Facultade de Filoloxía

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Traballo de Fin de Grao

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The Principles of Dystopian Fiction through the Work of Margaret Atwood

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A mi tutora, por confiar en mí incluso cuando yo no lo hacía.

A mis abuelos, por cuidarme en la tierra e inspirarme desde el cielo.

A mis amigas y amigos, por demostrarme que no hace falta ser perfecta para ser querida.

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Introduction

The dystopian genre has historically played a significant role in the literary landscape, delving into society's deepest anxieties and warning about dangerous tendencies that could potentially lead to crises in the future. Since its emergence until today, dystopian works have invited readers to examine the world critically, questioning governments' totalitarian measures, environmental concerns, unregulated technological progress and the transgression of fundamental human rights. Therefore, dystopias aim to arise social awareness about current threats before they become reality, encouraging collective action for change. The objective of this dissertation is to analyse the evolution of dystopian literature and to examine its formal features as well as its intersection with speculative narrative genres like climate fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction, thus exploring its power to address contemporary issues such as climate change, the Anthropocene's maintenance or the ethical debate concerning posthumanism. While the first chapter provides a theoretical explanation for these concepts, the second part of this dissertation applies this framework to a practical analysis of Margaret Atwood's work, examining how dystopian features are conveyed in her speculative novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003). Hence, the employed methodology is based on a theoretical-analytical approach, examining the principles of dystopian fiction and its relationship with Atwood's work. It combines the study of primary literary sources with academic essays, research articles and critical literary perspectives on dystopian narratives, posthumanism and climate fiction.

At present, Margaret Atwood is widely considered one of the most important dystopian writers due to her ability to create vivid portrayals of fictional worlds affected by environmental degradation, societal oppression and gender inequality, ingeniously employing literature to mirror current issues. Atwood is referred to as "the prophet of dystopia", a reputation she acquired for writing fictional accounts, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) or *Oryx and Crake* (2003), whose dystopian visions became increasingly relevant in contemporary society (Mead,

2017). Nevertheless, the author herself refutes the notion of being a prophet: she claims that, rather than predicting the future, her speculative works are based on historical events and actual scientific facts. Atwood emphasizes that by examining the past and the present, she extrapolates its tendencies to write dystopian stories based on the cyclical pattern of human tendencies and behaviour (Polk, 2023). Her speculative novel *Oryx and Crake* exemplifies her statement, since its fictional world stands as a warning about the potential dangers of technological extremism and climate change in contemporary society, challenging readers to face the possible consequences of their present decisions.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is the first dystopian book in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, followed by *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam.* The following dissertation focuses on the first instalment of the book series since it can be approached as a standalone work, whose self-contained plot delves deeply into numerous complex themes whose study is considered sufficient for the scope of this paper. Additionally, the trilogy's second and third book employ archetypal patterns of fairy tales, distancing them from the dystopian postulates that represent the core of this paper (Kozioł, 2022, pp. 283-284). *Oryx and Crake* explores themes of genetic engineering, environmental degradation and corporate control: the novel presents a world devastated by pollution and a human-made plague whose last survivor is Snowman (formerly Jimmy). In this post-apocalyptic scenario, Jimmy must perform as the caretaker of the Crakers, a genetically engineered species of hominids created by Crake, a brilliant scientist and friend of Jimmy whose final goal is to lead humanity to extinction to replace them with his 'enhanced' hominids.

Delving into the first chapter of this dissertation, it provides a theoretical framework in which dystopia is depicted as "the dark side of Utopia" (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p. 1), narratives that portray disastrous future scenarios triggered by current social tendencies. Likewise, the dystopian genre is closely linked to the utopian impulse, as both serve as critical

reflections of the present, questioning existing structures and opening the possibility for change. For a better understanding of the genre, dystopian historical evolution is traced from its first appearance in biblical texts to its establishment in the nineteenth century, when the industrialization raised concerns among the population of being replaced by technology. The genre evolved throughout de twentieth century, progressing from classic dystopias -defined by its pessimism- to 'critical dystopias', which keep its dark essence but allow utopian hope for social transformation: the dystopian genre 'speculates' about what our future could be. Therefore, it can be classified under the broad category of speculative fiction- narratives that intentionally depart from reproducing reality. While closely related to science fiction, it is not limited to it, emerging instead as an independent genre.

Dystopian works invite readers to question their societal and political structure, but also to revisit their relationship with nature and technology. Dealing with the environment, dystopian fiction, as well as climatic and post-apocalyptic fiction, are considered genres of the Anthropocene – a geological era shaped by human traceable impact on the planet. These narratives explore the consequences of climate change, the destruction of biodiversity as well as environmental degradation. Furthermore, posthumanist thought is here used to interrogate the coevolution of humans and technology, along with other beings and the environment. Two branches are particularly interesting for this study: transhumanism, which seeks to enhance the human body through bioengineering, and critical posthumanism, advocating for a more ethical and balanced technological progress.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* explore these concepts by presenting a dystopian society whose totalitarian and technocratic regime led to environmental and social catastrophe. The novel's world is divided between the overpopulated and polluted cities of the Pleeblands and the Compounds, restricted areas for the scientific elite, whose leaders employ genetic engineering as a weapon to control and dominate society, commercialising the human body to

reinforce their capitalist system. Their unchecked manipulation of human nature poses ethical questions that are explored through the contrasting lens of transhumanism and traditional humanism, personified by the two main characters. While Crake seeks to enhance the flawed human race by creating a bioengineered new species, Jimmy (Snowman) favours culture, emotional connection and the inherent imperfection of human nature. Through Crake's character, radical ecotopianism -the complete erasure of human-over-nature hierarchy-, is called into question: while he tries to end the anthropocentric conception of the human being, Crake paradoxically maintains the race's supremacy by solely deciding the future of the entire planet. Finally, this dissertation examines language, culture and religion's role in the construction of human identity, exemplified through the figure of the Crakers -Crake's hominids- and their development of essential human traits despite his creator's attempt to erase them.

1. Beyond Dystopia: Examining Future Visions in Margaret Atwood's Fiction

This chapter examines some of the most relevant concepts of the dystopian genre that frames the subsequent analysis of Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003). Therefore, it begins by defining the main concepts of the thesis, continues accounting for the emergence of the genre early stages, and follows with its historical development by culminating in its consideration in contemporary literature. Along with the description of dystopian formal features, the chapter will delve into the problematization of its generic classification as it raised as a hybrid genre, defying classical boundaries that pertain to genre distinctions. Likewise, various approaches to the genre as offered by different scholars -including Atwood's- will be discussed to find a possible consensus in dystopia's labelling as part of the broader "speculative fiction" category. To conclude this theoretical introduction, the chapter explores the most recent developments in dystopian fiction that seeks to identify the distinctions among the subdivisions of dystopian accounts for ultimately discussing two key concerns in the work of Margaret Atwood: climate fiction and the posthuman theory, both tackling the future consequences of large-scale effects of humanity's degradation of the environment and its rapid technologization.

1.1. Definitions

Utopias portray a fictional, ideal world, considerably improved in comparison with the writer's reality. Sargent (1994) defines utopia as a "non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space, that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived" (p. 9). In addition, Roemer (1982) complements Sargent's definition by highlighting the impact utopias may have on their readers as making them reflect upon alternative cultures and values, contrasting with their own society (p. 3).

In regard to utopia generic sibling, dystopias are commonly described as the "dark side of Utopia" (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p. 1), a portrayal of a place worse, not better, than the author's contemporary world. Moylan (2000) greatly illustrates both the critique of repressive societal systems and the utopian impulse by portraying dystopias as, on the one hand, narratives that present a significantly unpleasant or repressive society, often projecting contemporary social trends into a disastrous future, and, on the other, as a critical counterpart to utopian thought, exposing and contesting the prevailing social systems while also opening up the possibility of change.

As aforementioned, the dystopian genre is deeply bonded with the utopian impulse since dystopias acquired its same critical and educational purposes. Nevertheless, these concerns are displayed in a very different way:

> Unlike the "typical" utopian narrative with a visitor's guided journey through a utopian society which leads to a comparative response that indicts the visitor's own society, the dystopian text usually begins directly in the terrible new world; and yet, even without a dislocating move to an elsewhere, the element of textual estrangement remains in effect since the focus is frequently on a character who questions the dystopian society. (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p. 5)

Thus, the depiction of an ideal world urges readers to reconsider their reality in terms of how it could be improved to resemble, though not to equal, the utopian dream. Meanwhile, to avoid the undesirable future that dystopias portray, the author intends the reader to address and change the real social or political factors that might drive society towards the dystopian literary outcome. Ironically, the notion of a utopia implies the existence of a previous dystopia; reality is expected to change for the better. On the other hand, dystopias maintain hope, to a greater or lesser extent, to transform the dystopian fictional society into its utopian version. Margaret Atwood approached utopia-dystopia duality and named the neologism as 'ustopia',

“a yin and yang pattern; within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia” (Atwood, 2011, p. 85).

Ultimately, anti-utopian narratives must be differentiated from dystopias, since they arose in response to the revival of utopias to criticise both utopian thinking and its related writers. As Levitas and Sargisson (2003) discuss, even though utopias are a representation of the desire to improve life, anti-utopias doubt if the critique present in their pages is enough to catalyse a real social change (pp. 13-16). In tune with this, Uhlenbruch (2015) adds that anti-utopian writings “want to alert to issues such as the possibility of utopia turning into totalitarianism if enforced in reality” (p. 128). Therefore, while dystopias are the literary counterpart of utopias, anti-utopias are the nemesis of the utopian impulse.

1.2. Genesis and Development of Dystopian Fiction

Since the Middle Ages, the success of a writer laid on his or her ability to skilfully imitate the classical authors: they were expected to respect the inherited tradition and follow the literary canon to produce their own writings. The Greek and Roman authors set a strict model of content, style and structure that led to the establishment of fixed literary genres that new generations must adhere to, resulting in minimal opportunity for innovation and originality. However, during the Romantic period this tendency experienced a significant shift, opening the possibility for more boundary-pushing literature, leading to the creation of the hybrid genres and blended frontiers that are found in contemporary literature.

However, as stated by Isomaa et al. (2020), considering how genres have changed over time, classical and static definitions are outdated and result insufficient to describe contemporary writing, even though their historical phases can be analysed for a better understanding of the status of a genre (p. 12). Therefore, when the chronological approach is applied to the dystopian genre, we find that the dystopian imagination addresses the

problematic tendencies of a particular time, acting as ethical and political warning for its readers by creating places that are significantly worst that the current one. Thus, authors' portrayal of dystopian societies varies depending on the socio-political problems of the time:

> The contemporary historical moment is interrogated by critical positions that necessarily work within a dystopian structure of feeling (and perhaps that "moment" has recurred, as has the dystopian genre, in one form or another since the onset of twentieth-century capitalism—beginning in its monopoly and imperialist phase, taking another form in the 1940s and 1950s, and yet another in the 1980s and 1990s). (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p. 4)

Despite the formal emergence and consolidation of dystopian fictions in the second half of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, isolated dystopian features can be found in different genres from ancient times: as Uhlenbruch (2015) claims, in eighteenth-century slave narratives' the population was already dehumanized, though not by machines but by humans (p. 128); even the Bible contains accounts of oppressed societies and of the destruction of the world by natural disasters, such as Noah's flood myth or *The Apocalypses of Saint John* (Isomaa et al., 2020, p. 14).

Furthermore, the term 'dystopia' was coined before the upcoming of the genre during the late nineteenth century, co-occurring with the rise of industrialisation and automatisation (Uhlenbruch, 2015) in the post-Civil War society. From this moment, writers began to appeal to humanity's growing fear of eventually being replaced by mechanical perfection, resulting in the creation of science fiction novels that will lay the foundations for the future dystopian genre. According to Wilson (2013), novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818 or H. G. Wells's vision of modernity in *The Time Machine* in 1895 are a case in point (p. 1).

As previously introduced by Baccolini and Moylan, the establishment of the utopian genre took place in the early twentieth century with the so-called classical dystopias, such as George

Orwell's *1984*. Struggling with the economic and political problems that popped out after the end of World War II, classical dystopias present pessimistic futures where there is little to no hope for social improvement and thus for scaping the close, gloomy ending that characterise these writings (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p. 7). As stated by Isomaa et al. (2020), classical dystopian endings are frequently hopeless because the social rebellion that would possibly defeat the authoritarian dystopian empire, which is the main focus of the work, results crushed, and the dystopian regime is maintained (p. 16)

Moving forward into the historical timeline, during the 1960s and 1970s utopian literature resurged in the new form of the 'critical utopia': "'critical,' in this sense, incorporates an Enlightenment sense of *critique*, a postmodern attitude of self-reflexivity" (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p. 2) where both writer and reader acknowledge the limitations of the classical utopia, approaching it not as an aspiration to a possible reality but as a literary dream. Classical utopias, such as Plato's *Republic* or Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (Wilson, 2013, p. 1) were replaced because they failed to catalyse a social transformation by trying to change reality into a very specific model of utopian society; in opposition, the new 'critical' utopia challenges the system by presenting a better but open future that opposes the dominant ideology (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p. 2).

In the 1980s, this utopian revival ended abruptly due to the radical change in economy, politics and culture. Anti-utopias arose and questioned the optimism of critical utopias:

> (It) constitutes a reaction against the master narrative of the Enlightenment that considers science, technology, and education as the means for creating a better future for humankind. In dystopian fiction, science and technology often serve or produce undesirable or morally dubious, sometimes destructive, purposes and consequences. (Isooma et al., 2020, p. 15)

Consequently, the conservative politics of the time led to a reformulation of the dystopian writing, generating a negative image of technological advance: the new neoliberal discourse substituted the utopian social dream for the promises of capitalism, assuring to find immediate happiness on the market. Nevertheless, as stated by Baccolini and Moylan (2003), by 1985 the consequences of this lifestyle started to be recognized and questioned by new dystopian narratives such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (p. 3). Dystopias went beyond the distinctive pessimism of the genre by supplying a critical view that addressed the social and political problems of the time by analysing it sources, pointing out the need for change to prevent these speculations from becoming a reality. In conclusion, 'critical dystopias' are "those narratives that despite the grim scenario (or rather through it) uphold some explicit or implicit form of utopian hope – belief in the possibility of radical social transformation" (Moylan, 2000, as quoted by Isooma et al., 2020, p. 13).

1.3. Genre Approach: Speculative Fiction

With the increasing popularity of critical dystopias, a great debate emerged around the classification of the new hybrid genre that defied the classical generic categories. Contemporary society witnesses a certain consensus as to labelling the dystopian genre under the broader category of speculative fiction, despite the fact that the meaning of 'speculative fiction' still arises discussion. As Oziewicz (2017) claims:

> The term "speculative fiction" has three historically located meanings: a subgenre of science fiction that deals with human rather than technological problems, a genre distinct from and opposite to science fiction in its exclusive focus on possible futures, and a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating "consensus reality" of everyday experience. In this latter sense, speculative fiction includes fantasy,

> science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres like the gothic, dystopia, weird fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction […] and more. (p.1)

Departing from Oziewicz's first definition, speculative fiction loomed as a subset of science fiction that focused on humanity's reaction towards the new technological environment, excluding all non-mimetic forms, narratives that intentionally strayed from reality such as fantasy, dystopia and horror. It was not until the twentieth century that this viewpoint was dismissed, as no work of literature fully transcribes the real world; there is always an element of imagination involved. Thus, whether departing or not from reality, all literary genres employ fictional resources to create their fictional worlds.

By this means, many authors upheld that non-mimetic forms must also be considered literary ones, although differentiated from science-fiction: this second approach theorized that speculative fiction should be considered an individual genre opposed to its fictional counterpart. The main defender of this definition was Margaret Atwood herself: Atwood claimed that while science-fiction portrays situations that could not possibly happen today – just like time travel or aliens' invasions -, speculative fiction writers base their narratives on more solid facts, leading to conjecture about conceivable events that, in opposition to science fiction, might take place (Atwood, 2005, pp. 108-110). Nonetheless, as Oziewicz (2017) claims, Atwood's approach to speculative fiction presents a key weakness in building her definition around the narrative's ability to predict future events, since "the works it designates are subject to retrospective transformation into science fiction if their at-one-point possible futures do not become reality" (p. 5).

Finally, the understanding of speculative fiction as a broad category that embraces all non-mimetic genres -including utopia, dystopia and postapocalyptic fiction- has increased since the 2000's, becoming the dominant consensus among scholars (Oziewicz, 2017, p. 6). In this sense, speculative fiction is offered as a broad umbrella term for narratives that

intentionally shift away from replicating reality, a collective that had historically being excluded from the literary status and normally regarded as "popular" fiction, even when its popularity was incredibly increasing as well as its cultural impact. Baccolini and Moylan (2003) also comment on the benefits of this approach, noting that the inclusiveness of speculative fiction allows narratives that diverge from classical genre traditions, such as dystopia, to become visible and accordingly valued in the literary sphere (p. 7)

Notwithstanding the previously exposed definitions of speculative fiction, Isooma et al. (2020) nuance that no genre "has an essence that remains the same through changes over time and place, and which can be expressed in a single definition" (p. 12). Therefore, rather than looking for a thorough definition of speculative fiction, it is more advisable to comprehend it as a category whose meaning will probably transform and expand, reaching more historically located meanings in the future.

1.4. A Hybrid Genre: Societal Dystopias and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

When approaching the most fundamental features of dystopian fiction, it must be noted that since for many critics the terms speculative fiction and science fiction are still interchangeable, dystopian characteristics are often dragged from the science fiction manuals. According to Kuźnicki (2017), these most relevant features of dystopian fiction comprise a plausible description of the technological environment, the novum -a key factor of estrangement- and the impact on society of this scientific innovation (p. 15). Additionally, Malmgren (1991) claims that any fictional universe (i.e. all non-mimetic piece of literature) is built around two major components: the 'world', which comprises four interlocking systems -actants, social order, topology and natural laws-, and the 'story', the plot connecting the elements that conform the fictional world (pp. 139-142). The novum is introduced into one of the systems, leading to a set of transformations in the remaining elements; when the altered system is the social order,

the genre drives towards a utopian or dystopian excursion that invites the reader to compare his reality with the fictional society to establish normative frameworks that critique or affirm contemporary societal structures (Malmgren, 1991, p. 141).

In societal dystopias, the focal point is the totalitarian, oppressive, racist or classist system along with the rebellion striving to crush it. On this matter, Isomaa et al. (2020) comment on the dynamics between the struggling individual and the different oppressive strategies of the hegemonic order, moving from physical to psychological violence and the coercion of the emotions (p. 15). Thus, the narrative is built around those characters who are not conform with the culture and values of the dystopian society, which are morally incorrect and violate the individual's rights by employing pain as a political weapon to exercise complete control over them. Baccolini and Moylan (2003) also discuss the employment of discursive power to alienate the population, and how the counter-narrative of resistance must question the fundamental, unreflectively accepted values of the system in order to dismantle it (p. 5).

Additionally, the referred dystopian societies often emerge as a response to apocalyptic catastrophes -such as pollution, the destruction of the natural world, climate change or wide-scale war- that impact the world and force humanity to adapt to the new post-apocalyptic environment (Isomaa et al., 2020, p. 18). An example of a bad society created to survive these catastrophic events is found in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: the patriarchal and totalitarian Republic of Gilead arises as an effort to overcome environmental pollution and radiation (which rendered most women in the state sterile) by taking control of the still fertile population and regulating its reproductive behaviour.

The crossover of dystopian, postapocalyptic and feminist fiction found in Atwood's novel illustrates how dystopian accounts drift towards the practice of genre blurring:

> The borders of utopia and dystopia as genres are not rigid, but permeable; these forms absorb the characteristics of other genres, such as comedy or tragedy. In this sense,

> dystopia as a genre is the ideal site for generic blends. Conservative forms are transformed by merging with dystopia, a merge that forces political reconsideration, and traditionally conservative forms can progressively transform the dystopian genre so that its pessimism shifts from being resigned to being militant. (Donawerth, 2003, p. 29)

Hence, by intentionally borrowing features from other genres, dystopias question fixed literary boundaries and become a generic crossover, allowing various social movements such as feminism, anti-war protest or ecologism to employ the dystopian hybrid genre as a medium for critical expression. Moreover, the practice of genre-crossing grants dystopian writers the creative freedom to employ resources from other literary forms and keep expanding the frontiers of dystopian literature.

1.5. Genres of the Anthropocene: Dystopian and Climate Fiction

According to Crutzen and Stoermer (2000), the Anthropocene is a geological era that begins by the end of the eighteenth century and is characterized by the advent of humanity as the dominant force in shaping the ecology and geology of the planet (pp. 17-18). This proposed epoch, which describes the current period in Earth's history, is marked by significant changes such as the extinction of many non-human species, the destruction of natural habitats and the ecosystem as long as the climate change, signalling technology, science and capitalism as their main cause. As such, dystopian fiction can be considered a genre of the Anthropocene since it explores the potential disastrous consequences of human behaviour for the future of the planet (Isooma et al., 2020, p.15).

On the nomenclature of the Anthropocene, Evans comments that "the term introduces a novum that differentiates it from our prior sense of the world, integrates that novum into

a future-oriented but historically grounded narrative, and uses that narrative to direct a reexamination of modernity" (p. 485). By calling attention to the past and present environmental costs of the capitalist system, as well as to our 'unnatural' relationship with non-human species and nature, the fictional genres of the Anthropocene help readers reconsider our historical past and to imagine, from this new perspective, what our future could be.

On this matter, climate fiction - commonly regarded as "cli-fi" – is presented as a genre of the Anthropocene that plays a crucial role in showing the impact of global warming to a wider public. Howbeit, neither cli-fi or dystopias are considered a genre in the scholarly sense: rather than adhering to a strict set of formal and stylistic conventions, these borrow and adapt devices from established genres. Within these frameworks, cli-fi focuses on the psychological, social and political issues derived from climate change, mixing factual scientific research with imaginative speculation on the future of humanity (Goodbody and Johns-Putra, 2019, pp. 1-9). Streeby (2018) suggests that climate fiction has the ability to make readers approach climate change in new critical ways by engaging them with fictional worlds to trigger real emotions and responses (p. 18). In other words, with its capability to make people reconsider real issues through fiction, cli-fi develops as a vehicle for protest against political inaction regarding the threat of climate change.

Expanding on this view, although the large-scale human effects on the planet begun to be scientifically studied in the nineteenth century, it was not until the 1960's and 1970's that renewed attention to climate change led to widespread public concern and literary engagement with the phenomenon (Goodbody and Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 3). Despite the proper creation of cli-fi literature during these decades, the genre was popularized in the first years of the new century with novels like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003): as the book opens "the everyday reality of the post-climate change and post-industrial era is immediately apparent. Atwood details the failures of modernity" (Philips, 2019, p. 49). By employing devices from

apocalyptic fiction such as the biblical myth of the flood or a virus that radically decimates the population, Atwood creates an effect of urgency on the reader that aims to raise awareness about the consequences of climate change if drastic measures are not taken, thereby conveying a sense of the importance of both behavioural and political change on the issue.

1.6. Post-Humanism: Questioning Borders

Posthumanism is a philosophical and cultural movement that questions the conventional definition of humanity, understanding the process of posthumanisation as "those dynamics by which a society comes to include members other than 'natural' biological human beings" (Gladden, 2018, p. 35), a process driven by its technologization. Due to the diversity of applications of the term -from academic field and artistic expression to political campaigns and the development of technology for commercial purposes-, some scholars have chosen to create a typology to classify the different manifestations of posthumanism. Gladden (2018) categorised it based on two factors. First, depending on its understanding of posthumanity, posthumanism can be analytic, comprehending it as a reality already present in the contemporary world; or synthetic, approaching posthumanity as a future development that can be achieved or avoided. Second, focusing on its goal, posthumanism can be either theoretical or practical, either aimed at pure knowledge or seeking to catalyse a real change (p. 39).

On the other hand, Mosca (2013) argues that the most notable branches of posthumanism are two: transhumanism, which seeks to enhance the human body and its biological limitations through the use of technology; and critical posthumanism, understood as a co-evolution between humans and machines, but also with other non-human species and the natural world (p. 45). Thus, transhumanism and posthumanism are arguably opposed, since the former tends to neglect the possible disastrous consequences of body enhancement for the planet, while the latter "stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to an

ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well" (Ferrando, 2013, p. 32). Nevertheless, as Canvus (2021) claims, they are also overlapping issues, as both advocate for human enhancement, and transhumanism needs the posthumanist ethics to effectively improve the human body without destroying its environment (p. 177).

In the work of Margaret Atwood, all synthetic posthumanism, transhumanism and critical posthumanism converge to explore the relationship between humans and machines as long as the impact of technology in our conception of humanity. The author's concerns about the post-human condition are shown in many of her novels and interviews; for instance, in the Kesterton Lecture she delivered in 2004, Atwood asked questions such as "What is a human being?" or "How far can we go in the alteration department and still have a human being" (Howells 2006 in Mosca, 2013, p. 46). Another example is Atwood's dystopian novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003), which shows the consequences of Crake's plan, a scientist disillusioned with humanity's destruction of the environment who decides to create a virus that ultimately brings about the extinction of human beings, replacing them with eco-conscious, genetically modified creatures. Commenting on the transhuman impulse and on the analytical, speculative value of the novel, Yoo (2019) highlights that:

> Transhumanism might be actively promoting a dystopian future that would radically destabilize the 'ontological foundations of what counts as human', and would consolidate emergent changes in our notions of human biology, consciousness, and cybernetic beings, brought on by the exponential growth of technology and science. (p. 663)

Finally, in her novel *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), Margaret Atwood illustrates the power of corporal technology to suppress individual freedom by depicting a world where women are implanted with false memories to 'fall in love' with its assigned partners (Cuadrado Payeras, 2019, p. 35). Through this means, Atwood raises important ethical questions about

humanity's current coexistence with technology and the natural world while drawing onto the possible consequences of the rapid, unconscious technological change we are undergoing.

2. Analyzing *Oryx and Crake* Dystopian World

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is a speculative fiction work that explores the possible consequences of environmental degradation, unchecked technological advancement and the ethical implications of genetic engineering. This chapter examines the novel's dystopian and post-apocalyptic themes, contrasting humanist and post-humanist perspectives through the novel's protagonists. By analyzing the implications of both Jimmy and Crake's approaches, Atwood invites the readers to reconsider the current relationship between humanity, technology and the environment: as the author herself suggests, *Oryx and Crake* is not only about catastrophe but about the changes society needs to convey to avoid the dystopian future to become real.

2.1. Margaret Atwood: Writing for a Troubled World

Margaret Atwood is a well-known Canadian writer whose extensive work –including poetry, short stories, novels, essays and literary criticism- is inspired by the intersection of feminist, Canadian nationalist, ecological or human activist concerns, among others. Particularly, Atwood's environmental concerns show as especially influential in all her career, being the author's childhood experiences the origin of her ecological consciousness. Her father, Carl Atwood, a professor of Zoology at the university of Toronto, established a unique lifestyle for his family -they spent every summer in a forest workstation for his entomological research. These early encounters with wilderness made Atwood acutely aware of the importance of nature's preservation and of its fragility (Cooke, 2004, pp. 3-4), an environmental concern that subsequently spanned in her writing due to the threat humans posed to nature. As Telligman (2013) explains, "in Atwood's understanding, ecological ruin stems from human estrangement from the natural environment, an estrangement fortified by capitalism and consumerism in contemporary societies" (p. 2).

In her dystopian novels, Atwood explores the complex relationship of humans with nature: she does not endorse the complete cessation of the use of technology but advocates for a more responsible employment of its potential and acute knowledge of its risks (Telligman, 2013, p. 2). However, her writing is also platform to denounce the degradation of the environment, picturing in her novels the possible disastrous consequences of the global warming, pollution, and the technological interference in the natural world to warm about the dangerous tendencies of our current society. As the author herself explains, writers are "eye-witnesses, I-witnesses", witnesses to "the story of the disaster which is the world" (Atwood, 1982, p. 203) who must shed light on the world issues for the readers to critically analyze their role in the current crisis and being able to act accordingly (Cooke, 2004, p. 18).

As Said (2017) states, Atwood aligns with Edward W. Said's understanding of an intellectual:

> The intellectual is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her/his business. The central fact for me is, I think, that the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'etre* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. (Said in Kuźnicki, 2017, p. 2)

In other words, an intellectual is a writer who comprehends their obligation towards humanity, which is not to entertain their readers but to use their privileged position to give

voice to all those people and issues that are often forgotten by society. In fact, for Atwood art is a moral matter where writing not only depicts the world but critically analyse its faults, witnessing its failures to finally suggesting possible solutions (Rigney, 1987, p. 1). Therefore, the author's commitment to human rights, defiance of power structures and advocacy for freedom of expression make of Margaret Atwood a relevant voice in the contemporary intellectual landscape. Nevertheless, Atwood's concerns are not limited to fiction: Cooke (2004) explains that the author is a real activist who, as a member of organizations such as PEN International -a leading writers' association that advocates for freedom of expression- or Greenpeace, fights censorship and protects writers who are persecuted in many country for simply expressing themselves while speaks out about the threaten environment and the urgent need of preserving natural spaces (pp. 5-6).

As far as *Oryx and Crake* is concerned, the author explains that writing yet another dystopian account so soon after the publication of her best-seller *The Blind Assassin* in 2000 was not her original plan. However, she found herself sketching *Oryx and Crake* on a boat when seeing the glaciers of the Artic receding, a few months before the September 11 terrorist attacks took place in the United Sates (Atwood, 2003, p. 1). Margaret Atwood coincided to being writing about a fictional catastrophe when just a real one happened deeply influenced the genesis of her new book:

> *Oryx and Crake* is a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper. It contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians, it invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent. Every novel begins with a *what if* and then sets forth its axioms. The *what if* of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, *What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us?* Writers write about what worries them, and the world of *Oryx and Crake* is what worries me now. It's not a question of our inventions— all

> human inventions are merely tools—but of what might be done with them; for no matter how high the tech, *Homo sapiens sapiens* remains at heart what he's been for tens of thousands of years—the same emotions, the same preoccupations. (Atwood, 2005, pp. 285-286)

With these questions in mind, Atwood created *Oryx and Crake* as a reflection of her concerns for the present and future of humanity, a double dystopia that stands as a warming of what *will* happen if we continue to employ inappropriately our technological creations without any restrain.

2.2.- Dystopian and Post-Apocalyptic Context

Oryx and Crake opens *in media res*, placing the reader in a post-apocalyptic world with a devastated environment whose fauna and flora have been substituted by biotechnological modified beings. However, the plot does not unfold chronologically but goes back and forth in Snowman's life, the last human being on the planet who was once called Jimmy. In the present, post-apocalyptic world, Snowman becomes the caretaker of the Crakers, hominids that resemble women and men but who are designed to lack the former humanity's flaws. Through flashbacks, the novel delves into Snowman's memories, recalling his life in a capitalist society driven by technological inventions and its morally dubious employment, which ultimately led to its destruction by Crake's hands, Snowman's friend and a scientist disappointed with the path that his own race had underwent. Crake, who was determined to "save the world even if he must destroy that world in order to save it" (Ingersoll, 2004, p. 166), developed a lethal virus that whipped out all of humanity (including himself), solely leaving Snowman alive with the task of guiding the Crakers as the new inhabitants of the planet.

Delving into the contraposing images of past and present, pre and post-apocalypitic world, Kuźnicki (2017) states that Atwood's exploitation of dystopian fiction in *Oryx and*

Crake is double: the world before its post-apocalyptic ending in the book represents our near-future society, while the world after man-made bio-ecological apocalypse shows a more distant, uncertain future (pp. 77-80). The division and contrast between these two periods becomes obvious from the first page of the novel, where the remnants of both worlds converge to form the post-apocalyptic landscape that Snowman gazes upon:

> Snowman wakes before dawn. He lies unmoving, listening to the tide coming in, wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades, wish-wash, wish-wash, the rhythm of heartbeat" (p.1) On the eastern horizon there's a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly glow. […] The offshore towers stand out in dark silhouette against it, rising improbably out of the pink and pale blue of the lagoon. 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. (Atwood, 2003, p. 1)

Dunlap (2013) comments on the contrasting power of this image, showing how the binary divisions between human and animal, or culture and nature, have been blurred: the 'various barricades'- the products of culture- lie mixed together with waves- the representation of nature, where "the sound of nature commingling with culture is then compared to a symbol of both—the heartbeat—an image associated both with a biological organ and with cultural constructions of love and vitality" (p. 4). Nevertheless, Yoo (2019) highlights the outcomes of Crake's plan, a desolated picture of what the world *was*, *is*, and *could have been*: the greyish-rosy haze signals the presence of 'deadly' UV rays, carcinogenic to humans; the towers that once stood solid on land are now covered by the sea, and instead of the traffic's noise, Snowman is just able to hear the waves smashing together the cars' rusted pieces (p. 671). Both scholars explore Crake's radical reimagination of the relationship between humanity and environment, reflecting his pursuit to create a utopian vision in which all entities coexist, but emphasizing the actual failure of his plan, which resulted in a collapsing dystopia.

Notwithstanding the apocalyptic catastrophe, the world described in *Oryx and Crake* before its destruction was not blissful either: Jimmy (Snowman) and Crake lived in a totalitarian state ruled by science, stratifying its populations between a small privileged elite - the scientists, living in guarded parcels called Compounds-, and all the rest, inhabitants of typical twentieth century cities named the Pleeblands. Both main characters, as children to relevant genetic engineers, dwelled in the pollution-free areas of the Compounds, growing wealthier and safer than the masses in the Pleeblands. Jimmy's father explained this division to his son in the following terms:

> Long time ago, in the days of knights and dragons, the kings and dukes had lived in castles, with high walls and drawbridges and slots on the ramparts so you could pour hot pitch on your enemies, and the Compounds were the same idea. Castles for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside.
>
> "So are we the kings and dukes?" asked Jimmy. "Oh, absolutely," said his father, laughing. (Atwood, 2003, p. 28)

Thus, what Jimmy's father exemplifies is the crucial role science played to control the masses, becoming the most powerful instrument for the technocratic regime (Kuźnicki, 2017, p. 87), reinforcing Atwood's vision of human's inventions as tools whose negative or positive potential depends on the intention of the ones who employ it.

In addition to science as a tool for power, *Oryx and Crake* pre-catastrophe world interacts with late modern American capitalism and consumerism as strategies for the maintenance of the totalitarian state (Howells, 2006, p. 163): "banking by fingertip, using a microwave without nuking your eggs, filling out housing applications for this or that Module and job applications for this or that Compound, family heredity research, negotiating your own marriage-and-divorce contracts, wise genetic match-making" (Atwood, 2003, p. 42). As Kuźnicki (2017) points out, the culture of overabundance turns people dependent on scientific

and technological products (p. 85). This becomes obvious with the unneeded but convenient 'improvements' that citizens are invited to implement in their daily life, along with the marketing of genetic enhancement, which is supposed to ameliorate themselves and their families by superficial means.

Nevertheless, in *Oryx and Crake* society, the traffic of goods is connected to the market of animals and even people. Dunlap (2013) explains how the scientists of the Compounds commercialize the genetic code of all beings, since both "human and non-human reproduction can be planned, modified, and improved" (p. 5). Jimmy's father himself was the main architect of the pigoons, a hybrid organism combining pig and human DNA designed as a living farm for compatible-human kidneys and skin cells. In the Compounds, playing with genetic material became an after-hours game: "There'd been a lot of fooling around in those days: create-an-animal was so much fun, said the guys doing it; it made you feel like God" (p. 26). Along with the *pigoons*, the novel also references a range of other hybrid creatures, like *rakunks, wolvogs, snats* or luminescent rabbits, many of which "were destroyed because they were too dangerous to have around" (p. 26). However, as Atwood's scientist could manipulate the genetic material of all these creatures, so can they create and commercialize human babies (Dunlap, 2013, p. 5) who were purchased online according to the consumer taste: "gender, sexual orientation, height, colour of skin and eyes- it's all on order, it can all be done or redone" (p. 289). Therefore, the Compounds prioritized market demand over ethical considerations, making human life as economically valuable as that of a *pigoon*: the totalitarian state realized that it was more profitable to colonize the life of the individual than its death (Foucault, 1984, p. 259), and thus built its capitalist and consumerist society around it, since life is the focus of biopower and its most powerful control weapon.

While the Compounds were privileged areas designed for the nation's ruling elite, the inhabitants of the Pleeblands could not avoid engaging in compulsive consumerism as a means

to escape the pollution, overpopulation and constant delinquency that filled their cities: "vacant warehouses, burnt-out tenements, empty parking lots. Here and there were sheds and huts put together from scavenged materials—sheets of tin, slabs of plywood—and inhabited no doubt by squatter" (p. 185). Withal, Kuźnicki (2017) comments on the breakable connection between the well-being of the dwellers of the Compounds and their utility for the regime, considering that they were safer than the inhabitants of the Pleeblands whereas they did not lose their profitable value or endangered the system, because when this happened they would be disposed of by the CorpSeCorps -the secret police forces-, as occurred to Crake's father, once an important dignitary that was executed solely for knowing too much about the immoral functioning of the regime (pp. 84-87). In comparison, the Pleeblands offered more freedom to choose their way of life: "real musicians on the street corners, real bands of street urchins. Asymmetries, deformities: the faces here were a far cry from the regularity of the Compounds" (p. 228) and also an open access to the truth: "everything in the pleeblands seemed so boundless, so porous, so penetrable, so wide-open. So subject to change" (p. 196). In essence, the contrast between living in the Compounds or in the Pleeblands underscores the regime's broader strategy of dominance, where control is maintained through the promise of safety and the exploitation of both fear and desire: while the Compounds offer security and commodity to their inhabitants, these scientists lack the autonomy and access to the unfiltered reality of the Pleeblands' dwellers.

2.3.- *Oryx and Crake*: Humanist and Posthumanist Alternatives

One of the most vital subject-matter of the novel is the ethical debate of contemporary genetic engineering: "in *Oryx and Crake,* questions of genetic predisposition and cultural experience are examined more explicitly than in any other Atwood novel" (Tolan, 2007, p. 297). Atwood denounces that technology is no longer a tool to improve life's experience but a more

controversial topic that has changed the understanding of the human body, as she asserts in an interview with Danielle Groen: “As far as inventing new animals, or using pigs to grow kidneys—that’s starting to happen now. They’ve broken the code. Whereas when I wrote Oryx and Crake, they hadn’t quite figured out how to get past the rejection factor. So ‘What next?’ I say.” (Groen, 2009, p. 221). Thus, Atwood addresses the open controversy among those who question the morality of interfering with the cycle of life by altering human’s nature and those who defend genetic modification due to the vast potential it holds to benefit humanity, depicting both points of view in an argument between Jimmy’s mother and father. In the novel, his mother challenges her husband about his involvement in the *pigoons’* project by exclaiming: “what you’re doing—this pig brain thing. You’re interfering with the building blocks of life. It’s immoral. It’s… sacrilegious” (Atwood, 2003, p. 30), to which his father responds: “t’s just proteins, you know that! There’s nothing sacred about cells and tissue, it’s just…” (Atwood, 2003, p. 30). At this point, Jimmy’s mother accuses him of playing god, messing with a natural human state – the ‘building blocks of life’- that should not be modified. By contrast, Jimmy’s father questions the traditional understanding of humanity by reducing it to a set of biological features that are not sacred but altered to preference. Additionally, Telligman (2013) comments on the father’s inability to express what human ‘just’ is, readdressing Atwood’s original question of how to combine the instrumental use of genetics with its ethical treatment -the contemporary difficulties of ascribing dignity to the body when DNA’s radical modification has become a reality (p. 10).

The opening epigraphs of the novel already introduce the above discussed dichotomy, which will be deeply discussed along its corpus as long as personified by the two male protagonists: a quotation from Jonathan Swifts’ *Gulliver’s Travels* represents Crake’s dehumanized science, while the following quotation by Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* is interpreted as the traditional human morality, carried out by Jimmy’s character (Kuźnicki,

2017, p. 80). These sources contrapose Swift's disillusion with mankind -which led Crake to articulate and ultimately accomplish his project for the complete eradication of the human race-, with Woolf's emotionality and defiance of human rights, qualities that Jimmy will cling to when confronting his loneliness as the only human alive, as well as his responsibility in the survival of the new race of hominids. Notwithstanding that the gender difference of the writers also hints the tension between Gulliver's values of science and reason - a "plain matter of fact"- and the virtues of imagination, writing and arts conveyed by Woolf's speculative vision of the world, Howells (2006) argues that Atwood's narrative partly erases this opposition by highlighting that creativity is an attribute shared by both artist and scientists in the novel -as their bizarre experiments demonstrate- since this is a quality intrinsic to human's nature (p. 161).

Jimmy and Crake's duality represents the tension between the technological progress desire and the need to preserve humanity's natural values, the former advocating for the transhumanist impulse as a mean to improve the future while the latter relies on traditional human values -such as empathy, human connection or the power of language- toward the same purpose. Nevertheless, as Bergthaller (2010) claims, both alternatives seem to have failed in Atwood's narrative:

> Jimmy and Crake (and the academic institutions they attend) stand for two different ways of tackling these flaws: traditional humanism, which in *Oryx and Crake* appears to have pathetically failed, and an aggressive posthumanism that ruthlessly remodels human nature according to "ecological" criteria – an approach whose triumph the novel depicts as indistinguishable from catastrophe. (p. 729)

Stated otherwise, the traditional human values prove insufficient in Jimmy's attempt to overcome his confinement in the postapocalyptic world, while the Crakers actually exhibit the same human flaws that Crake tried to eliminate with their creation, turning his utopian plan

into a dystopian catastrophe. Therefore, Atwood's narrative seems to suggest that the creation of a sustainable future can only be accomplished by the communion of reason and emotion, science and humanities (Yoo, 2019, p. 677).

2.3.1.- Crake's Transhumanist Approach: The Numbers Man

Crake is a classic example of Atwood's complex and contradictory characters: a brilliant scientist obsessed with technological advancement and deprived of moral values, someone whose extreme and nefarious methods contrast sharply with their utopian visions for environmental and societal improvement, "a demonic figure perhaps, like H. G. Wells's Dr Moreau, but also a failed visionary like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, whose utopian project results in the near extinction of the human race" (Howells, 2006, p. 176). Stein (2010) follows the comparison of Crake with Shelley's Victor Frankestein as both are considered mad scientist whose vision, distorted by ambition and pride led them to disaster (p. 147). However, Kuźnicki (2017) disagrees when labeling Crake as insane, since his goals – supplanting humanity with a new improved species of hominids for the wellbeing of the planet- are logical, objective, and strategically orchestrated (p. 82). In the novel, Crake is early characterized as someone who "was different. More like an adult; in fact more adult than a lot of adults. You could have an objective conversation with him, a conversation in which events and hypotheses were followed through to their logical conclusions" (Atwood, 2003, p. 36).

Whereas Crake's project is undeniably unethical, his analytical thinking is based on the foundations of social biology –which explains social behavior in terms of evolution- and genetic essentialism – a theory that reduces humanity to its genes. As Yoo (2019) illustrates, in Crake's view humans are genetically flawed, ergo their defects are inherent to the species and therefore irreparable, arguing that their substitution by genetically enhanced creatures is a mandatory requisite for the development of a transhumanist utopia (pp. 666-668). When identifying the weaknesses of humankind, Crake locates culture and symbolic thinking as the

root of the world's problems (Marks, 2015, p. 138), which are societal hierarchy, monogamy and religion, as portrayed by the character.

To begin with, Dunlap (2013) analyzes how Crake intends to eliminate suffering by building a world where "hierarchy could not exist" (Atwood, 2003, p. 165), where humans' culture of dominance has been erased (pp. 8-9) and "there's no more jealousy, no more wife-butcherers, no more husband-poisoners […] no pushing and shoving" (Atwood, 2003, p. 93). According to the young scientist, to achieve a utopian society, monogamous reproductive habits represent the first human flaw that must be eliminated since they become a primary source of conflict and violence:

> Under the old dispensation, sexual competition had been relentless and cruel: for every pair of happy lovers there was a dejected onlooker, the one excluded. Love was its own transparent bubble-dome: you could see the two inside it, but you couldn't get in there yourself. That had been the milder form: the single man at the window, drinking himself into oblivion to the mournful strains of the tango. But such things could escalate into violence. Extreme emotions could be lethal. If I can't have you nobody will, and so forth. Death could set in. (Atwood, 2003, p. 91)

In order to eradicate sexual frustration and its consequences, he modifies the Crakers' genetic material to alter their reproductive habits, making them resemble those of animals: during the mating cycle, which takes place each three years, females release pheromones that attract four males, who then perform a ritualized process free of romantic attachment, thereby avoiding competition and jealousy. By doing so, Crake not only controls the overpopulation problem within the pre-catastrophe ecosystem but constructs a new conflict-free society (Dunlap, 2013, p. 9): "no more *No means yes* […] No more prostitution, no sexual abuse of children, no haggling over the price, no pimps, no sex slaves. No more rape" (Atwood, 2003, p. 92).

Additionally, Crake's plan to erase human flaws, including culture, depended on the Crakers' inability for symbolic thinking, which led him to deprived them of attributing significance to reference , therefore avoiding their possible ascription to any religion (Marques, 2015, pp. 137-138). Crake suggests that religions are "based on misery, indefinitely deferred gratification, and sexual frustration", dismissing them to a "G-spot in the brain. *God is a cluster of neurons*, he'd maintained" (Atwood, 2003, pp. 295, 157). From his perspective, religion is a source of control and manipulation, offering fake promises about an afterlife that draws people's attention from real life problems. Crake, as he strives for a logical, reason-based society, perceives religion as an unacceptable barrier that would bring chaos, power struggles and violence to his utopian conception of the world.

When analyzing Crake's commitment to his posthuman project, Telligman (2013) signals that both him and Jimmy were deeply influenced by the society they grew up in, a world where the distinction between representation and authenticity became blurred, unmoored from reality (pp. 12-13). In many interactions they have, Jimmy often attempts to find the truly real while Crake always questions the concept of reality:

> "So, are the butterflies—are they recent?" Jimmy asked after a while. The ones he was looking at had wings the size of pancakes and were shocking pink, and were clustering all over one of the purple shrubs.
>
> "You mean, did they occur in nature or were they created by the hand of man? In other words, are they real or fake?"
>
> "Mm," said Jimmy. He didn't want to get into the *what is real* thing with Crake." (Atwood, 2003, p. 109)

By refusing to distinguish between what is 'real'-natural- or 'fake'-made by humans-, Crake develops a lack of empathy and ethics that ultimately allows him to eliminate mankind without feeling remorse. As Glover (2009) explains, since Crake has always lived surrounded

by scientist who played god, “he is able to convince himself that animals and insects created in a laboratory are the same as those naturally occurring in nature and that there are no ethical questions surrounding the creation of new species” (p. 53). Furthermore, the protagonists entered the world of virtual reality at a very young age, with free access to websites like ‘hedsoff.com’, ‘alibooboo.co’ or ‘HottTotts’ that showed executions, brutal violence and sexual harassment projections whose inauthenticity was dubious: “live coverage of executions in Asia”, “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”, “real sex tourists, filmed while doing things they’d be put in jail for back in their home countries […] The locations were supposed to be countries where life was cheap and kids were plentiful, and where you could buy anything you wanted”, “the giggles must have been recorded, because they weren’t coming from the three girls: they all looked frightened, and one of them was crying” (Atwood, 2003, pp. 82, 83, 90). As Howells (2006) claims, experiencing brutality through a screen deeply influenced Crake, increasing his detachment from reality (p. 176). For him, there is no boundary between cyberspace and reality, there is no difference in exterminating avatars or real people: Crake approaches the human body as raw material to experiment with in his laboratory -as Jimmy’s father does when designing the *pigoons*-. Nevertheless, the novel presents the other protagonist as his counterpoint, contraposing Crake’s transhumanist impulse with Jimmy’s traditional humanist values, following in his mother’s footsteps: “why is it he feels some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed? How much is too much, how far is too far?” (Atwood, 2003, p. 206).

2.3.2.- Jimmy’s Humanist Approach: The Words Man

Jimmy/Snowman, unlike Crake, engages life in a thoughtful and empathetic way, relying on the power of human connection and culture to find meaning in the posthuman world: “Crake

is a ‘Frankenstein figure’ who is bent on the destruction of humanity whereas Snowman is a ‘Crusoe figure’ who is committed to the survival and regeneration of the human species“ (Barzilai, 2018, as quoted by Yoo, 2019, p. 667). As Kuźnicki (2017) explains, Atwood characterises her two protagonists as opposites, contrasting Jimmy’s ethics and commitment to language with Crake’s analytic view and promotion of eugenics (p. 80).

Jimmy places grate value on culture and the various fields of humanities, since for him these are manifestations of inherent features to human beings, those that differentiate them from animals: “when any civilization is dust and ashes […], art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning—human meaning, that is—is defined by them” (Atwood, 2003, p. 170). When Snowman was still Jimmy, he found refuge in the linguistic system, immerse in a world that did not value cultural manifestations but technological advancement. In the post-catastrophe time, he was left with nobody to share these systems with: as the only human alive, he merely coexisted with the Crakers, humanoids created without the ability of symbolic thinking. Therefore, Snowman clung to the books he had read in the past as a desperate survival technique, compiling lists of archaisms whose meaning had no longer reference in the posthuman world:

> He compiled lists of old words too—words of a precision and suggestiveness that no longer had a meaningful application in today’s world […] He memorized these hoary locutions, tossed them left-handed into conversation: wheelwright, lodestone, saturnine, adamant. He’d developed a strangely tender feeling towards such words, as if they were children abandoned in the woods and it was his duty to rescue them. (Atwood, 2003, p. 192)

Snowman continues employing these ‘old words’ with the new species of hominids. Nevertheless, due to the lack of a shared cultural background that would attribute meaning to the terms, language no longer held its communicative value: “He can see the word, he can hear

the word, but he can't reach the word. He can't attach anything to it. […] This dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space." (Atwood, 2003, p. 43). Delving into this matter, Bergthaller (2010) emphasizes that symbolic thinking's effectiveness is a central issue in the novel: "[*Oryx and Crake* questions] what role language, literature and, more generally, the human propensity for symbol-making can play in our attempts to deal with the ecological crisis – a crisis that Atwood describes as arising from flaws in humanity's biological make-up" (p. 729). In other words, Atwood seems to invite readers to reflect on the role of language and creativity, whether it is useful for addressing and lessen the ecological crises produced by humans' flaws -competition, uncontrolled desire for power and domination- by raising awareness and social change; or it may simply serve as a distraction from the destruction caused by the species' pride.

Additionally, as claimed by Telligman (2013), Jimmy sharply contrasts with Crake's view of mankind, showing a superior ability for apprehending both human virtues and faults, understanding the human body not as laboratory supply but as a place for pleasure and emotion (pp. 20-21). This becomes evident in the time Jimmy spends with Oryx, where sexual encounters are often preceded by nightly picnics: "pizza, then Oryx's fingers in the mouth […] Then joy, crushing his whole body in its boa-constrictor grip. Oh stolen secret picnics. Oh sweet delight. Oh clear memory, oh pure pain. Oh endless night" (Atwood, 2003, p. 122). It is in earthly pleasures where Jimmy finds delight, enjoying quotidian activities like food or sex, which feel familiar and tangible. This leads him to experience rejection towards the inhuman, almost mechanical perfection of the Crakers:

> Every time the women appear, Snowman is astonished all over again […] No ripples of fat around their waists, no bulges, no dimpled orange-skin cellulite on their thighs. No body hair, no bushiness. They look like retouched fashion photos, or ads for a high-

> priced workout program. Maybe this is the reason that these women arouse in Snowman not even the faintest stirrings of lust (Atwood, 2003, p. 99)

As Kuźnicki (2017) states, a perfect body is not enough to compensate the lacking human component: the Crakers look too artificial and unreal to produce the same feelings Jimmy experienced towards women (p. 108). With humans, Jimmy felt moved by their imperfections, the traits that made them distinguishable and unique: "It was the thumbprints of human imperfection that used to move him, the flaws in the design: the lopsided smile, the wart next to the navel, the mole, the bruise […] But these new women are neither lopsided nor sad" (Atwood, 2003, p. 100). Jimmy is unable to feel desire towards the female Crakers regardless their beauty, a flawless appearance that actually makes their artificial origin stand up. Furthermore, it was Crake's ambition for perfection that condemned his plan for creating a species that would substituted humankind: he converted the Crakers into copies without originals (Hollinger, 2006, p. 457) Devoid of the defects that make humans complex and unique, the Crakers became simulations of Crake's vision without any true essence of their own, ruining his experiment at creating mechanical being detached from the natural world.

Therefore, another trait that differentiates Jimmy from Crake is the former's effort to discern the line that separates the real from the artificial, which becomes obvious in the first encounter the character has with Oryx. As a teenager, Jimmy was watching a child pornography video when she "looked over her shoulder and right into the eyes of the viewer—right into Jimmy's eyes, into the secret person inside him. *I see you*, that look said. *I see you watching. I know you. I know what you want"* (Atwood, 2003, p. 93). As Telligman (2013) claims, this scene individuates both Oryx and Jimmy: whereas she demands to be treated ethically, reasserting herself as an equal human and not like a consumer product, Jimmy recognizes her realness and takes responsibility for his role in watching her objectification in porn (pp. 21-22).

> Jimmy felt burned by this look—eaten into, as if by acid. She'd been so contemptuous of him. […] But for the first time he'd felt that what they'd been doing was wrong. Before, it had always been entertainment, or else far beyond his control, but now he felt culpable. (Atwood, 2003, p. 93)

Oryx's gaze at eight years old forced Jimmy to withstand the reality of her situation while acknowledging her humanity, distancing him from a society that promotes indifference to reality and favours artificial desensitization. This moment emphasizes the distinctions between Crake and Jimmy: while the scientist remained indifferent to these concerns, adopting a rational detachment towards reality, Jimmy's sensibility forced him to face his complicity in Oryx's abuse, highlighting the discrepancy between Jimmy's sense of guilt and Crake's cold utilitarianism towards mankind.

2.4.- Crake's Failure: Anthropocentrism and Ecotopianism in Oryx and Crake

From an ecocritical point of view, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* denounces the consequences of the actions humankind carried out under their anthropocentric understanding of the animal species and natural resources. The novel presents a dystopian future where humans' complete separation from nature and overstepping of the ethical, scientific, and ecological boundaries led to social and natural collapse.

Mankind's consideration of itself as the dominant species on Earth has persisted for centuries and has been supported, from the biological perspective, by Darwin's theory of evolution. As Martín (2019) exposes, the anthropocentric perspective has also justified the exploitation of the natural world as well as allowed mankind to commit devastating crimes against their fellow humans, creating and maintaining systems of domination and inequality since the dawn of history (p. 175). Atwood questions this pretended supremacy, placing humans as the root of the pre and post-apocalyptic world of *Oryx and Crake.* Surprisingly, Crake's

character is the first to take a stand against human exceptionalism: he can be read as an environmentalist who considers humans -and their power struggles - as the main cause of the planet's degradation (Dunlap, 2013, p. 8). As an example, Crake's ecological concerns are shown in his disapproval of the Happicuppa coffee enterprise:

> "Those guys should be whacked," said Crake.
>
> "Which ones? The peasants? Or the guys killing them?"
>
> "The latter. Not because of the dead peasants, there's always been dead peasants. But they're nuking the cloud forests to plant this stuff." (Atwood, 2003, p. 179)

From Crake's perspective, the problem of humanity as a destructive species cannot be solved: "as a species we're in deep trouble, worse than anyone's saying" (Atwood, 2003, p. 160). Crake realizes that humans are doomed to self-destruction when he encounters Oryx in a porn video: staring at the hopeless kid's gaze, he instantaneously condemns humanity and begins a plan to replace them with a better species for the planet, whose teacher, to avoid repeating the same mistakes as humankind, would be Oryx herself (Martín, 2019, p. 178). Crake's designs would lack jealousy, ambition and pride; for the Crakers, religions and hierarchical structures would be unknown concepts, just as hunting or consuming other living beings:

> What had been altered was nothing less than the ancient primate brain. Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesses. For instance, racism or hierarchy could not exist among them, […] there was no territoriality: the king-of-the-castle hard-wiring that had plagued humanity had, in them, been unwired. […] They were perfectly adjusted to their habitat, so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons, or, for that matter, clothing. They would have no need to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money. (Atwood, 2003, pp. 166-167)

Remarkably, as de Geus (2002) states, Crake's ecological utopian desire for eliminating human-over-nature hierarchies is shared by many ecocritics and environmentalists, ecotopian thinkers who advocate for happiness through the restraining of material pleasure and human desire (p. 189). Due to these considerations, scholars like Ciobanu (2014) agree with Atwood in labelling her work as 'ustopian', arguing that from an ecocritical point of view *Oryx and Crake* is closer to a utopia than to a dystopia:

> As Atwood figures it, however, the end of the Anthropocene is hardly the end of the world—it is simply the end of our world, the end of the world as we know it. As such, it is also an opportunity to imagine how a world that has been radically undone by that anthropo of the "Anthropocene" might come to reconstitute itself anew. (p. 153-54)

Ciubanu's interpretation suggests that the end of the Anthropocene could lead to a new, better era for the planet, free from the ecological threat posed by humans. However, as Dunlap (2013) argues, the novel highlights the risks of radical forms of ecotopianism, a social and ecological movement that seeks to improve the relationship between people and the environment (pp. 1-2). Crake does not intend to achieve a utopian society by promoting awareness of urgent environmental crisis but through the biological elimination of essential human traits. Paradoxically, despite Crake's intention to reduce the gap between humans and other living beings, he is both diminishing and maintaining human anthropocentrism (Dunlap, 2013, p. 3). By controlling and manipulating people's genetic material as well as their reproductive habits without their consent, Crake is reproducing the same anthropogenic behavior he is trying to destroy to bring his ecotopian vision to life. To this extent, Crake determined people's fate by himself, playing god over the planet's future: "*Crake made the Great Emptiness…,* say the men. *For us! For us!* say the women. It's becoming a liturgy. *Oh, good, kind Crake!*" (Atwood, 2003, p. 8).

Nevertheless, Atwood presents ecotopianism as a failed approach, since Crake's hominids develop the same faults he intended to erase with the eradication of mankind. Yoo (2019) explains that, at creating the Crakers without any religious or cultural knowledge, he established a void that Jimmy felt forced to fill when the Crakers inevitably asked about their origin (p. 671-672):

> The Children of Oryx, the Children of Crake. He'd had to think of something. Get your story straight, keep it simple, don't falter […] *Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk.* (Atwood, 2003, p. 100)

Jimmy provides the Crakers with myths, initiating them in the principles of symbolic thinking while bringing them closer to the human condition that Crake detested. Additionally, they develop a hierarchical behavior and a need for rituals to follow Jimmy's invented cosmology (Marques, 2003, p. 140): "they're sitting in a semi-circle around a grotesque-looking figure, a scarecrowlike effigy […] *Ohhhh,* croon the women. *Mun,* the men intone. Is that *Amen* ? Surely not! Not after Crake's precautions, his insistence on keeping these people pure" (Atwood, 2003, p. 375). Ultimately, Crake's failure lies in his inability to understand the complexity of human nature. Language, symbolism, spirituality and emotional connection are also inherent aspects of humanity, traits that cannot be eliminated without destroying the very essence that sets humans apart from animals.

Conclusion

The present dissertation was conceived as a study on how the dystopian genre evolved to combine its traditional formal features with conventions from other fictional genres, resulting in a hybrid genre that allows a broader critical and creative expression to warm about the dangers of some current societal tendencies. The findings confirm that dystopian fiction, particularly in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, successfully address contemporary problematic aspects such as the alarming scalation of climate change and the deliberate continuation of human activities that deteriorate the planet through industrialization and unchecked technological advancement, benefiting economic and political elites.

Oryx and Crake's world is extremely polluted, as the ozone layer destruction made solar radiation deadly for humans and rendered the natural environment dangerously unpredictable: [Snowman] awakes to thunder and a sudden wind: the afternoon storm is upon him. He scrambles to his feet, grabs his sheet. Those howlers can come on very fast […] Sometimes there are hailstones as big as golf balls, but the forest canopy slows their fall" (Atwood, 2003, p. 23). In Kuźnicki's (2017) words, Atwood pictures the last stage of environmental degradation, where the collapse is irreversible and humanity is doomed to destruction (p. 89).The novel's title itself warms about its fatal outcome, since both 'oryx' and 'crake' are names of already extinct species (Howells, 2006, p.7), which adds to the disappearance of the polar bear and the beluga whale, and ultimately, the human race. By interfering with nature while ignoring ethical and ecological concerns, humanity heads to a dystopian future where rising sea levels, extreme weather conditions and pollution turns the world uninhabitable. Through *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood shows how nature's exploitation for profit and climate inaction would easily lead to complete societal downfall. Therefore, this dissertation validates its initial objective at asserting that dystopian fiction becomes a powerful

medium for addressing contemporary issues and serve as a call to action, exhorting readers to reconsider what they could do today to reshape the future.

To conclude, although the chosen novel has been analyzed from a dystopian perspective, focusing on its societal, environmental and posthuman implications, it also conveys the possibility to be studied from a feminist perspective. Further analysis could delve into gender dynamics in dystopian and speculative fiction. Particularly, Oryx's character embodies the commodification of women as she was victim of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Jimmy and Crake consumption of pornography also normalizes the dehumanization of women, addressing real-world influence of media on the development of misogynistic attitudes from a very young age. Additionally, it would be of interest to expand on the themes explored in this dissertation by analyzing the remaining two books in the trilogy, *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013). *The Year of the Flood* introduces new characters who have survived the pandemic, founders of an eco-feminist religious group that contrasts sharply with the male-dominated scientific corporations in *Oryx and Crake.* Finally, the trilogy's closure opens the possibility for human renewal, questioning whether humanity will learn from its mistakes and avoid them in the future or confirm Atwood's claim about the cycle nature of history: that despite technological advancements, destruction is inherent to human's nature.

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