and Surreality: Humanistic Criticism in *Oryx and Crake*, *Journal of the PLA College of Foreign Languages*, 40(2), 113-120. <https://doi.org/10.16077/j.cnki.issn1001-1757.2014.02.016>
- Fu J. (2003). *A Study on Margaret Atwood Nanjing*: Yilin Press
- Gao C.X. (2008). Scientificity and Literariness: Comment on *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, *Journal of Shandong Normal University*, 53(4), 37-40.
- K. Snyder. (2001). 'Time to Go: The Post-Apocalyptic and the Post-Traumatic in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, *Studies in the Novel*, 470-489. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2011.0057>
- Liu Y. (2015). The Expansion and Disintegration of the Subject-On the Deconstruction of Human Chauvinism in *Oryx and Crake*. *Writer*, (10), 70.
- M. Atwood. (2004). *Oryx and Crake Canada: McClelland and Stewart*.

- Pan S.W. (2006). Atwood's Human Concern in *Oryx and Crake*, *Journal of the PLA Foreign Language College*, 29(6), 82-85.
- S. Dunning. (2005). Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*: The Terror of the Therapeutic. *Canadian Literature*, 86-101.
- W. Edward. (2002). *The Future of Life* New York: Knopf.
- Yang L.X. (2007). A Masterpiece of 'Anti-Utopian' Novel - A Test of Margaret Atwood's New Work *Oryx and Crake*. *Journal of School of Chinese Language and Culture Nanjing Normal University*, (2), 59-62.
- Zhang P. (2010). The Eco-Austere Interpretation of *Oryx and Crake*, *Foreign Language and Literature*, (3), 202-208. <https://doi.org/10.19716/j.1672-4720.2010.03.011>.
- Zhang M. (2003). Margaret Atwood on Writing *Oryx and Crake*. *Foreign Literature Dynamics*, (6), 13-14.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).