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**Storytelling as Survival in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and
Crake* and *The Year of the Flood***

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For Anderson,

a ni nin.

(For now and forever).

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"All that anxiety and anger, those dubious good intentions, those tangled lives, that blood. I can tell about it or I can bury it. In the end, we'll all become stories. Or else we'll become entities. Maybe it's the same."

"The Entities"

(Margaret Atwood, *Moral Disorder*).

Abstract

This thesis examines *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, speculative fiction novels by Margaret Atwood. I argue that storytelling is a means of survival in both novels, since protagonists rely on telling their own stories in order to be able to deal with their situations of survivors of apocalypse. First, I discuss how storytelling works as a theme in both novels, adopting Linda Hucheen's and Patricia Waugh's considerations on fragmented narratives. Second, I articulate both novels self-awareness narratives with theory on dystopia, based on the notions by Tom Moylan, drawing on his concept of critical dystopia. Finally, I consider the ways in which Atwood rewrites the traditional narrative of apocalypse in the two novels. In this thesis I propose a reading of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* as counterpart novels in the sense that, when read together, they amplify the discussion of the dystopian scenario presented. Storytelling as survival resonates in the many narrative levels of both works and I argue that even though the connection between storytelling and survival is a common theme in the two texts, it is worked differently in each of them. *Oryx and Crake* raises a discussion on the impossibility of telling a story straightforwardly and on the consequences of a society which devalues storytelling. *The Year of the Flood*, in turn, explores storytelling as a means of conveying survival knowledge and as well the consequences, both positive and negative, of the sharing of experience through oral stories.

Keywords: storytelling, survival, dystopian fiction, speculative fiction.

Resumo

A presente dissertação examina *Oryx and Crake* e *The Year of the Flood*, romances de ficção especulativa de Margaret Atwood. A proposta deste trabalho é a de que o ato de contar histórias funciona como uma forma de sobrevivência em ambos os romances, uma vez que seus protagonistas contam suas próprias histórias a fim de lidar com a situação de serem sobreviventes do apocalipse. Primeiramente, discuto como esse ato de contar histórias é tematizado nos dois romances, utilizando as considerações de Linda Hutcheon e Patricia Waugh sobre narrativas fragmentadas. A seguir, articulo as narrativas autoconscientes de ambos os romances com a teoria da distopia, baseando-me principalmente em Tom Moylan e seu conceito de distopia crítica. Finalmente, considero o modo como Atwood reescreve a narrativa apocalíptica tradicional nos dois romances em foco. Nessa dissertação, ainda proponho a leitura de *Oryx and Crake* e *The Year of the Flood* como romances que formam uma contraparte no sentido de que, quando lidos juntos, amplificam a discussão do cenário distópico apresentado. O ato de contar histórias como forma de sobrevivência está presente nos diversos níveis narrativos em ambos os textos. Argumento que, mesmo que a conexão entre contar histórias e sobrevivência seja um tema comum nas duas obras, essa relação é trabalhada diferentemente em cada uma delas. *Oryx and Crake* fomenta uma discussão sobre a impossibilidade de contar uma história neutra e as consequências de uma sociedade que desvaloriza o ato de contar histórias. *The Year of the Flood*, por outro lado, explora esse ato como um modo de transmitir conhecimento de sobrevivência, assim como as consequências, positivas e negativas, de compartilhar experiências por meio de narrativas orais.

Palavras-chave: contar histórias, sobrevivência, ficção distópica, ficção especulativa.

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INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood has been recognized as a shape shifter writer, in the sense that, throughout her career, she has used the conventions of many narrative forms in her novels, such as the gothic romance, the spy thriller, the historical novel, and speculative fiction. The Canadian author often challenges the boundaries of genres as well as any other conventional roles or categories, such as those assigned to women and men, writer and critic, and the dialectics between life and art. As an author, she is constantly aware of her experimentation with these categories and their possible implications for the reading audience. Two of her most recent novels, *Oryx and Crake*, published in 2003, and *The Year of the Flood*, which came out in 2009, depict in the realm of speculative fiction the blurred boundaries in relation to the roles mentioned above and portray protagonists that rely on telling their own story as a survival technique.

The theme of writing and the act of storytelling and their relation to survival are recurrent themes in Atwood's work. She often presents protagonists, usually women, who have a close relation to writing or telling stories. The act of narrating their lives is an act of empowerment, since it provides a chance for these women to speak for themselves and to present their version of their lives. Moreover, this revision of one's history or story and search for one's identity often constitute an act of survival.

In *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, the relation between storytelling and survival is once again problematized and radicalized. In a dystopian world where storytelling is devalued and has no place, this post-apocalyptic setting presents characters that tell stories to themselves and write to no readers. In both novels, storytelling and writing are represented as survival strategies for the protagonists, who have not only to revisit their own lives, but also to deal with cultural survival, once they become the last humans on Earth.

Both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* present a post-apocalyptic world in which most humans have died because of an act of bioterrorism: a deadly virus caused the death of billions. The ones who survived inherited a wasteland, since life on the planet became hostile to humans. Genetically modified animals have gone wild and there is no food in a planet climatically changed because of global warming. The only creatures apparently able to survive under these circumstances are the Crakers, a gene spliced species created from an experiment derived from human beings, who are able to eat grass and live comfortably in the hot weather. The question posed is whether the Crakers can be considered humans or not, since they are apparently unable to produce any form of art or symbolic thinking and express themselves in a very simple language.

The protagonists of both novels then find themselves lost in a world of ruins which no longer contains the paradigms of what it means to be human. Differently from the strange Crakers, they still bear a close relation to emotions, art and language and need to strive to find food and water in this catastrophically hostile environment. Atwood creates more than a bare survival story: through the main characters' memories before the final catastrophe, she incites, with her characteristically ironic tone, a discussion about the high valorization of science over art, the power of language and the intricacies of a society that naturalizes violence and presents women as commodities.

Labeling these novels as speculative fiction, Atwood again challenges literary conventions. Coral Ann Howells comments: "if there is a single distinguishing Atwoodian marker, it is her insistently ironic vision, which challenges her readers' complacent acceptance of easy definitions about anything" (*Margaret Atwood 2*). In the novels focused on this study, the texts are pervaded by echoes of conventions of castaway narratives, survivor chronicles, and classical dystopian narratives. Moreover, images of men (the sensitive artist Jimmy, the genius scientist Crake) and women (the practical woman Toby, the fragile passive

girl Ren) that permeate our cultural imaginary are presented only to be reframed and reconstructed throughout the narratives.

Atwood argues in a text about Ursula K. Le Guin that speculative fiction can “provide a kit for examining the paradoxes and torments of what was once fondly referred to as the human condition” (*Writing with Intent* 245). It is precisely this observation on the human condition that is one of the major themes in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, since the protagonists find themselves relying on storytelling and sometimes on writing in order to attempt to answer this question: what human condition is. The comparison with Atwood’s previous speculative fiction, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, published in 1985, is unavoidable, mainly because in this text the narrator also uses storytelling as a means of survival. However, differently from the dystopian narrative, in which a national catastrophe in the form of a totalitarian Christian government takes place, as portrayed in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* present global catastrophes in the form of worldwide pandemics. As Howells claims, while the first novel focuses on more domestic issues, *Oryx and Crake* – and, I would argue, also *The Year of the Flood* – discusses worldwide ones (“Dystopian Visions” 162). The setting in the more recent novels is not even mentioned, although some critics have speculated that it takes place on the east coast of the U.S (Bouson, “It’s Game” 140) or even in South America (Ingersoll 163). Thus, storytelling and writing as survival strategies in these novels work differently since the matters debated in these dystopian narratives include themes that were not central to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, such as the ethics of science, the naturalization of violence and the place of art and the humanities in a highly technological world.

Oryx and Crake presents two narrative layers: one that happens before the near extinction of humans and other that happens after it. The first layer reveals a third-person narrator whose focus is Snowman, a Last Man character in the tradition of narratives that

depict the last male human alive, such as the novels *Last Man*, by Mary Shelley, and *I Am Legend*, by Richard Matheson. Apparently the only one to survive the world pandemics, Snowman has to cope with the idea of being the repository of human culture. He then starts telling his own story to himself. By doing this, a new layer of narrative is introduced. Snowman tells the story of Jimmy, as he was known before the catastrophe. The novel subsequently goes back and forth, presenting the perspectives of Snowman and Jimmy, and the reader is forced to establish connections between the two narratives as well as to acknowledge the artificiality of Snowman's attempt to split himself into two different personas: Snowman, now in the present, and Jimmy, his past self.

Snowman lives a nightmare in a wilderness scenario. The world he finds himself in is hostile: there is no food, global warming has changed the climate, and gene-spliced dangerous animals now gone wild constitute a threat. Moreover, the lack of human contact is making him lose his mind. He assumes the responsibility of taking care of the Crakers, the gene-spliced creatures derived of human DNA, but the lack of humanity in them – or so it seems to him – contributes to his escalating insanity. In an attempt to understand what happened to the world and to explain it to the Crakers, Snowman creates a mythology for them in which Oryx – a mysterious Asian woman who was his lover in the past – and Crake – his best friend, the scientist responsible for the plague that erased human life from the planet – are divine figures and he, Snowman, is their prophet. His mythmaking and the stories he creates to himself consist his survival strategy: it is his only way to cope with the extermination of humanity.

Like Jimmy, this protagonist lives in a sort of nightmare. He faces a consumerist society that naturalizes violence and favors science over any artistic expression. A satirical version of our highly capitalist society, this second layer of the novel is also bleak and Jimmy finds no place in it either. He is a “words person,” someone with abilities in language in opposition to a “numbers person,” a person good at mathematics and physics, in a world that

only values scientific knowledge. With an unusual inclination towards old forms of art that are now completely out of date in a society that believes solely in science as a form of knowledge, Jimmy remains marginalized, even though he belongs to the rich elite. Throughout the novel, he is the only character to question the way violence and pornography affect people and to realize the important role of art for humans. Because of these abilities, he is constantly depressed and finds in language a relief from the emptiness of his daily life by inventing new words and trying to save old ones from oblivion. But despite his dissatisfaction with the current social order, Jimmy, portrayed as an ambivalent character, does nothing to change it.

The same double structure is presented in the dystopian world in *The Year of the Flood*. This novel works not as sequel to *Oryx and Crake*, but rather as a simultaneous narrative, with the same story and plot told from different points of view. There are also two layers: one in the post-apocalyptic wild landscape after the bioterrorist catastrophe and the other in the late capitalist society before it. These two visions are also presented as nightmares, now focused on the lives of the unprivileged people that have no clear idea of what led the world to its present catastrophic state – differently from Snowman, who had that understanding – and how they strive to survive both in the pre- and post-apocalyptic scenarios.

The Year of the Flood has been defined in relation to *Oryx and Crake* as “less satirical in tone, less of an intellectual exercise, less scathing though more painful. It is seen very largely through the eyes of women, powerless women” (Le Guin). In fact, I argue throughout this thesis that the two novels are counterparts. The 2009 novel presents the other side of the world of *Oryx and Crake* and introduces a view from the margins in opposition to a view from the privileged ones. One may say that Jimmy/Snowman’s point of view is already marginal in the sense that he is an artistic outcast in a highly technological society.

But *The Year of the Flood* is certainly more ex-centric – to use the term coined by Linda Hutcheon to define the marginal position of points of view in postmodern narratives, particularly Canadian ones (*The Canadian Postmodern* 175). It depicts the views of two poor women and of a religious leader, subjects relegated as second class citizens by the society portrayed in the novel.

The first woman focalized is Toby, a runaway, and her life story is told by a third person omniscient narrator. Toby's narrative is intertwined with that of Ren's, a trapeze dancer prostitute who tells her own story in the first person. These two points of view are also divided into two time frames because the reader has access to Toby's and Ren's lives before and after the catastrophe, in a structure very similar to the one presented in *Oryx and Crake*. There is also an extra perspective that serves as a kind of introduction to the chapters: the voice of the religious leader Adam One. Through the hymns he creates and the speeches he gives, the reader has access to an additional layer of this fragmented narrative and is compelled to put all these instances of narrative together in order to try to make sense of the different survival stories being told.

The world that “is now one vast uncontrolled experiment” (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 267) is, in *The Year of the Flood*, more brutal. This characteristic influences the representation and thematization of survival, especially the survival of the marginalized and poor characters in the unlawful atmosphere of the pleeblands, the poor and derelict remains of the old cities. The geographical distribution in both novels covers the pleeblands and the Compounds. The Compounds, the rich part of the city with access to scientific knowledge and power, work as walled cities controlled by private corporations with their own security force, the CorpSeCorps. There is no mention of state presence in either novel. In *The Year of the Flood*, the reader is able to understand the way the CorpSeCorps act on the pleeblands using the place as an open lab for the experiments done in the Compounds. It is also shown how this

unlawful area is used by the task force as a place in which the undesirable ones can be easily forgotten or erased. In *Oryx and Crake*, in turn, the Compounds are viewed from the inside and the industrial aspect of the CorpSeCorps is portrayed, since in the Compounds there is always the paranoiac fear of one company stealing ideas from the other.

Howells states that “the key term for Atwood is always survival in context of environmental change which is both ecological and ideological”. Both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* portray an apocalyptic vision of environmental disasters and push survival to its extreme consequences. As the critic continues in her argument, “The Wilderness myth almost disappeared from her fiction in the late twentieth century, only to make its uncanny comeback in *Oryx and Crake*” (*Margaret Atwood* 187). It may be said that survival in the two novels analyzed is a radicalization of Atwood’s previous exploration of the theme of survival and environmental change as it now implies the survival of humans as a species.

In the view of this predicament, it is no wonder Snowman, Toby, and Ren, despite their differences, rely on storytelling and writing as a survival technique in the post-catastrophe world. In order to deal with their situation as the last repositories of human culture, they tell their own life stories to themselves and sometimes write things down as a form of memory record retrieval. Exiled, the protagonists of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* are caught between “here” and “there”, between “now” and “then”. In order to cope with this estrangement, they start reflecting on the act of telling stories and on the nature of language. As Eleonora Rao states,

In the post-catastrophe world he [*Oryx and Crake*’s protagonist, Snowman] finds himself in a vertigo of sense which tries to suck him in and from which he is constantly trying to escape . . . Yet unpredictably, words also preserve their meaning at times and allow Snowman to tell, remember, think over his

story, on how he got where he is now, in the narrative present. Words are also a salvation, a way to remind him that he is still human and alive. (111)

Rao makes this remark in relation to *Oryx and Crake*, but the same can be applied to *The Year of the Flood*, with the difference that, in the latter novel, women are the ones to narrate their survival stories. Moreover, survival is intrinsically linked to storytelling and writing in the sense that words, language and narration are the features that still connect the protagonists to human culture.

Sharon Rose Wilson claims, “Snowman acts as a trickster creator: his attempt to keep words from becoming extinct succeeds in that he manages to tell the story we read” (“Blindness” 187). Snowman, the trickster protagonist in *Oryx and Crake*, manipulates language and retells his story to survive. In the same way, Toby and Ren, in *The Year of the Flood*, try to recover their memories and use to-do lists, old religious hymns and sayings to keep themselves sane. Storytelling and language, as I claim, are what hold them to the ground, as a survival strategy.

In order to deal with their situation as last survivors, these protagonists tell and write stories, although they choose different ways of doing it. Snowman, in *Oryx and Crake*, tells stories to himself. In *The Year of the Flood*, Toby writes lists and Ren tells her story. Throughout this thesis, I analyze how these characters relate to storytelling and writing and what the implications of their actions and their relation to survival are. When these characters write or even tell stories, they put themselves at the center of the narrative, voicing their views, opinions and perspectives. Moreover, it is through this act of telling stories that the protagonists are able to cope with and survive in the hostile environment surrounding them.

In this “complex structure of [Atwood’s] multi-layered novel[s]” (Bouson, “It’s game over” 142) the blurring of conventions such as breaking with a linear narrative and the constant questioning of the link between language and the world seem another strategy to

reflect on the act of telling stories. In the realm of speculative fiction, Atwood connects telling stories to the question of what makes us human. After all, in the dystopian post-catastrophe scenario of both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, storytelling is all there is left to define and give meaning to humans. By turning this act of telling their own history to themselves and writing to no readers into a survival strategy, the protagonists of these novels are empowered by being able to understand their predicament and deal with the disaster situation surrounding them.

The intriguing way storytelling and survival are yoked in a catastrophic atmosphere in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* is what initially propelled me into analyzing this theme in these two novels. As they are recent publications, they have not received much academic attention in what comes to a comparative analysis of the two works. Among the few articles available that provide a comparative analysis of the two novels, the majority focuses on environmental issues. An analysis of this interconnection between storytelling and survival in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, themes that are very recurrent in Atwood's previous fiction, has not been made yet.

In 2013, Margaret Atwood released *MaddAddam*, the third book of what is called the MaddAddam trilogy. This last volume is actually a sequence to both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, since it begins at the ending point of its predecessors: the encounter of Toby, Ren, Amanda, the Painballers, Jimmy/Snowman and the Crakers. This third book is not part of the discussion presented in this thesis for two reasons: because of the time of the publication of the novel and because of the relevance to the theme chosen for analysis. The novel was released when this project had already been proposed and developed. Besides, and more importantly, the connection between storytelling and survival in *MaddAddam* is approached differently. Moreover, because it is a sequel and does not depict a simultaneous narrative as in the previous novels, it does not fit the counterpart reading I propose in this

work. Therefore, in the course of this thesis, I do not make any reference to *MaddAddam* since it is not part of my primary corpus.

Throughout this thesis I use the terms storytelling and survival as literary tropes. For storytelling, I refer to the act of telling stories in oral form. The same applies to the notion of writing, which I consider as any register in written form. For survival, I also use the term according to Margaret Atwood's four instances of survival – bare survival, disaster survival, cultural survival, and vestige survival – discussed in her 1972 book on Canadian literature, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (I introduce this notion of survival and relate it to *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* in Chapter 1).

Survival in this thesis is always related to the notion of staying alive, of moving on after a certain event rather than other possible interpretations of the word, such as not living a plentiful life. My main objective in this thesis is to analyze how storytelling and survival are linked, thematically portrayed and represented in the many narrative layers of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. To consider both the similarities and differences between the two novels, I examine closely how these narrative layers are constructed. Considerations on the fragmented narrative from a postmodernist perspective are relevant to this study, since the novels chosen are self-reflexive texts that discuss, in different ways, the meaning of telling stories while they expose the building blocks of a narrative in their own narratives.

The conjunction of an analysis that puts together some considerations from postmodernism and a theory on dystopia may not be as irreconcilable as one might think. According to critics such as Raffaella Baccolini and Jayne Glover, women's writing of speculative fiction – including here the dystopian genre – is often experimental in form, presenting self-reflexive traits and self-aware narratives (Baccolini, "The Persistence of Hope" 519 and Glover 52). Because of this characteristic that is clearly apparent in Margaret

Atwood's novels, I discuss issues of self-reflexivity and fragmentation in the texts studied while also I point to the social critique raised by these dystopian narratives.

Since my approach to the texts considers how the narrative layers expose the connections between storytelling and survival, I chose not to approach the areas of environmentalism and psychoanalysis. I recognize these two are important theoretical approaches to Atwood's fiction and I acknowledge some texts from these perspectives throughout this thesis. However, studies related to the environment, such as the extinction of rare species, global warming, and pollution as well as the way characters relate to trauma from a psychoanalytical point of view are not my main point. Indeed, many critics have discussed *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* from these two perspectives: Coral Ann Howells, Fiona Tolan, Sharon Rose Wilson, Stephen Dunning, Katherine V. Snyder and Hannes Bergthaller, to name a few.

The conjunction between storytelling, survival and dystopia has been made in relation to the 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, but it has not been the major focus in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, even though these latter novels provide an apocalyptic view of the end of the world, placing human survival at their center. I consider these two novels a radicalization of the themes of storytelling and survival in Atwood's work, since they present the extinction of humans because of human action. Moreover, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, as simultaneous narratives, provide an intriguing analysis if one is to consider the contrasts in the way storytelling and survival are portrayed as a theme in the novels. This aspect has been mainly disregarded by critics. In this work, I focus specifically on the relations between storytelling and survival.

In Chapter 1, "Storytelling and Metafiction", I discuss the adoption of the term speculative fiction rather than science fiction to analyze both works, drawing mainly on the debate presented by Jayne Glover. I also highlight the way the first term contributes to a form

of fiction that is more focused on social issues that frequently uses metafiction to provide a critique of the conventions of the science fiction genre. Margaret Atwood and Nalo Hopkinson both consider it a better label when used in relation to contemporary science fiction written by women in the last decades. The fragmented nature of both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* led me to introduce the counterpart reading of both novels.

The overtly debated issue of storytelling in *Oryx and Crake* makes it a highly metafictional text that focuses on the procedures of narrating. Having in mind Linda Hutcheon's and Patricia Waugh's considerations of the effects generated by a fragmented text, I analyze how Snowman wishes to be a traditional narrator but ultimately fails in doing so, presenting to the reader not the story of Oryx and Crake but a crippled version of his own past. In contrast, *The Year of the Flood* presents a more covert mode of metafiction, in which conventions of the scientific and religious discourses are laid bare. As mentioned, storytelling is used as a means to convey knowledge of survival. *The Year of the Flood* is discussed not under the light of the impossibility of straightforward narration as *Oryx and Crake*, but as a commentary on the artificialities of discourses given as natural. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* can be read as novels about the importance stories have in our society and on how their absence is pernicious.

The notions of utopia and dystopia are discussed in Chapter 2, entitled “Utopian and Dystopian Visions”, in which I focus on how Atwood revisits the mentioned literary traditions and plays with them. I propose that both novels, mainly because of their self-reflexive quality, blur fixed notions of utopia and dystopia. The two novels are, in fact, both tributes and interrogators of these generic traditions. Taking into consideration Tom Moylan's, Frederic Jameson's and Lyman Tower Sargent's notions of utopia and dystopia, I argue that, when read together as counterparts, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* form a critical dystopia in Moylan's terms.

Later on I investigate the utopian and dystopian spaces in the novels, as well as the way they dialogue with tradition, especially that of Last Man fiction. I also consider that what unites the many counter-narratives is precisely storytelling. The many stories told in the novel are the most important element of this oppositional thought against the system: Jimmy's dissatisfaction with a world that relegates art to unimportant expression, Adam One's sermons that provide an alternative way of life, Toby's lists that reflect her painful experience of survival, and finally Ren's diary and stories that show the consequences, both good and bad, of sharing experiences in a pre- and post-catastrophe scenario.

Finally, I discuss how the novels rewrite apocalypse in Chapter 3, "Telling Stories about the End of the World." Atwood treats this rewriting of apocalypse differently in the two novels. *Oryx and Crake* is a narrative from the point of view of a reluctant elect, someone who survives apocalypse without wanting to be chosen, while *The Year of the Flood* challenges the notion of having elected ones, since the God's Gardeners credo questions this important apocalyptic concept. In relation to the latter novel, apocalypse logic is reverted when the non-elect, if one is to consider Crake as the figure to choose between elect and non-elect, is at the center of the narrative.

As Atwood's novels make apocalyptic notions ambivalent, I focus my discussion on the matter of gender and violence against women. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* provide a bleak picture of a future in which women are treated as goods to be traded or sold. Oryx, from *Oryx and Crake*, is presented as an object to the male gaze and I analyze how her silence and absence of voice gain meaning if one reads *The Year of the Flood* as a counterpart novel to *Oryx and Crake*. In the 2009 novel, women are able to tell their own stories of abuse and suffering and regain their agency, stressing the link between storytelling and survival. The view of women as mere products is actually a comment on and a critique of gendered violence.

Once again, in this chapter I consider storytelling as the core of Atwood's texts. I discuss how the Crakers, initially supposed to be creatures without the ability of having any kind of symbolic thinking, produce art and stories under the influence of Snowman. It is possible to propose a reading that maybe storytelling is an ability too inherent of humans that cannot be simply deleted from our system. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* are novels that criticize a culture that is oriented towards information, rather than the sharing of experiences.

This thesis proposes the reading of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* as counterpart novels that present storytelling as a means of survival for the protagonists. The study of how storytelling and survival are connected in these two texts constitutes what I believe to be a relevant contribution to the study of the notion of storytelling in Atwood's fiction and in contemporary speculative fiction written by women. By reading these works as counterparts, I discuss how storytelling is thematized through a fragmented narrative, how it is relevant to the discussion of the dystopian society depicted and how it is an important element in the rewriting of apocalypse presented in the novels.

CHAPTER 1: STORYTELLING AND METAFICTION

1.1 Speculating the Future

Since the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, Atwood has insisted on labeling her work speculative fiction and not science fiction. She has claimed the same in relation to *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* (“The Handmaid’s” 513; *In Other Worlds* 2). The term, however, has raised debate since some critics see it as simply part of the science fiction genre. It is worth mentioning that some science fiction scholars use the term speculative fiction as a pre-form of science fiction, referring to works produced in the 17th and 18th centuries; it is also mentioned as a popular alternative interpretation of SF (Mendelsohn 4). In this thesis I will not use the term speculative fiction to refer to such works. Whenever I use it, it is according to more contemporary attempts of definition of the genre, such as the ones by Margaret Atwood, Nalo Hopkinson and Jayne Glover.

When referring to the term, Atwood remarks:

I said I like to make a distinction between science fiction proper – for me, this label denotes books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can’t go – and speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth. (“The Handmaid’s” 513)

This definition of speculative fiction as based on the development of science nowadays with the projection of its effects on humankind in the future in contrast with science fiction, which supposedly focuses on what is not “at hand” consists of a very slippery and debatable one. The science fiction author Ursula K. LeGuin criticizes this lack of precise definition in Atwood’s remarks and advocates for the use of the term science fiction. According to her,

This arbitrarily restrictive definition seems designed to protect her novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awards. She doesn't want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto. ("The Year")

In Le Guin's review of Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*, she points to the limitations of reviewing the text as a realist novel and not as science fiction. For the author, science fiction has a critical vocabulary of its own. Despite controversy, Atwood and most of the critics that deal with her work (Coral Ann Howells, Eleonora Rao, Sharon Rose Wilson, and Fiona Tolan, to name a few cited on this thesis) insist on adopting the term speculative fiction.

The definition of the term science fiction is also problematic. Arguably, Hugo Gernsback coined it in 1926 (Canavan and Wald 241) but, even before that, texts with the characteristics of science fiction had been written. The origins of science fiction are open to debate. Some critics trace back its origins to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and others reject it because of its anti-science discourse (Stableford 19). Critics have not reached a consensus related to what specific quality marks a text as science fiction. The most famous attempts of defining the genre, perhaps, have come from the Marxist critical group on *Science-Fiction Studies* that includes names such as Darko Suvin, Carl Freedman, Tom Moylan and Frederic Jameson. These critics elaborated on the concept of critical utopia (coined by Moylan) as well as on concepts commonly referred to as "novum" and "cognitive estrangement" (defined by Suvin). Although this thesis will refer to Moylan's notion of critical dystopia in order to cast some light on the dystopian quality of Atwood's novels and the reader might expect to find Moylan's reflections on science fiction in this analysis, it is not the main aim here to seek a definition of science fiction, which would certainly go beyond the purpose of this research. This brief debate on the matter of labeling the genre attempts to discuss the reception of Atwood's novels and the specific terms adopted to refer to them.

It is not rare to see speculative fiction being marked as a specific branch of science fiction or as a synonym for New Wave SF,¹ soft SF or even social SF.² In his dissertation about Brazilian New Wave and cyberpunk science fiction, Roberto de Sousa Causo presents the scenario and characteristics of New Wave science fiction and relates it to postmodernism. As an opposition to the popular form of the genre in the 1960s – its mainstream format at the time as having a *pulp ethos* –, New Wave SF is more interested in discussing the problematics of language, the restrictions of generic fiction, and the limitations of traditional SF stories rather than in straightforwardly narrating adventures in other planets (Causo 35).

New Wave SF is not speculative fiction in the terms I consider in this thesis, but speculative fiction to some extent maintains the postmodern aspect of New Wave SF. In contemporary speculative fiction, metafiction and the discussion of the role of storytelling continues as a persistent topic as well as a constant concern in the reformulation of the traditional readings of the genre.

Jayne Glover argues for the use of the term speculative fiction because of the lack of precise definition of New Wave science fiction, its connection to writers from the 1960's, the possible pejorative interpretation of term “soft SF” and the restrictive notion of “social science fiction” (46). She goes further to discuss the possible implications of using the term speculative fiction instead when making reference to works which present a more experimental use of language, a focus on storytelling, and a questioning of fixed categories such as gender and race.

According to Glover, the term speculative was popularized by Judith Merril, but she was not the first one to use it. Glover, as well as Causo, credits the origin of the term to Robert A. Heinlein, who, in 1947 used “speculative fiction” to discuss science fiction that used science

¹ I use the terms SF, scifi, and sf interchangeably. However, sf or SF is never short for speculative fiction.

² “Soft SF” and “social SF” are used as opposed to “hard SF”, which would be science fiction firmly based on Physics and Mathematics.

and technology to present new situations for human beings. Merrill appropriated the term in 1966 to introduce her concept of science fiction that did not have a focus on science solely.

Speculative fiction as a label often suffers from two problematic interpretations: 1) it serves as a broader umbrella term that goes beyond science fiction, also referring to some forms of fantasy; 2) it is a rather more restrictive term designed for some texts of a specific variety of science fiction. Glover agrees with Merrill on the second issue and states that the term speculative fiction should be used when a text focuses on social and anthropological aspects using a “scientific mode,” that is, a hypothesis and an experimentation of an idea in a world with different paradigms and situations of our current society. In Merrill’s line of thought, science fiction is to be considered a mode and not a genre. In this thesis I will use this notion.

Farrah Mendlesohn also discusses the view of SF as a mode:

[science fiction] is less a genre – a body of writing of which one can expect certain plot elements and specific tropes – than an ongoing discussion . . . reader’s expectations of sf are governed less by what happens than how that happening is described, and by the critical tools with which the reader is expected to approach the text. (1)

When science fiction is considered a mode rather than a genre, as Mendlesohn defends, speculative fiction falls into the more specific definition Glover holds. Speculative fiction works use the science fiction mode – the presentation of a new world, a hypothesis about it and a later experimentation on its unraveling – to present narratives that question issues that are often taken for granted such as gender, race, and the relation between humans and nature.

This discussion foregrounds some of the rejections of the label of science fiction by authors such as Margaret Atwood and Nalo Hopkinson. In Atwood’s *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, the author defines science fiction as a genre with recurrent motifs such as rockets, aliens, and time machines; therefore, excluding her own writing from it. She uses the term speculative fiction in order to refer to the science fiction mode and to the way her

texts extrapolate on social and technological tendencies of the present in a futuristic atmosphere, and not as a genre.

Her statement is troublesome and one might read her previously mentioned collection of essays as an answer to Le Guin's critique of her position regarding genres. Le Guin's *The Year of the Flood* review is actually quoted in the book and a debate between the two authors over what science fiction, speculative fiction and fantasy are is overtly mentioned. Moreover, Atwood's rejection of the term science fiction caused a real commotion in the SF community (Canavan and Wald 237). The release of a set of essays about it (using the term SF on the cover, specifically) can be read as a way to make peace with readers and critics. However, in the course of her essays, Atwood again re-estates that *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood* are not science fiction. Nevertheless, she provides five short stories of her own that would configure her definition of the genre (they all involve aliens, mutations, and space travel of some sort). I believe Atwood's considerations on the permeable and sometimes subjective definitions of the genre (*In Other Worlds* 7) to be relevant for the discussion here, even though it is not specific, because it poses clearly that the science fiction imaginary is already heavily associated with technological extrapolations.

I acknowledge the lack of precise definition concerning the use of speculative fiction and my adoption of the term is due mainly to Glover's considerations of its use as a way to mark a difference between science fiction concerned with technology *per se* and more recent texts which focus on social and anthropological issues framed by a narrative in a possible future. I agree with the scholar when she says that the use of speculative fiction rather than science fiction is not made arbitrarily or just as a manner of avoiding the term. Speculative fiction is a specific sub-category which frequently displays attention to issues such as race, gender, and ethnicity (48). Her argument meets the one by the Caribbean-Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson, who argues that speculative fiction can be considered a subversive kind of

literature in the sense that it can blur fixed relations in terms of gender, race, identity, as Atwood's fiction also seems to address in a more radical way, since the limitations of realist fiction are no longer an issue (Nelson 100-10). Conventions can thus be questioned drastically because new paradigms for society can be created and old ones extrapolated.

From this point on, I will refer to Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* as speculative fiction based on the discussion presented. However, I may refer to critics who use the term science fiction when referring to these novels. When quoting or discussing these critics, I will use the term science fiction accordingly.

Speculative fiction seems to be a fertile space for women writers to discuss issues such as gender, the power of imagination, the consequences of technology, and the way societies are constructed around it and how technology affects individuals and their relation to their own space. In the past decades, a number of texts with such themes have been published, such as Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*, Jeannette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*, Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*, and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, among others. According to critics such as Glover and Susan Watkins, these texts rework some science fiction traditional conventions such as male protagonists, the dichotomy of technology being either purely good or catastrophically evil, and a westernized view of humankind (Glover 48; Watkins 119). They also play with reader's expectations in often fragmented and discontinued narratives. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* certainly fit this category.

Raffaella Baccolini states that women's science fiction renovated the "oppositional nature of the genre" ("The Persistence of Hope" 519). Relying on Frederic Jameson's assumptions that genres are culturally constructed, she claims that feminist revisions of genre shaped women's science fiction as subversive literary forms in that they extrapolated and questioned stereotypes. Most of the works Baccolini refers to are classified by Glover and authors such as Atwood and Hopkinson as speculative fiction. In this way, they dialogue with tradition as

well as question it. Contestation often comes from ex-centric subjects and there is a focus on the role of language and storytelling. Baccolini suggests specifically the case of critical dystopia, but most contemporary speculative fiction written by women could be considered as such mainly because of their hybrid quality.

For Glover, women's speculative fiction opposes both literary and science fiction tradition: "Rather than making it doubly peripheral, however, this combination allows it to explore feminist issues in ways impossible in either mainstream fiction or traditional science fiction" (52). It is fiction that poses the matter of power in its very core. It questions notions regarding not only gender, but also any other binary opposition considered fixed. Therefore, it can easily be related to notions of the ex-centric in Linda Hutcheon's terms and of postmodern literature.

Andrew M. Butler states that it "should perhaps be taken for granted that much postmodernism reads like SF" (137) following on Brian McHale's notion that science fiction stands for postmodernism in the same way that detective fiction stood for modernism. He means that, in order to read most of SF, the reader has to be aware of the conventions of the genre and of its constant dialogue with previous texts. By creating a sense of defamiliarization, science fiction texts depict strange things one would otherwise consider the norm and vice-versa. In science fiction, a new world order can be created with a new set of conventions, thus showing that some categories considered "natural" are in fact constructed, an effect frequently associated with postmodernism. What women science fiction writing seems to do is to go even further in this potential questioning of conventions, because even though science fiction has the necessary tools to critique the *status quo*, many texts still reinforce it.

Linda Hutcheon defines postmodernism as

Arts forms fundamentally self-reflexive, in other words, art that is self-consciously art (or artifice), literature that is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with literary past as with social present. Its use of parody that literature is made, first and foremost, of other literature. (*The Canadian Postmodern 1*)

This definition that encompasses self-awareness of both formal and cultural construction of a literary work may dialogue with the discussion of speculative fiction and its recurrent issues. Postmodern theory is an interesting tool to discuss the metafictional quality of texts as well as its emphasis on storytelling and language, topics extensively present in speculative fictions.

Oryx and Crake and *The Year of the Flood* can be read under this light. As works of speculative fiction, they create a new world order in which capitalism is led to its ultimate consequences. The apparent absence of the state and the privatization of security forces guarantee an atmosphere of impunity and insecurity to civilians. It empowers private corporations which are seen as synonymous of protection. Hard sciences and biology are considered the only legitimate forms of knowledge, while art and the humanities are neglected. The narratives are also portrayed through the eyes of ex-centric subjects: the failed artist Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* and the members of the eco-religion, Toby, Ren and Adam One in *The Year of the Flood*. Both novels address the issue of storytelling and the dangers of creating an opposition between science and art. They subvert linear narrative and narrativity, and question science fiction's traditional logic of being pro-science (if one may consider the first writings of science fiction in the 20th century), as they put at the center of the narrative the issue of storytelling, and not technology, as a means of survival.

Oryx and Crake and *The Year of the Flood*, by different means (which shall be discussed throughout this thesis), are novels about the power and dangers of storytelling. Nonetheless, the major danger is its absence, since the result of storytelling being cast away by science in that dystopian context is that social memory and knowledge are lost. The late capitalist

society portrayed no longer reflects on its own culture. A way to promote this reflection is precisely through art. By constantly making reference to the act of telling stories and writing, the narrators question both literary tradition and science fiction tradition in a typically postmodern manner by articulating ex-centric voices, counter-discourses and a constant metafictional reflection within a blurring of genres.

Baccolini asserts that in speculative fiction “the recovery of history and literacy, together with the recovery of individual and collective memory, becomes an instrumental tool of resistance for their protagonists” (“The Persistence of Hope” 520). Thus, the emphasis on the importance of telling stories and having stories told creates an impulse within the text (not merely a warning to society) which certainly marks its difference from traditional forms of science fiction. By traditional science fiction I refer to works that still present white male protagonists in a plot more interested in discussing technology *per se* than its effects on people.

1.2 The Fragmented Narrative in *Oryx and Crake*

Coral Ann Howells affirms that, in *Oryx and Crake*, the protagonist Snowman goes on a “wasteland journey [which] lead[s] him back to the heart of darkness where he has to confront his own skeletons in the closet, the bodies of Oryx and Crake, . . . scattered like pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle left for Snowman to fit together into a narrative” (“Dystopian Visions” 172). This image of a puzzle is certainly an interesting way to read the 2003 novel. The reader has to put together fragments of a text, decoding Snowman’s own accounts in trying to construct his narrative. Although there is a logical timeline in *Oryx and Crake*, it is not linear nor is it traditionally obvious. It demands from the reader an active role because of its hidden cross-references, false stories, and fragmented structure.

When discussing the role of the reader in relation to fragmented texts, Linda Hutcheon states, “As readers, then, we are both players and spectators, trapped within the text yet free to interpret, especially when the text itself is fragmentary, untotalized, open” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 171). By this, Hutcheon is not saying that in other types of texts the reader has no active role; she is remarking instead that, in fragmented ones, this role is foregrounded. The reader is forced into this position because of the structure of the text and its discontinuity. Fragmented texts challenge narrativity as it is conceived traditionally and puts the reader in the center of the production of meaning.

Oryx and Crake is structured in chapters divided into sections. Alternatively, the chapters are assigned to the present narrative of Snowman (always in present tense), apparently the last human being alive in the planet, and the past narrative of Jimmy (always in past tense), Snowman’s name before the final catastrophe. Katherine Snyder points to the effect created by these two narratives:

Oryx and Crake blurs these lines [between reality and fantasy] by juxtaposing the putative ultimate catastrophe of human extinction in Snowman’s present with a series of smaller scale traumas that shaped his past from his earliest childhood memories forward. The novel does not imply that such different orders of trauma are commensurate. Losing one’s mother at a tender age is not the end of the world. It just feels that way. But that is Atwood’s point. (473)

Snyder’s work aims at discussing how temporality in trauma theory and on this dystopian fiction converges. Even though I do not tackle psychoanalysis or trauma theory in this thesis, I find Snyder’s remarks revealing of Snowman’s relation to storytelling. His shadowy narration that puts together his past and present focuses on his previous end-of-the-world experiences, his minor losses and experiences of loneliness that now are mirrored in his present reality.

Starving to death and potentially losing his mind, Snowman is obsessed with his own past and with the understanding of his role on the plot that caused global genocide. As Eleonora Rao puts it, his “isolation and temporal displacement makes him the ultimate outcast, compelled to ‘live’, albeit surreptitiously, in the past, a past which is populated by reveries, dreams, memories, and nostalgia” (108). Snowman wants to access the bigger picture, to understand the jigsaw, but is unable to. “*Fucking Crake!*” (*Oryx and Crake* 125), he screams when mentally consumed by the doubts and fears that surround his own survival. He blames Crake for everything that happened but he can only speculate on his best friend’s plans and reasons for destroying humankind. He tries to imagine what Crake wanted him to do and conjectures on whether Crake’s death was actually Snowman’s final betrayal in the form of murder or an assisted suicide architected by Crake himself. Sharon Rose Wilson analyzes Jimmy’s blindness and the way he fails throughout his life to see the events unfolding in front of him (“Blindness” 187). In his incarnation as Snowman, the same pattern occurs. The more he tries to understand how he was never able to grasp Crake’s dangerous plans, the more he is lost in his own fragments of a story.

The matter of fragmentation in the novel is read in a more radical way if one is to consider the doubled consciousness of the narrator. Howells associates Snowman with Atwood’s previous dystopian protagonist, Offred, from *The Handmaid’s Tale*:

He exists in a state of double consciousness, working by associate leaps between “now” and “then” in an effort to escape a devastated world littered with the wreckage of late twentieth-century civilization reminding him daily of what he has lost. (“Dystopian Visions” 172)

The protagonist divides himself into his post-catastrophe self, Snowman, “The Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards” (*Oryx and Crake* 8), and his pre-catastrophe self, Jimmy: “Once upon a time, Snowman wasn’t Snowman. Instead he was Jimmy. He’d been a good boy then” (17). In this double way, the narrative is

fragmented in one more layer and the account of Jimmy's life can be read as Snowman's telling of it. In this manner, Snowman's third-person narration of his life as Jimmy can be understood as Snowman's attempt to detach himself from his own story, to dislocate himself from the center of his own narrative.

Howells points into this direction in her article, but she reads it as a way to deal with trauma and so does Snyder. However, I read Snowman's doubled self as a way of portraying the impossibility of unbiased narration, a critique of traditional narratives which present narrators claiming to be neutral. Snowman wants to be that narrator, to be able to see the bigger picture. He starts his tale with the expression "Once upon a time" (17), one of the most traditional beginnings of tales in Western society. He wants to be detached, but ultimately cannot. He is unable to tell the story of Oryx and Crake, he can only tell his own accounts, perspectives, and fears. And these accounts are full of holes and gaps. The split between Jimmy and Snowman highlights the fragmented quality of the novel and its metafictional quality. It calls the reader's attention to the way narrators operate.

Snowman wants to understand what happens, but as Rao observes, "his story is full of gaps for himself and for the reader. Meaning constantly escapes him, till the very end of the novel with its elusive, open-ended conclusion" (111-12). Although Snowman's recollections of his life as Jimmy, which go from his childhood to adult life, apparently seem to unfold the entire mystery of the narrative (What happened to humankind? Why has Crake done it? Why was Jimmy unable to stop him?), such expectations are unfulfilled. Some questions remain unanswered for Snowman and for the reader as well, and some questions have more than one answer. As Oryx, the woman who is the center of the love triangle between Jimmy and Crake, remarks: "You have a lot of pictures in your head, Jimmy. Where did you get them? Why do you think they are pictures of me?" (*Oryx and Crake* 132). Snowman can access nothing but his version of the story and the pictures in his head. What the fragmented narrative of the

novel does is to emphasize this impossibility of straightforward narration and to show that the story being told is partial, biased, and incomplete as any narration is. The reference to the traditional beginning in a fairy tale, “Once upon a time”, is also a sign that the story being told is nothing but a story, a construction and does not necessarily present an expected truth.

In a narrative that goes back and forth in time, *Oryx and Crake* resists obvious attempts of putting everything together. It stresses its own fragmented quality by trying to escape this very quality: Snowman wants to narrate his story straightforwardly but is not able to do so. His failure shows the building blocks of the narrative. Given the illusion that Snowman is going to tell his tale and solve all the mysteries, the reader is immersed in a variety of fragments with one-word titles such as “Mango,” “Bottle” and “Airlock.” Other promising titles give the illusion of containing important information. For instance, “Oryx” presents Jimmy’s version of Oryx’s story, but the fragment does not reveal much about her despite Jimmy’s impressions. In an article focused on Oryx, Susan Hall affirms that her laugh works as a critique of object economy (186). However, the scholar seems to overlook the fact that that voice – or that laugh – isn’t Oryx’s, but Jimmy’s telling of Oryx. In the end, Oryx remains an enigma – her real name is never revealed nor are the details of her relationships and life – as well as Crake.

Howells observes that Snowman bridges past, present and future (“Dystopian Visions” 171), but it this bridge is disjointed. Snowman sometimes is able to grasp that his purpose of putting Oryx’s story together is pointless, since accounts on it vary: “There must once have been other visions of her [Oryx]: her mother’s story, the story of the man who’d bought her, the story of the man who bought her after that” (*Oryx and Crake* 133). If all is then just a set of different perspectives, totality is an impossibility. As Hutcheon claims, “The process of reading a fragmented text is such that readers can be implicated directly in the challenge to the boundaries both between genres and between ‘real life’ and art” (*The Canadian*

Postmodern 84). Fragmentation thus questions any kind of totalizing narrative and denaturalizes any notion that there is a single story or a truth. There are, in fact, stories and possible truths. That is why Snowman's tale is never finished or completed.

1.3 The Fragmented Narrative in *The Year of the Flood*

If the fragmented narrative in *Oryx and Crake* foregrounds the impossibility of narrating in a neutral form, in *The Year of the Flood* this strategy seems to address and contest notions of fixity – fixed identities, fixed stories. Unlike the previous novel, the 2009 text is less interested in the task of highlighting narrativity and much more engaged in posing questions that unsettle notions of fixed images of women. It also raises a discussion on the matter of identity, the many facets of identity one holds and the different stories such identities convey through fragmented accounts and multiple points of view.

One might argue that *The Year of the Flood* is less fragmented than *Oryx and Crake* and superficially this is true. Not much of the random memories and out of context remembrances that permeate the narrative in the 2003 novel can be found in *The Year of the Flood*. In this latter novel, narrative seems concatenated in a more traditional format. Nevertheless, fragmentation is present in the triple narratives presented: the one by Ren in first person, the one by Toby in third person, and the one by Adam One, in the form of sermons. The fact that there are three protagonists in this novel and that the reader has access to their points of view marks a clear difference between the two novels. It amplifies the perspective, giving new insights on different aspects of the world created by Atwood.

Jameson praises this characteristic in the novel by saying that *The Year of the Flood* “gives us the view from below – always, as we know, the most reliable vantage point from which to gauge and map a society” (“Then You”). This oppositional view – considering Snowman/Jimmy's only perspective in the previous novel – also varies because the reader has

access to three different narratives that overlap at times and often present contradictory facts and perspectives. They are supplementary and not complementary, in the sense that they are extras, diverse perspectives of a story, but they do not form a bigger picture. They do not complete the puzzle. Again there is not a sense of completion in the end of the novel, but rather a permanent questioning.

Adam One's sermons are a clear example. He is the strong leader of an eco-religion, possessor of a solid faith: "Let us sing!" is his recurring closure for each sermon in honor of a saint's day – the saints being people who fought for environmental issues such as Diana Fossey and Chico Mendes³. In Ren's narrative, Adam One is portrayed as a benevolent father, an image of kindness that she relies on when she is lonely and thinking about getting advice from someone. It is in Toby's narrative, however, that Adam One is presented in a more negative light. When Pilar – one the Eves, female leaders of the Gardeners – dies, he tells the other Gardeners not about her assisted suicide, but about her accidental poisoning, then adding to Toby: "I apologize for my excursion into fiction. I must sometimes say things that are not transparently honest. But it is for the greater good" (184). These different aspects of Adam One do not give the reader a full picture of him. His facets as a leader, a benevolent advisor, and a manipulator cannot explain his actions throughout the novel. His involvement with Zeb, the rupture that created the terrorist group MaddAddam, and his role in the creation of the plague that eradicated humans, are not explained by the different perspectives presented about him in the novel. That is why I insist on saying that these different points of view are actually supplementary: they give us extra information, alternate stories, but never completing the picture, but rather expanding it.

The novel is divided into chapters assigned to either Toby or Ren. A God's Gardeners' hymn on a saint's day introduces each chapter that is followed by one of Adam One's sermons. The

³ A list with the names of all saints mentioned in the novel alongside the context for the appearance of the name can be found in a weblog dedicated to the novel. See <http://theyearoftheflood.weebly.com/4/post/2010/11/saints.html>.

first part of the chapter is about the post-apocalyptic narrative of survival of Toby or Ren and the following parts focus on their past lives, before the catastrophe, until the chapter entitled “Saint Dian, Martyr”, in which the narrative of the past catches up with the one of the present. Thus, the reader is sent back and forth not only between present – Toby’s struggle to survive by herself in a spa and Ren’s entrapment in an airlock at a stripper club – and past – an account of these women’s lives from childhood to adult life – but also between Toby’s, Ren’s, and Adam One’s perspectives. His sermons work both as a report on the Gardener’s system of beliefs and on the fate of the group.

In Toby’s narrative, the fragments of her past life reinforce the matter of point of view. Toby relies on memories in order to keep herself alive in the chaos she suddenly finds herself in. However, she acknowledges that narration is a matter of perspective: “I wasn’t the picture because I’m the frame, she thinks. It’s not really the past. It’s only me, holding all together. It’s only a handful of fading neutral pathways. It’s only a mirage” (239). Since many events in the novel overlap – in that they appear in the three narratives of the three protagonists – the reader is constantly reminded that what he or she is reading is actually a partial account of events and that none of them is what really happened. The protagonists Toby and Ren as well as the reader are aware that their views on the past are just their views and not a kind of neutral narration, as Snowman naively believes he can do.

Therefore, the matter of the fragmented narrative in *The Year of the Flood* has an emphasis not on striving to achieve a bigger picture, but rather on interpreting this picture. The focus is not on narration itself but on the way one constructs one’s own narration by having a different perspective. The effect is that the reader feels less in the position of a detective attempting to solve a mystery and more in the role of a collector who holds fragments of a story together. The attempt is not to discover anything, but to compare and contrast.

Even the protagonists are more radically fragmented in this novel. Toby in her narrative is an orphan, an abused young woman, a Gardener, an Eve, Tobiatha, an underground terrorist and a survivor. Each fragment of her narrative shows one of these aspects. Moreover, at the same time, she is none of them. “Toby could tell a sham when she saw one, being a shame herself” (113), is what she wonders when she considers Lucerne’s position in the Garden. As Lucerne, Toby herself feels she was never true to what she really felt towards the Gardeners. There is a permanent feeling that she is acting her own role and is aware of that and that her identity is plural and multiple.

Hutcheon remarks how postmodern parody reformulates possibilities of subjectivity (*The Canadian Postmodern* 9). She says that often “Atwood is challenging male definitions of selfhood as applied to women” (142) and that “Atwood’s women seem to possess subjectivities that are much less easily defined in traditional terms; that are more fragmented and even multiple” (145). In *The Year of the Flood*, these multiple roles of women are insistently thematized showing this idea of a fragmented identity. The obsession with the matter of naming in the novel, for instance, is remarkable of this characteristic. Toby is Eve Six, Tobiatha, and Inaccessible Rail. Ren is both Ren and Brenda. Even Amanda, a secondary character in the novel, has multiple names: Amanda, Amanda Payne, Barb Jones. She even describes herself in her teenage years as not having an identity, “So I’m invisible” (85), she concludes. By writing her name in syrup and then letting the ants eat it, Amanda is reinforcing her capacity of appearing, disappearing and recreating herself when needed.

Ren would later look for her own way of creating and recreating herself, following somehow the steps of her long-lasting friend Amanda. Ren is the neglected child who lives in the margins of her mother’s life. As a child she is known as Ren, but when she goes back to the Compounds, the name Brenda comes up: “She was calling me Brenda now: she claimed it was my real name” (215). By assigning her a new name, it is as if Lucerne – her mother – is

trying to create a new identity for her. Not the dirty kid from the Garden, but the suitable daughter of an important man in the Compounds. With these two identities, Ren is incapable of finding herself. She claims, “I had been traumatized: I had nothing to compare myself with” (213). Throughout the novel she is a Compounder, a Gardener, a college student, a docile assistant and a prostitute – the last one being the epitome of her constant change of roles. As Mordis, the club manager to whom she eventually works, says to her, “You can be whoever you want” (295) if she enters Scales, the expensive night club he runs. This argument is what tempts Ren to finally accept the job.

As a prostitute, she would finally be able to recreate herself, to travel through identities, leaving her past behind or at least hidden. Hutcheon says that this final acknowledgement of a fragmented self is part of a woman’s recognition that “the unified self her culture has taught her to desire may be inappropriate for her as a woman” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 144). When Ren and Toby embrace their own fragmentation, their own different stories and perspectives, they are able to move more freely in the decadent world depicted in the novel.

When discussing *The Edible Woman*, Atwood’s first novel, Hutcheon remarks:

[it] may on the surface look like straightforward realist fiction, but its feminist and anti-consumerist politics actually find their particular expression through the articulation of postmodern contradictions in metafictional themes and forms that we usually associate with more narcissistic formalist impulses in fiction. (*The Canadian Postmodern* 140)

The Year of the Flood may be read in the same light. Its themes of women’s lives, of poverty, of violence and of a search for a place in the world somehow engage a postmodern paradox in Hutcheon’s terms. Multiple voices and multiple narrators create instability in the narration since there is often contradiction and different portrayals of characters.

In realism, says Patricia Waugh, “the conflict of languages and voices is apparently resolved . . . through their subordination to the dominant ‘voice’ of the omniscient, godlike author” (6).

In a fragmented narrative, this notion of authority is questioned. There is no hierarchy of voices in *The Year of the Flood*. The three narrators are equally coordinated and to none of them is attributed an idea of neutrality. Even the use of third-person narrator in Toby's narrative is reverted. Instead of the all-knowing omniscient kind, there is a narrator whose voice is intertwined with Toby's voice in first person and Adam One's sermons. Furthermore, the third-person narrator here engages in a parody of a coming of age narrative combined with a survival narrative. This combination creates a parody, and according to Hutcheon, such feature is a major form of postmodern paradox because it both undermines and reverses a convention.

1.4 A Failed Detective Story: Reading Both Novels as Counterparts

When put together, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* may be read as counterpart novels. However, it is necessary to highlight that I do not read them as complementary in terms of plot since this would be denying the open, fragmentary nature of both texts. My idea of reading them as counterparts is actually related to the ways themes are approached in the two novels. While *Oryx and Crake* is a narrative of the privileged ones living in the Compounds, close to the spheres of power, *The Year of the Flood* depicts the life of the poor ones in the Pleeblands, the ones in the margins. If the former is about the anxieties of science, the latter is about religion. The first presents a male point of view and the male gaze is foregrounded in relation to the exploitation of women. In the most recent novel, there are different women's points of view and their perspectives in relation to the same exploitation. The novels approach a dystopian world in very distinct perspectives, even though they refuse to be complementary in the sense that one reveals mysteries not resolved in the other. On contrary, reading the novels together maximize the possibilities of interpretation because they open the debate of social issues. Again, one novel does not explain the other.

Marcel Theroux in a review of *The Year of the Flood* remarks that “together [the novel being reviewed and *Oryx and Crake*] form halves of a single epic. Characters intersect, plots overlap. Even the tiniest details tessellate into an intricate whole” (“The Year”). His point is that there is a sense of completion when the reader finishes reading the two novels in the sense that he or she may acquire a better understanding of the events narrated – the plague, Crake’s reasons to destroy humanity, Adam One’s intentions, the relationship between Jimmy and Ren, the connection between the MaddAddam group, the God’s Gardeners and Crake, etc., but I argue that there is no such completion.

The novels certainly play with the idea of complementing each other. The cross-references and the overlapping of characters and events emphasize the notion that the mysteries found in one novel may be unfolded in the other, but I argue this does not happen. One example is Jimmy and Ren’s relationship. From Ren’s point of view in *The Year of the Flood*, Jimmy broke her heart and she was never able to trust a man again. She says about him: “Sweet, ruinous Jimmy. Jimmy, who’d trashed my life” (307). But in *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman remembers her as Brenda and when he recollects her nice girly decorated bedroom and her fluffy toys, he adds: “It’s always struck him how the toughest and most bitchy girls had the schmaltziest, squishiest doodads in their bedrooms” (271). He had read her diary and found out she hated him and he thinks she is mean. In *The Year of the Flood*, Ren says that she had done it out of revenge because Jimmy was seeing another girl. But as far as the reader knows, both of them may have broken each other’s hearts. It is all inconclusive.

As in much postmodern fiction, the reader is a failed detective: all his or her attempts to try to discover a mystery are ultimately pointless. But the novels compel the reader to adopt this detective role. Take for instance, in *The Year of the Flood*, when the reader finds out that Glenn, a.k.a. Crake, had connections with the God’s Gardeners. This fact might give the impression that Crake’s reasons for eradicating humanity are going to be related somehow to

the credo of the eco-religious group and that some mystery regarding Adam One and his sect is to be revealed. In the scene this connection between Glenn/Crake and the Gardeners is presented, Zeb makes Ren and Amanda deliver Pilar, one of the Eves in the Garden, a jar of honey brought by a boy. Zeb is the one to introduce them: “This is Glenn. Take good care of him” (146). When Zeb leaves, Amanda asks Glenn: “How come you know Zeb?” to which he replies vaguely “Oh, I used to know him” (147). Later on, when Ren is back to the Compounds, she encounters Glenn again. He tells her how, in any kind of extreme situation, what is needed to do is to kill the king. Pilar tells Toby the same thing at the time they were together in the Garden. The reader is then left with the puzzle of Crake/Glenn’s relation as a kid to the Gardeners, especially Pilar and Zeb, but this relation is never presented or mentioned again. That is the reason I reject Theoroux’s view that one novel completes the other. Connections are made, but no meaning is attributed to them, no question is answered. All hints lead to empty evidences and half-presented reasons.

One may argue against my reading of the novels by saying that in the end of *The Year of the Flood*, Ren discovers about the BlyssPlus and the MaddAddam group, being able thus to pin out Crake’s position in the plan that brought humans to extinction. She considers: “For one split second I think about saying all this to Croze – how I know quite a lot about this Crake from a former life” (395). Nevertheless, Ren does not understand the reasons. She may be able to link Crake to Zeb and to the final act of terrorism against all humans, but she is unable to grasp the bigger picture; thus, the plot is not revealed to her or to the reader. There is, however, the prevailing false impression of finding something, the illusion that, by reading both novels, it would be possible to achieve a sense of wholeness, but the reader is left ultimately with fragmented stories, different points of view only.

Waugh remarks that “the traditional fictional quest has thus been transformed into a quest for fictionality” (10) in metafictional texts. Achieving a final truth is not possible, since the reader

can only access parts of a story. This is the point in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*: there is a constant questioning of traditional forms, traditional binary oppositions, and traditional ways of telling stories. The reading of these novels as counterparts does not hold if one attempts to find definitive answers; it is rather a way to debate the meaning and the function of storytelling.

1.5 Reflecting on Stories Told and Telling Stories in *Oryx and Crake*

Oryx and Crake can be read as a novel about the process of creating a narrative. Snowman, as the narrator of Jimmy's life, acts as a trickster creator and, as Wilson points out, the result is that "his attempt to keep words from becoming extinct succeeds in that he manages to tell the story we read" ("Blindness" 187). Drawing on this comment, one might start linking the matter of reflecting on the role of language – and later on, on storytelling – and survival, which in *Oryx and Crake* presents many meanings. The first of them refers to the survival of the protagonist, Snowman, who is dying in the beginning of the novel: "Time to face reality. Crudely put, he's slowly starving to death" (175). The second instance is the survival of human culture, which has now Snowman as its only bearer and representative: "'I used to be erudite', he says out loud. *Erudite*. A hopeless word. What are all those things he once thought he knew, and where have they gone?" (175). When Snowman turns to his past as Jimmy, another notion of survival appears; the survival of arts in a dystopian society which values science over any form of knowledge: "So a lot of what went on at Martha Graham [the arts and humanities college in the novel] was like studying Latin, or book-binding: pleasant to contemplate in its ways, but no longer central to anything" (219). These instances of survival may be linked to Atwood's own remarks on the theme in her 1972 book, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, in which she discusses survival as the national metaphor for Canada.

Atwood lists four instances of survival:

For early explorers and settlers, it meant bare survival in the face of the “hostile elements” and/or natives ... But the word can also suggest survival of a crisis or disaster, like a hurricane or a wreck ... what you might call “grim survival” as opposed to “bare survival”. For French Canada after the English took over it became cultural survival ... There is another use of the word as well: a survival can be a vestige of a vanished order which has managed to persist after its time is past, like a primitive reptile. (41)

The last three meanings of survival can be found in *Oryx and Crake*. Snowman’s striving to find food in a post-catastrophe environment is unquestionably “grim survival.” The portrayal of the lack of prestige in the study of arts in Martha Graham and Jimmy’s pursuit in dealing with words is cultural survival and the last, gloomy, kind of survival is Snowman’s coping with his new reality as Last Man, referring here to the literary tradition of portraying the last male human being alive. What is remarkable is that in all these three circumstances, storytelling is used as a means to make survival possible. By frequently drawing on storytelling and on language, Snowman lays bare some conventions of narration.

Earl G. Ingersoll dedicates an article to the matter of survival in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, but his reading of the relation between survival and storytelling is based on the author-reader relation. He states, “Snowman opens up the mother of all nightmares – a future in which no one can – or will – read what the Author writes” (“Survival” 171). Ingersoll is basically saying that writing and storytelling do not survive in the novel. I counter his position by pointing that he summarily disregards the relationship Snowman and Jimmy have with words and stories. He does not consider these relations in their contexts – Snowman in post-apocalypse and Jimmy in a technological culture that abolishes art. Neither does he consider that Snowman/Jimmy survives because of storytelling and words. Ultimately, the critic seems to disregard the meaning of survival and storytelling for the protagonist.

Rao is the one to point that “the act of storytelling becomes the only place where he [Snowman] can feel housed” (111). Words are Snowman’s –again, also Jimmy’s – salvation in a world he is not able to understand or cope with. Later in her text, Rao observes that the “act of storytelling . . . has multiple resonances. It means survival that allows Snowman to avoid sinking into a world where words lose their consistency, use, and meaning” (111). This relation between storytelling and survival is very strong in the novel and Ingersoll seems to overlook it, reading Atwood’s novel simply as a cautionary tale with a sad ending in which books no longer exist. In the following extract, Snowman, in a moment of desperation regarding his present situation, evokes words to keep himself calm, as if they were his ultimate salvation:

‘Hang on to the words’, he tells himself. The odd words, the old words, the rare ones. *Valance. Norn. Serendipity. Pibroch. Lubricious.* When they’re gone out of his head, these words, they’ll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been. (*Oryx and Crake* 78)

Words and his own story he is telling to himself are the things that keep Snowman alive and that constantly remind him that he is human. He becomes the repository of human culture, and he tells stories and recalls words as a way to cope with his situation and to reflect on his own life.

Hutcheon argues that the narcissistic quality of the novel as a genre is that it is “both the story telling and the story told” (*Narcissistic Metafiction* 10), that is, the plot and the reflection on the way this plot is constructed are equally relevant. When Snowman cannot stop the literary references in his mind, “One more scrap from the burning scrapbook in his head” (*Oryx and Crake* 12), continually letting fiction shape his present situation, a commentary on the very notion of fictionality is being made: literature does not represent the world, and the difference between fiction and fact is not clear cut. As Hutcheon points out,

metafiction mingles literature with its critique. This argument is precisely the metafictional paradox: all metafiction consists of its first critical observation.

Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as:

a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

If Snowman's sense of reality is permeated by fictional accounts, would not the reader's so-called reality also be so? This destabilizing notion is played along the whole novel. The very techniques Snowman lays bare are the ones the narrator – and Snowman himself – uses in order to be able to tell Jimmy's story of Oryx and Crake. The constant reflections on storytelling and its effects are highly metafictional.

The Last Man narrative and the castaway report are parodied extensively in *Oryx and Crake*.

Hutcheon defines parody as

a major mode of thematic and formal structuring, involving what I earlier called integrating modeling processes. As such, it is one of the most frequent forms taken by textual self-reflexivity in our century. It marks the intersection of creation and re-creation, of invention and critique. (*A Theory of Parody* 101)

Snowman, as a character, is aware of his life as parody since he is able to perceive the intertexts that permeate his own narrative (mainly the Last Man narrative and the castaway report). An example of this awareness can be found in the following quote:

Or he could keep a diary. Set down his impressions. . . . He could emulate the captains of ships, in olden times – the ship going down in a storm, the captain in his cabin, doomed but intrepid, filling in the logbook. There were movies like that. Or castaways in desert islands,

keeping their journals day by tedious day. Lists of supplies, notations on the weather, small actions performed – the sewing on of a button, the devouring of a clam.

He too was a castaway of sorts. . . .

But even a castaway assumes a future reader . . . Snowman can make no such assumptions: . . . Any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past”. (45-46)

Snowman paradoxically rejects and assumes his position as a castaway. Even though he considers the uselessness of seeing himself as such because he is the last man, he will never have a reader, he cannot refrain from narrating his own life later on, even if it is to “a rakunk, a young one” (56). Snowman does exactly what a castaway does – he writes a letter telling his fate, he tells the story of his life emphasizing the small details – except for the part in which he actually expects someone to find him and his story. In Hutcheon’s words, it is “parody that engages it” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 146). Snowman parodies accounts of castaway narratives, exposing their conventions: a storm, a stubborn captain, a journal about unimportant things. But at the same time, he incorporates such aspects by performing them. The parodic effect is that he is exposing how castaway narratives are constructed: what their conventions and common elements are.

Another example of Snowman’s awareness of literary conventions is the scene in which he is losing his mind, feeling guilt and remorse because of his inaction in the face of Crake’s plan to destroy humanity:

“Get me out!” He bears himself thinking. But he isn’t locked up, he’s not in prison. What could be more out than where he is?

“I didn’t do it on purpose”, he says, in the sniveling child’s voice he reverts to in this mood.

“Things happened, I had no idea, it was out of my control! What could I have done? Just someone, anyone, listen to me please!

What a bad performance. Even he isn't convinced by it. But now he's weeping again. (*Oryx and Crake* 50-51)

This excerpt points to the way a crying scene could go. Snowman finally acknowledges that a lot of crying and guilt is not enough to make a good scene; however, eventually, he is crying. Snowman's own notions of what a crying scene is supposed to look like shape his sense of reality. Nevertheless, he is still crying and suffering. Thus, to what extent is "reality" being represented in fiction and fiction being inserted into reality? As often happens in metafictional texts, the questioning is more relevant than the answering. This questioning of fictionality and reality is central to metafiction.

One of the most striking passages is the section entitled "Toast", in which Snowman, recklessly says "you'll be toast!" (112) to the Crakers. Biologically incapable of understanding metaphors and figurative language, the Crakers demand an explanation on what toast is. Snowman aggressively asks them to leave without giving any kind of answer but the question haunts him: "'What is toast?' – says Snowman to himself, once they've run off. Toast is when you take a piece of bread – What is bread? Bread is when you take some flour . . ." (112). In a series of definition questions, Snowman realizes that he is unable to explain what a toast is since all the other references of toast – flour, a toaster, electricity, butter – no longer exist. Thus, Snowman faces how it is to live in a world in which most referents are absent. His final assumption, "Toast is me. I am toast" (113), is not only ironic because of his present situation of starvation but because of his realization that human culture is left for him in language but language in itself, that is, language without culture, is meaningless. The Crakers do not share the referents he does.

Snowman tries to tell his own story but is unable to do so. What he can do is tell fragments and versions of it, being his constant attempt the very material of the novel we read. Waugh remarks that the metafictional dilemma is that when "one is to represent the world, he or she

will realize the world cannot be represented” (3). Analyzing the ways Snowman tries to represent the world, there are three major attempts of storytelling in *Oryx and Crake*: Snowman’s telling of his life as Jimmy, Jimmy’s telling of Oryx’s life, and finally Snowman’s mythology for the Crakers in which Oryx and Crake are deities that watch over them and he, Snowman, is their prophet. In all three instances, the frequent reflection on the impossibility of narrating events creates a commentary on fictionality and on how narratives are constructed.

Metafiction, thus, is at the very core of *Oryx and Crake*, and the storytelling theme underlies the whole narrative, being connected to the notion of survival. By questioning storytelling techniques, commenting on them and later on using these same techniques in the narrative, the narrator and Snowman question the nature of fictionality. As Snowman concludes during his session with the Crakers, in which he retells the cosmology of Oryx and Crake, “What is real? No real can tell us about the real” (118). Storytelling is not a direct representation of the world, but a way of creating one.

1.6 Reflecting on the Artificiality of Discourses in *The Year of the Flood*

Differently from *Oryx and Crake*, which overtly draws the reader to the matter of narrativity, *The Year of the Flood* presents metafictional traits more subtly. Issues of metafiction are raised by the Gardener’s credo of not writing anything down, Ren’s diary, and Toby’s lists. The role of language and the function of writing and storytelling are posed. The use of a fragmented narrative with multiple points of view forces the reader to engage in the reading of the text at the same time he or she questions the conventions of the traditional novel. Besides, the Gardener’s hymns, more than just explaining the system of beliefs of the religion, work as a parody of both religious and scientific discourses.

I have already mentioned how the 2009 novel apparently reads as a traditional novel but actually works as a critique to it. The reader is not taught to read the novel as in *Oryx and Crake*, which openly discusses issues of storytelling and language, being thus explicit in its metafictional traits. In *The Year of the Flood*, the reader is rather immersed in the text, having to establish the connections on his or her own. Hutcheon remarks on the difference between overt and covert metafiction. According to the author,

In overtly narcissistic texts, the emphasis is upon bringing both this liberty and this duty [of reading] to the reader's attention. In a covert form, however, it is assumed that he knows his duty and will respond accordingly. The stress alters subtly from the teaching of the thematized reader to the actualized act of reading in progress. (*Narcissistic Metafiction* 30)

The Year of the Flood subtly presents its metafictional qualities. The reader has to perceive how the novel incorporates the character's habits of writing and storytelling in its own construction and how the three narrators' different views on storytelling actually comment on the nature and function of fiction.

Each of the three narrators presents a different level of metafictionality in their narratives. Adam One's narrative is presented in the form of sermons and it conveys a vision of storytelling as a way of passing on knowledge. The Gardeners banish any kind of writing and favor oral history; thus, all Gardener's credo and practices are transmitted through storytelling. Adam One in his sermon transmits survival knowledge: "Let us construct our Ararats carefully, my friends. Let us provision them with foresight, and with canned and dried goods. Let us camouflage them well" (*The Year of the Flood* 91). The Ararat is a storage unit each Gardener is supposed to build before the coming of the Waterless Flood, the second time God would destroy the world, albeit still fulfilling its promise to Noah that it would be not by water. The name Ararat is an emblematical reference to Mount Ararat; the place that,

according to the biblical myth, Noah landed with his ark. Adam One uses his sermons to instruct and to prepare the Gardeners to live in a hostile environment.

One might read Adam One's sermons as a retelling of Christian sermons and scientific discourse. Through his sermons, Adam One is rebuilding biblical discourse, parodying it, and therefore exposing its construction. In order to create his new set of dogmas and interpretation, he both acknowledges and undermines biblical conventions like the parable, the psalm, and the sermon. The reader is then grounded on the familiar discourse of the Bible and led to an unfamiliar interpretation of it, which is a combination of these religious forms and scientific discourse. In one of the sermons, Adam One says, "How much we lost, dear Fellow Mammals and Fellow Mortals! How much have we willfully destroyed! How much do we need to restore, within ourselves! . . . Let us sing!" (13). The structure is familiar to the reader: it is part of a eulogy. However, the use of the word "mammals" destabilizes the narrative since it is not a word expected in this context. Being able to identify the norm and the difference, the reader perceives the parodic nature of the text.

Having in mind Hutcheon's definition of parody, it is possible to say that when scientific and religious discourses collide in Adam One's sermons, the reader is able to acknowledge the double nature of the text and it is this duplicity that makes him or her aware of the text as construction. If the text read is articulated in a direct relation with a previous text and if the characteristics of this text are appropriated and resignified in order to create another text, textuality is then in evidence. From a relation of familiarization and defamiliarization, the reader is caught in a metafictional paradox; that is, his or her attention is drawn to the structure of the text and its construction.

Waugh acknowledges the importance of the Russian Formalist concept of defamiliarization for metafiction. She claims that metafiction "offers both innovation *and* familiarity through the individual reworking and undermining of familiar conventions" (13). When the tension

between the familiar and the unfamiliar highlights the way a text is constructed metafiction takes place. In this sense, Adam One's sermons are all inherently metafictional, as the following example shows:

We thank Thee, oh God, for having made us in such a way to remind us, not only of our less than Angelic being, but also of the knots of DNA and RNA that tie us to our many fellow Creatures. (*The Year of the Flood* 53)

The familiar ground of the preaching is made unfamiliar with the mention of DNA and RNA, concepts associated to science. This mingling of science and religion discourses breaks reader's expectations, calling his or her attention to the formal aspect of the text. According to Waugh's considerations, this unsettling of expectations that draws the reader's attention to the formal aspect of the text is a covert form of metafiction.

The Gardener's credo also presents a questioning of the function of language. For them, language means the fall from God's grace:

According to Adam One, the Fall of Man was multidimensional. The ancestral primates fell out of the trees; then they fell from vegetarianism to meat-eating . . . from simple signals into complex grammar, and thus into humanity. (188)

In the Gardener's belief, language is the ultimate element that leads humans away from God. The Fall of Man for them is not the traditional Christian view of Adam and Eve eating the fruit against God's will and thus losing their innocence. It is rather a symbolic way of facing the evolution of humans and the way they are separated from other animals, starting to use them for their own purposes instead of protecting them. For the Gardeners, language brings with it the final fall, the one that generates segregation between humans themselves because of its complexity. They draw on the image of the Babel Tower and say that language creates misunderstandings, confusion, war, and death.

For the Gardeners, writing is considered a very dangerous activity because it is fixed. The Gardener kids write their lessons on slates and later on erase them, so they have to rely on memory. If language is fall from God's grace, then humans have to make their best not to overuse it and consequently fall even more. Oral language is seen as less dangerous by the Gardeners because it is not imprisoned in the written word, which is immutable. Oral storytelling has an important meaning among them because it is through it that they convey their knowledge and, in a later instance, are able to survive. Because of Adam One's sermons and the Gardener's lessons, Toby and Ren have the necessary knowledge to survive in the post-apocalyptic world. They learn how to store supplies, grow edible plants, hunt, identify predators, remember things by heart, and keep track of time.

The novel constantly makes reference to the process of storytelling, both its values and dangers, as well as to the way stories are created and manipulated. This thematization, however, occurs in the form of an unresolved paradox. Even though Toby and Ren are taught in the Garden to abhor the written word and adopt oral culture, both write at some point in the novel, both cases in situations they need to survive. Hutcheon states that in Atwood's works frequently "there is no dialectic or even real dichotomy, just postmodern paradox" (*The Canadian Postmodern* 138), in that the Canadian author often does not attempt to resolve the contradictions in her text, but leave them instead to be perceived by the reader as paradoxes. In her study, Hutcheon is making a reference to Atwood's texts from the 1970s and 1980s, but it could be applied to her later works. In *The Year of the Flood*, this paradox is mainly present in two instances: 1) in the protagonists struggle in relation to storytelling and writing, and 2) in the realization that the paradoxical tensions between the oral and the written are part of the novel. The novel portrays the protagonists' anxieties in relation to the oral and written word but the result, the novel itself, is written and is open to interpretation, turning concrete the greatest fear of the Gardeners: that someone might "use your words to condemn you" (6).

Toby writes lists in order to keep her sanity:

Toby's been keeping track of the days on some old AnooYoo Spa in the pink notepaper. Each pink page is topped with two long-lashed eyes, one of them winking, and with a lipstick kiss. She likes these eyes and smiling mouths: they're companions of a sort. At top of each fresh page she prints the Gardener Feast Day or Saint's Day. She can still recite the entire list off by heart.

Under each Saint's Day she writes her gardening notes: what was planted, what was harvested, what phase of the moon, what insect guests. (163)

Through writing she maintains her routine, duties and responsibilities carefully under record. She even ponders on her sanity when she rereads the entry with the word "hallucination". The lists work both as reflection and reminder of her new condition of survivor. Writing becomes for her not synonyms for danger but for life: she needs it to keep going. Furthermore, the use of these lists is later on incorporated in the narrative itself. The narrator starts using lists when focusing on Toby, a strategy that can be seen in the following excerpt:

The riffle, of course. Ammunition. Trowel, for digging roots. Matches. Barbecue lighter, . . .
Cooking pot. The Kelly kettle. . . .

Spoons, metal, two; cups, plastic, two. . . . Binoculars: heavy but necessary. . . . Sugar. Salt.
The last of the honey. . . .

The syrup Poppy. The dried mushrooms. The Death Angels (363).

The use of listing as narrative emphasizes Toby's previous activities of enlisting things and makes a metacommentary on how lists work as narrative, not simply as random items written down. By starting with the obvious item of the riffle, this list-narrative conveys the idea of violence or protection against violence, goes through utilitarian items such as food, and ends with death, the possible and plausible future for two women alone in the dark. The reduction in narrative form accompanies the character's reduced and immediate circumstances. As this

narrative carries meaning, so does Toby's previous lists which, more than telling about her routine, tell the reader the narrative of her survival.

The same can be said about Ren's diary. As a teenager, she goes against the Gardener's belief of not writing things down and keeps a diary: "By this time I had a diary – all the girls at school had them, it was a retro craze: people would hack your computer, but they couldn't hack a paper book. I wrote all of this down in my diary. It was like talking to someone" (221). At this moment in her life, she was feeling miserable, being back at the Compounds with her mother and having no friends. Writing makes her feel more secure, makes her endure the situation, makes her survive. The feeling of talking to someone is made literal when she writes a passage for Jimmy, her boyfriend at the time, knowing he would read it. This way, Ren exemplifies the warning the Gardeners have in relation to writing: the control over someone's writing brings power. Ren reverts the situation momentarily, but she would later suffer the consequences: Jimmy starts to believe she really hates him and leaves her.

The Year of the Flood reads as a metafiction if one is to consider the way passages of the novel question discourses and expose their artificialities. Moreover, the incorporation of Toby's lists into the narrative as well as Ren's writing a diary is a way to comment on the dangers and the powers of the written word. The theme of storytelling is presented as a way of conveying knowledge, including the practical knowledge Ren and Toby would need to survive in the post-apocalyptic scenario.

1.7 The Power of Imagination: *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* as Novels about the Importance of Having Stories Told

I have discussed in this chapter how *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* are fragmented novels that highlight ex-centric perspectives, display metafictional comments and play with reader's expectations. I have also remarked how storytelling is a major theme in

both novels, how it is discussed and how it is related to the matter of survival. Howells claims, “Atwood’s novels have always highlighted the art and indeed the artifice of storytelling, where the real world is transformed and reinvented within the imaginative spaces of fiction” (*Margaret Atwood* 186) and she certainly has a point. In the novels studied, I would say Atwood is going even further: she is discussing what happens to a world in which imagination, and consequently storytelling, has no place. The dystopian capitalist reality Jimmy, Ren, Toby and Adam One inhabit leads to final disaster and storytelling – in Jimmy’s case – and the knowledge obtained through it – in the case of Ren, Toby and Adam One – is what makes survival possible after the end of the world.

For Walter Benjamin, storytelling is intrinsically related to experience: “Experience which is passed from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn” (85). Modernity would diminish the importance of sharing experiences – Benjamin discusses how the soldiers coming back from World War I were silent rather than talkative about their experiences – favoring information over experience, a more direct form of conveying knowledge. In Atwood’s novels, the society that considered only scientific knowledge diminished social interaction to virtual exchanges and transformed human suffering into reality shows to be broadcast online, leading to catastrophe. The ones able to survive are the outcasts of this previous order, precisely the ones to share experiences and to tell stories. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* highlight how experience and storytelling are related and how these two characteristics are the very tools of survival of humanity.

No wonder both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* end in a cyclical narrative. In the former novel, the final section entitled “Footprint” repeats with minor differences the first section of the novel, “Mango”:

Snowman wakes before dawn. He lies unmoving, listening to the tide coming in, wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades, wish-wash, wish-wash, the rhythm of heartbeat. He would so like to believe he is still asleep. (*Oryx and Crake* 4)

Snowman wakes before dawn. He lies unmoving, listening to the tide coming in, wish-wash, wish-wash, the rhythm of heartbeat. He would so like to believe he is still asleep. (429)

The difference between the two instances is that there is now a footprint in the sand, hope for humanity. Snyder claims that the cyclic nature of the narrative calls for an idea of “repetition with a difference” (464), as many circular narratives do. When discussing Snowman’s ending in *Oryx and Crake*, she considers: “Retrodetermination does not mean that the past can be changed, but it does allow for the possibility that the present meanings of past events can be” (464). Snyder is again commenting on trauma theory to discuss cyclical trauma but it certainly mirrors the cyclical narrative. In Atwood’s common open ending stories, the return to the initial place can be read as illusory since perceptions have changed. If storytelling in the beginning of the novel is disregarded as unimportant, in the post-apocalyptic world it is all that is left of human culture: a story to be told by its last survivor (or survivors, as it is presented in the end).

In the 2009 novel, Toby’s anxiety in the beginning of the narrative, marked by her heartbeat “*katoush, katoush, katoush*” (5) is mirrored in Toby’s penultimate section in the book: “*katoush*” (415). But instead of the fear of wild animals and her intense worry that makes her listen to the sound of her own pounding heart described at the beginning of the novel, in the end she is afraid of others listening to her heartbeat and thus being killed by the other humans that survived. Toby at first is afraid of her own inability to survive but she later on finds out that she is to fear humans again. She is unsure whether the cycle of violence is to repeat itself and her final prayer in the end of the chapter, “Dear Leopard, dear Wolf, dear Liobam: lend

me your Spirits now” (415), points to her ambiguous relation to the God’s Gardeners: does she believe in their faith? Does she finally accept it? Or is she just desperate?

In the two texts repetition is linked to death. Both characters are starving at the beginning of the novels and both in the end are about to confront other humans, and it is unknown whether they are going to survive or be killed. However, it is also possible to read these repetitions as images of life: they are survivors in a wasteland, they managed to stay alive, and by the end of their narratives they find other humans also alive, a possibility to start over. This repeated death, but at the same time life images, in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, points to the protagonists’ survival experience and to the way they used their own forms of storytelling to survive. When the protagonists face extreme situations in which these images of life and death appear, they relate to storytelling. The lack of valuing of the powers of storytelling led the world to its final catastrophe, but on the other hand, it is precisely storytelling that is left in the post-apocalyptic scenario since it is what enables the protagonists to survive.

Oryx and Crake and *The Year of the Flood* both present the relationship between storytelling and survival as convergent in the sense that it is storytelling that makes survival possible. However, the protagonists face different obstacles to survive. In the former novel, Jimmy feels an outcast because he loves art and later, as Snowman, he is unable to find food. In the latter one, Ren and Toby are victims of sexual abuse and poverty. Later, after apocalypse, they are again targets of violence. In the following chapter, I analyze the dystopian scenarios created by Atwood and the different social issues presented in the two texts. I also point to the different utopian and dystopian visions displayed in each text.

CHAPTER 2: DYSTOPIAN AND UTOPIAN VISIONS

2.1 Dystopia and Utopia in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*

As texts that can be read under a postmodern light, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* revisit tradition and play with it. One of the many traditions played with and parodied in both novels is the notion of utopia and dystopia and their literary manifestations. By way of referring, rewriting and reworking clichés and common motifs of these two distinct literary traditions, the novels present their hybrid and genre blurring nature. In a highly critical and self-aware way, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* both rescue and undermine utopian and dystopian literary traditions.

One may well recall Adrienne Rich's essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision", because Atwood's texts often move into that direction. For Rich, re-vision is an act of survival and a necessity in order to rethink issues, especially gender ones. Atwood's texts pay a tribute to tradition at the same time they are openly interrogators of it, exposing the limitations of both form and representation, in this case, of utopia and dystopia. The Canadian author seems to force the novels to the edge of the dystopian genre, incorporating utopian impulses into it and ultimately presenting these very impulses in an ambiguous form. These two notions – utopia and dystopia – are present in many ways in the narrative: 1) as different perceptions of a same reality – the world Crake built for the Crakers is certainly utopian for him, but completely dystopian for Snowman; 2) as a system of beliefs – the God's Gardeners' way of life can be read as utopian for its members even though they face a dystopian reality; and 3) as a narrative mode – Snowman's description of his reality as a dystopia, and Adam One's view of apocalypse as a necessary step towards utopia. The self-reflexive nature of the novels also contributes to the problematization of utopia and dystopia and to the way they are rewritten and inserted into the narratives. However, the assumption

that utopia and dystopia are contrary forces is inadequate, because each notion has its own literary tradition and Atwood is aware of that while working with both of them.

Even though utopian writing dates from the scripts of Plato, the birth of utopia as a literary tradition is associated with the publication of Thomas Morus's *Utopia* in 1516. The choice for Morus's text as landmark is mainly due to the fact that his text sets the estrangement conventions for utopian texts. Anne Cranny-Francis discusses this estrangement:

One of the major conventions of utopian fiction, in common with other generic forms such as science fiction and fantasy, is estrangement. Another world, the utopian figure, is constructed in the text and the reader, in the process of (re)constructing this figure, is positioned to see her/his own society from a different perspective. (110)

The critic mentions three relevant elements present in utopian writing: 1) cognitive consistency, 2) geographical and temporal description of the society (even if it is set in an inaccessible place), and 3) the idea of a traveler/guide relationship that explains how the given society works. For her, even though the utopian society is described in details, this apparent realism does not make utopian literary writing a blueprint for the future. She affirms:

This cognitive consistency, this realism, of the utopian figure is no doubt the reason for its interpretation as a blueprint. However, if the utopian figure is placed within the political practice of the text, then its blueprint realism may be seen as serving an entirely different function, that of reinforcing the constant direction of the reader back to the realities of her/his own society. (110)

In her argument, Cranny-Francis follows critics such as Frederic Jameson and Tom Moylan. In their reading, utopian literature is seen as a way to politicize readers, having the potential of making them aware that the way society is arranged is neither natural nor inevitable. In

Morus's text, the critique is aimed at Tudor England. In his detailed description of the society of the far away Utopia that is made through the conversation between Hythlodæus and More, Morus established a framework of elements that would be incorporated by other writers of the genre.

The first writings of dystopia were often connected to satire, presenting a strong critique of their times. Tom Moylan, however, considers that the classic dystopia as a genre started in the 20th century (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky* xi) and in this work I follow his argument. For the critic, "crucial to dystopia's visions in all its manifestations is this ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday people" (xii). The major difference between the elements of literary utopia and dystopia is the focus on the individual. Whereas in utopia the conversations between the traveler and the guide expose how society works, in dystopias society is described through the eyes of a discontent citizen. One of the early examples of this literary dystopian mode, for Moylan, is E. M. Foster's "The Machine Stops," in which the description of the social system is provided through the eyes of Kuno. The conflict between *status quo* and potential dissident is another element of dystopias.

When discussing the terms utopia and dystopia, I refer to the literary tradition, not to utopian or dystopian expressions as they happen in actual societies or as a political expression. I adopt Moylan's and Jameson's definitions of utopia but because these two critics mention Lyman Tower Sargent's definitions as a basis for discussion and problematization of the terms, I find it relevant to present them. For Sargent, the terms can be described in the following manner:

Utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space.

Eutopia or positive utopia – 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 the reader lived.

Dystopia or negative utopia – 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 worse than the society in which the reader lived.

Utopian satire – 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 a criticism of that contemporary society. (“The Three Faces” 3)

The aspect of authorial intention is dealt by Sargent in this article even though he states that intentions are “frequently complex and even conflicted” (6). For the critic, however, intention at a certain point is relevant for utopian studies, because they are interdisciplinary studies. The field of literature may reject authorial intent nowadays, but other fields and methodologies do not. Nonetheless, here Sargent recognizes that a literary piece of utopian/dystopian literature has a life of its own and that readers may perceive differently what an author primarily calls a dystopia or a utopia. Moylan also seems to recognize the importance of the author’s intention in a fashion very similar to Sargent’s in his *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*.

If one is to consider Sargent’s definitions of utopia and dystopia, it is clear that Atwood’s text challenges them. Sargent defines utopianism as social dreaming (“The Three Faces” 3) and names three main ways in which it can be expressed: utopian literature, communitarianism, and utopian social theory. In this work, I specifically discuss matters related to utopian literature. It is certainly useful to stress, as Sargent reminds readers in his article, that utopian does not mean a perfect society. In “Utopia – The Problem of Definition”, he discusses this common sense idea that connects utopia to perfection and states that utopia

has never had anything to do with describing a perfect society, not even in Morus's text. Utopias describe better societies that, nonetheless, are not perfect. The difference between a classical utopia and a critical utopia lies, according to Moylan, on the fact that, in the latter, the discontinuities and limitations of the social system are portrayed, whereas in the former they are not (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky* 56). I use the term critical, in tune with Moylan, to refer to both utopia and dystopias and to mark a difference between classical utopias and dystopias and the ones produced now. Agreeing with Moylan, I consider these new works of utopia and dystopia, through self-reflexivity mainly, contest the social systems they present more strongly.

A literary utopia (for the purposes of the research here, I do not use Sargent's term eutopia to refer to positive utopia.) would then be an imaginary world conceived as better than the reader's. Conversely, dystopia consists in the depiction of an imaginary world which is worse than the reader's. In common, utopia and dystopia share the idea of "social dreaming," as Sargent puts it ("Three Faces" 3), that is, the way a group of people imagine their lives in a different perspective, for the better or for the worse. Essentially, utopia and dystopia both provide critical analysis by means of presenting a new way of arranging society. However, the process by which they operate is different. For Jameson, a critical – or totalizing, to use the term the critic adopts – analysis is the depiction of a system, economically and socially, that makes possible to the reader the complete critical analysis of this system (*Seeds of Time* 68-69). Jameson's term is very controversial. In this thesis, I use critical analysis to indicate the idea of reflecting critically about a system. Whenever I mention totalizing analysis it is as a reference to Jameson's definition.

On the difference between utopian and dystopian conventions, Baccolini and Moylan state,

Unlike the typical eutopian 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. (Introduction 5)

In dystopian narratives, the relationship between the individual and the system is highlighted, because the focus on character rather than on setting stresses the manner a system operates oppressing individual experience. Dystopian narratives frequently entail reports on the life of a character that moves from total alienation to an understanding of the coercive situation he or she is living. As the narrative progresses, this character becomes politically engaged at some level, being able to critically analyze the system in question. In utopian narratives, in turn, the focus is usually on setting and on the presentation of an alternative society to a foreign traveler who can then trace the similarities and differences between his or her own society – usually very close to the readers' – and the new one.

Jameson disregards the potential dystopia has to promote an engaging critique of a system because of its tendency to narrate an individual experience. He observes that dystopia, because of its "narrative quality," is too focused on an individual character, a feature that takes away the utopian possibility of "non-narrative" (since for him, utopias frequently tend to carry detailed structural description the focused society), a strategy crucial to analyze a society critically (*The Seeds of Time* 55). Dystopia would then be, for him, too close to the current system, not creating the necessary estrangement of utopia. Even though Jameson criticizes the critical potential of dystopia, he usefully separates it from utopia, calling attention to the fact that what is interesting in utopia is its form and not content, that is, the

impulse for change, not a map to that change. However, Moylan presents a counter-argument when he affirms that there is room for engagement in dystopian narratives. For him,

His [Jameson's] disavowal of dystopian narrative unnecessarily limits the range of this new cultural matrix. . . . Certainly if instances such as the anti-government discourse of market and militias or political activism of identity politics bear utopian traces, then dystopian stories of violent and unjust societies can also provide a creative take on the problems of the current social order as well as on possibilities for political moves against and beyond it. Rather than removing dystopia from the utopian discussion problematic, Jameson's clarifying comments set the stage for a discussion of dystopia that allows us to see just how this particular textual tradition work in terms of processes of Utopia. (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky* 145)

Moylan thus sees in Jameson's own interpretative model the importance of dystopia as a critical tool. The tendency towards narrativity in the genre is not seen as restrictive, but rather as constructive. Dystopia creates powerful counter-narratives of the system that may contain within themselves utopian impulses. I tend to agree with Moylan, despite his excessive high hopes in the role of the reader as a political articulator after reading utopian or dystopian narratives. I see dystopia as having both utopian impulses and potential for critical analysis of a system.

Baccolini and Moylan, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and Dystopian Imagination*, call dystopia "the dark side of utopia" (1). The dark side to which they refer is not an opposition, but only a different way to look at a same thing. As Moylan asserts in his *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, the opposite of utopia is actually anti-utopia, although he remarks that the term dystopia has been wrongly used to express anti-utopia and vice-versa. These utopian and anti-utopian impulses work in different directions: while the former seeks a

society that is essentially better than the present one, the latter insists on the prevalence of the *status quo*. As Moylan extensively explains in his book, utopia and anti-utopia are not to be considered merely literary expressions, but rather political agendas. In a Marxist reading that accompanies Frederic Jameson's assertions on the same subject, present mainly in *The Seeds of Time*, Moylan poses utopia and anti-utopia as political positions that shape our society. Therefore, it may be argued that utopian and anti-utopian literary expressions may reflect such positions and influence the way readers think of their society.

In order to construct his argument, Moylan expands on Jameson's theory of utopia as well as his concept of cognitive mapping. The term cognitive mapping is the call for a new aesthetic made by Jameson in "Cognitive Mapping." As the author says, it is a "spatial analysis of culture" (348) and consists of an aesthetics that, according to Moylan's reading of Jameson, "goes beyond the limits of modernism and postmodernism, yet nevertheless retains the traditional characteristics of being able to 'teach, to move, to delight'" (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky* 356-57). In his essay, Jameson proposes the idea of cognitive mapping as an essential part for accomplishing a socialist project. Throughout his text, Jameson claims that the aesthetics of cognitive mapping "does not exist" and that "we cannot imagine [it]" ("Cognitive Mapping" 347), but that it would allow us to analyze the system as a totality (he even marks the difference between totalizing analysis, a view of the system that encompasses political and social economical instances, and totalitarian vision, a word often linked to political forms of oppression), in a critical way. For Jameson, "The project of 'cognitive mapping' obviously stands or falls with the conception of some (unrepresentable, imaginary) global social totality that was to have been mapped" ("Cognitive Mapping" 356). This idea of an aesthetics that could represent the totality of a system in a critical way is problematic, especially when it comes to the notion of totality being possible. However, many science fiction scholars have adopted this notion of representing a system politically and

socioeconomically in a critical way, as cognitive mapping, to discuss science fiction. Since in science fiction there is a sense of estrangement and new rules and paradigms of society can be created, they can thus be analyzed in their “totality” in a critical way. Jameson has never stated that science fiction is the genre of such a new aesthetic, but science fiction critics have often used the term in order to discuss the mechanics and characteristics of the genre (Moylan, *Scraps of the Untained Sky* 57).

I agree with Moylan that cognitive mapping is a useful concept to think about how dystopian (and utopian) narratives are able to provide a way to analyze an entire social system. By cognitively mapping a different world, a work of literature may present a critical analysis of a system and, more importantly, alternative ways of living. To Moylan, critical utopias, as well as critical dystopias, offer this analysis of a system in a way that classical utopias and dystopias do not. Their use of self-reflexivity and text self-awareness highlight the inadequacies of the system, its failures and its different social layers. For critical utopia Moylan names works of utopian writing published in the 1960’s and 1970’s; for critical dystopia, he considers literary works published in the 1990’s and 2000’s. Although I frequently draw on Moylan’s ideas and concepts of critical dystopia, I disagree with his clear cut division of critical utopia and dystopias along the decades. For me, these dates should be considered as reference, not as a restrictive fixing of a certain type of literary work. Nonetheless, as I mentioned earlier, I agree with his differentiation between classic and critical dystopia

Dystopia, then, is not the negation of utopia, but rather its unlikely counterpart. According to Moylan, dystopia posits itself insistently in a position to negotiate in the continuum of utopia and anti-utopia, being always open-formed. From the classical dystopia of the beginning of the 20th century to the works Moylan labels critical dystopias in the 1990’s, dystopia, by portraying a version of a world that is worse than our present one, also

cognitively maps a system and therefore promotes reflections on alternative ways of living. Critical dystopia would radicalize this cognitive mapping effect by the recurrent use of self-reflexivity and genre blurring – following Baccolini’s thoughts on the matter presented in the article “Gender and Genre” – to question our own society more deeply while presenting a utopian impulse. In this way, a dystopian vision can contain both utopia and anti-utopia characteristics in the sense that it negotiates with these impulses.

Oryx and Crake and *The Year of the Flood* can be analyzed as dystopian narratives. They present a world that is definitely worse than ours in many ways – politically, economically, and environmentally. However, both novels dialogue with utopian and dystopian traditions in many levels, as I shall discuss. The first dialogue with tradition is the presentation of a post-apocalyptic scenario in which humanity comes to near extinction, a common motif in dystopias. I discuss how Atwood rewrites apocalypse in Chapter 3, but for now I focus on the dystopian aspect and on how Atwood insistently shows both utopian and dystopian visions of apocalypse in her novels. The second dialogue with utopian and dystopian literary traditions is made through the rewriting of iconic figures: the mad scientist, the reluctant survivor, the peaceful leader, and the well-intentioned terrorists – recurrent figures of discontent citizens in classical dystopias. In both novels, these figures are presented just to be represented again under a different light, as often seen in Atwood’s fiction. Lastly, the dialogue with utopian and dystopian tradition is made by the reading of the novels as counterparts. When put together *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* form a critical dystopia that questions dystopian and utopian visions by constantly shifting the perspective and unsettling notions that the characters – as well as the readers– may take for granted.

2.2 Two sides of the same dystopia? The novels as counterparts.

In this work, I propose the reading of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* as counterparts. With the term counterpart, I mean that these novels can be read together in such a way that they provide a deeper and critical perspective on the world built by Atwood, not that they simply complement each other in terms of plot. I have already discussed in Chapter 1 how the reading of both novels together leads us to a failed detective story in the sense that one cannot be used to clarify some mysteries left unresolved in the other, although they might give this impression at first glance. In relation to the depiction of the world created by Atwood and to the understanding of how this society operates in socioeconomic levels, the counterpart reading I propose is quite relevant. Even though some gaps are left out – for example, what about the government? Is there any? Or did it merge with the corporations? – it is possible for the reader to start mapping this near future version of our world in a more detailed scale if the novels are put together.

In his review of *The Year of the Flood*, Jameson argues that this novel has a superior quality if compared to *Oryx and Crake* because it depicts a wider range of social realities:

Oryx gave us the view of this system from the inside and as it were from above, even though there really does seem to be no oligarchic ruling elite nor any totalitarian party or dictatorship on the old-fashioned modernist dystopian model; *The Year of the Flood* gives us the view from below – always, as we well know, the most reliable vantage point from which to gauge and map a society. (“Then You”)

The argument presented above concurs with Jameson’s Marxist readings. Even though I do not want to privilege one novel over the other, *The Year of the Flood* does amplify the world presented in *Oryx and Crake* in a much deeper scale. In *The Year of the Flood*, the pleeblands are presented in a more cruel form, as the issues of violence and poverty are exploited in more depth. Le Guin even remarks that the novel is “more painful” than its predecessor exactly for

these reasons (“The Year”). In *Oryx and Crake*, the pleeblands are also portrayed as a place of violence, but as a privileged young man, Jimmy never had to deal with the pleebland’s daily problems. It is always an outer place for him – a somewhere dangerous and somehow attractive place for him – whereas for protagonists Ren and Toby in *The Year of the Flood*, it is an essential part of their lives. Both women suffer all the violence the pleeblands can provide, especially gender violence. They are victims of objectification and sexual abuse and find in the Gardeners' dwelling a place to feel, at least, temporarily safe.

The reading of the novels as counterparts also casts light on the representation of the God’s Gardeners. Presented as a crazy cult in *Oryx and Crake*, they are portrayed as a group with an interesting alternative way of living in *The Year of the Flood*. By reading the two novels together, the reader is able to grasp that the Gardeners are actually both things at the same time – an ambiguous turn very characteristic of Atwood. The radical way of living of the members is truly eccentric even to those inside their cult, such as Zeb and Toby. But it is clearly a much more sustainable society.

In *Oryx and Crake*, this view of the Gardeners as a cult full of crazy radical religious people is introduced when Snowman, narrating his life as Jimmy, tells the reader about Jimmy’s experiences at college. Jimmy, at the time, shares a room with a Gardener supporter, and the narrator focuses on how eccentric she was, to the point of depicting her as a stereotypical insane person with wired hair, no personal hygiene, etc.:

He [Jimmy] shared a dorm suite . . . with a fundamentalist vegan called Bernice, who had stringy hair held back with a wooden clip in the shape of a toucan and wore a succession of God’s Gardener’s T-shirts, which – due to her aversion to chemical compounds such as underarm deodorants – stank even when freshly laundered. (221)

The Year of the Flood, in contrast, portrays a different version. The Garden is described as a place of beauty, and the narrator focuses on how Toby's expectations of finding a disorganized place – that alludes to the ideas presented about the Gardeners in *Oryx and Crake* – are frustrated:

The Garden wasn't at all what Toby had expected hearsay. It wasn't a baked mudflat strewn with rotting vegetables waste – quite the reverse. She gazed around it in wonder: it was so beautiful, with plants and flowers of many kinds she'd never seen before. There were vivid butterflies; from nearby came the vibration of bees. Each petal and leaf was fully alive, shining with awareness of her. Even the air of the Garden was different. (43)

Atwood seems deliberately to present ambiguous visions of the God's Gardeners through the narrators and characters, and only the reader is able to put some of the pieces together and understand the Gardeners and their function in the social system presented in both novels. For Jimmy, they are mere greenie protestors; for Toby, they are a paradoxical organization; for Ren, they are the providers of safety, and for Adam One, they are his religious community. Only for the reader are the Garderners all these things at the same time, but much more: they are an important factor in the development of Crake's plan. The God's Gardeners have their influence felt in many levels of society – in the pleeblands and in the Compounds – and the reader can map this influence and understand the link to the final catastrophe.

As mentioned, one may argue that Ren, by the end of *The Year of the Flood*, has the comprehension of Crake's whole plan. I argue this is not the case because she does not have the full picture of what happened. She knows of Crake's connection to the Gardeners but very superficially, because she never understood what he was doing there as a child. Lately, she gets to know what he did to the MaddAddam Group and she even has a glimpse of Crake's relationship with Oryx. However, the political implications of these facts escape her. When

she ponders in her narrative “how I know quite a lot about Crake from a former life” (395), she is stressing the personal aspect of it. Ren never understands Crake’s reasons and the political implications they involved.

In the reading I propose, only the reader can apprehend the whole system: Compounds, pleeblands, Gardeners, the plague, the Crakers. Even though plot holes remain, a critical analysis of the system both politically and socioeconomically is presented if one is to consider the two novels. The radical social division between the haves and have-nots and the way the CorpSeCorps act are explained in *Oryx and Crake*, regarding mainly the Compounds. In *The Year of the Flood*, this view is expanded with the presentation of how the pleebs work as an open lab and how the fast food chains function as a black market, a way to financially control the pleeblands and at the same time to literally dispose of enemies.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the pleeblands are presented as a dangerous place for Compound people. It is the site for the undesirable ones in society: the poor, the addicts, the crazies. This perspective is introduced mainly through the voice of Jimmy’s father, which is diluted into the narrative when Snowman, telling about his life as Jimmy, considers why it was best for Compound people to live inside the Compounds. The comment also highlights the atmosphere of competition among the different Compounds and the reason for their isolation:

Compound people didn’t go to the cities unless they had to, and then never alone. They called the cities the *pleeblands*. Despite their fingerprint identity cards now carried by everyone, public security was leaky: there were people cruising around in those places who could forge anything and who might be anybody, not to mention the loose change – the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies. So it was best for everyone in OrganInc Farms to live all in one place, with foolproof procedures. . . . Still, the CorpSeCorps men – the ones Jimmy’s father called our people – these men had to be on constant alert.

When there was so much at stake, there was no telling what the other side might resort to. The other side, or the other sides: it wasn't just one other side you had to watch out for. Other companies, other countries, various factions and plotters. (31-32)

In *The Year of the Flood*, the pleeblands are described as a place of violence perpetrated by pleeblanders themselves and by the CorpSeCorps, the private police from the Compounds. In this novel, the implications of a science oriented culture are shown in their gloomiest aspects: the pleeblanders are used as tests subjects, even without their knowing. They contribute to the profit of the CorpSeCorps through illegal deals, and the place is seen as the perfect site for assassinations. The narrator, presenting Toby's viewpoint, considers the implications of such actions in the structure of the pleeblands:

The local pleebmobs paid the CorpSeCorpsMen to turn a blind eye. In return, the CorpSeCorps let the pleebmobs run the low-level kidnappings and assassinations, the skunkweed gro-ops, the crack labs and street-drug retailing, and the plank shops that were their stock-in-trade. They also ran corpse disposals, harvesting organs for transplant, then running the gutted carcasses through the SecretBurgers grinders. So went the worst rumours. During the glory days of SecretBurgers, there were very few bodies in vacant lots. (33)

The social system that in *The Year of the Flood* is presented as a cruel and hypocritical environment in which everyone turns a blind eye to everything – e.g. violence towards women, the ethics of science, etc. – is enriched with the insights presented in *Oryx and Crake* that show how the privileging of science actually made people incapable of critical thinking. Moreover, the marketing industry is fully presented in this novel, with its dirty schemes to influence and manipulate people. In *The Year of the Flood*, the consequences such marketing has on people are portrayed in relation to the pleebrats, the parentless children in the

pleeblands, who practice extreme violence and trade sex for goods because they believe in the current propaganda and want to consume at any cost. Finally, a kind of resistance is presented in the two novels. In *Oryx and Crake*, there is Crake, the genius who believes that by genetically enhancing human beings he will be able to eradicate all the problems in the current system. In *The Year of the Flood*, there are the God's Gardeners with their beliefs in living as one with nature. The unlike link between these apparently radically different alternatives – Pillar and the MaddAddam group – in the figure of Crake himself exists only for the reader. I argue that when put together, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* cognitively map a world that provides a critical analysis of a system and consequently makes it possible to think of an alternative way of living.

Considering cognitive mapping as appropriated by Moylan to discuss critical dystopias:

Sf's textual mechanics therefore invite, or at least enable, a cognitive mapping process that runs from the stated information of the alternative world to the absent paradigm that informs the text, back to the page, and outward again to the reader and the realities of her or his own historical moment, then back into the text, and inevitably out again in a feedback spiral that can be properly shocking, enlightening, motivating. (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky* 60)

In this “feedback spiral”, the reader is able to reflect about his or her own society by means of analyzing the system presented in the novel. He or she is the one to grasp the system and how it works: Compounds, pleeblands and the connections between them. In Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping, which Moylan endorses, the ones inside the system can never grasp the totality of this system. Similarly, in Atwood's novels, the characters are never able to understand their realities or the connections between events. It is up to the reader to challenge these views because he or she has the bigger picture, thus being able to analyze it critically.

Together, the novels studied form a critical dystopia, which Sargent defines:

. . . 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 worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with eutopia. (“Three Faces” 222)

In this fashion, my reading of the novels as counterparts converges with Sargent’s definition. Undoubtedly, Atwood’s texts operate in more complex levels than just portraying a worse society that points to a possible hope, but these guidelines seem useful to analyze the utopian and dystopian visions presented in the two novels. I argue that, separately, they are closer to classical dystopias in Moylan’s conception, that is, both present an imaginary world represented as worse than ours that negotiates the anxieties of the spectrum between utopia and anti-utopia.

Another difference between classical and critical dystopia is remarked by Tom Van Steendam in his study of Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*: “classical dystopia’s focus on the humanist perspective and the individual as the criterion, whereas the critical dystopia puts emphasis on society and the world as a whole that needs to be re-examined and reconfigured” (32). Van Steendam uses the distinction between classical and critical dystopia to mark the way critical dystopias offer a moral tone or a warning in the end of the narrative. I disagree with his view because, even though it is possible to read critical dystopias as warnings for our own society, classical dystopias also can be read this way. Not do I believe a warning to society consists of the most important feature of critical dystopias. By focusing almost entirely on them, Van Steendam loses much of the ambiguity presented in *Oryx and Crake*. This novel certainly presents a powerful critique of capitalist society, but it is also a complex text with many dystopian layers, with each layer criticizing the other. For example,

Snowman's narrative of survival in the post-apocalyptic world is a critique of his own accounts of his life as Jimmy.

The utopian impulse in a critical dystopia is due to its ongoing critical aspect. Critical dystopias present a constant examination of the society being depicted and often have a utopian horizon, even if it is minimal. Classical dystopias lack this presence of utopian possibility. For Moylan, to be a critical dystopia, it is necessary to have a "utopian engagement". When commenting on Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, he argues,

Although the *Tale* remains a "classical" dystopia in its overall structure and tone, its author has nevertheless taken the traditional dystopia to a historical limit, and in doing so she anticipates the moment of critical dystopias that will soon occur in the popular realm of sf in the late 1980s. And yet she pulls back from a degree of utopian engagement that will appear in the critical dystopias, she remains on the other side of the dividing line from these more radical texts that nevertheless benefit from her vision and craft. (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky* 165)

Other critics such as Raffaella Baccolini consider *The Handmaid's Tale* a critical dystopia, but Moylan's call for utopian engagement in the critical dystopia aligns well with Sargent's definition of critical dystopia. The open ending of *The Handmaid's Tale* leaves little or no possibility of utopia, and even the appendix, often pointed as an optimistic escape from the oppressive regime of Gilead, presents a society which cares nothing for the others' suffering and it is not much of a better place. However, for some critics it does not mean that there is no utopian horizon in the novel. Ildney Cavalcanti points out to the way language is a place of utopia for Offred ("Utopias of/f"). But I believe the critical aspect to which Moylan is referring is linked to a collective horizon of utopia, that is, to the possibility of the current dystopian system to be eradicated.

In regard to *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, only when put side by side do they present the necessary qualities of a critical dystopia in Moylan's terms: a genre blurring quality, a critical analysis of a system, a self-reflexive stance, a collective struggle and a utopian impulse. In *Oryx and Crake*, the lack of a collective struggle and the utopian impulse are perceived by the main character as completely dystopian, whereas in *The Year of the Flood* such self-reflexivity is not stressed. A critical analysis of the system that includes reflections on the social and economical structure cannot be grasped from the reading of the novels separately. As counterparts, they present the necessary qualities of a critical dystopia with the utopian impulse being both the Craker's relation to the environment, which is much more balanced, and the God's Gardeners way of living in connection with nature, even after the plague strikes. By putting the novels side by side, the reader is able to perceive a utopian possibility of a better society for humans and Crakers.

Furthermore, the novels address issues of otherness more strongly when they are read together. Oryx's life of suffering, which is constructed by Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake*, is viewed in this novel as a puzzle. The narrator, focusing on Jimmy, considers regarding Oryx: "How long had it taken him to piece her together from the slivers of her he'd gathered and hoarded so carefully?" (132) Nevertheless, when put together with Toby's history of sexual abuse and Ren's involvement with prostitution in *The Year of the Flood*, Oryx's story acquires a much deeper questioning of how women are considered commodities in a society which values nothing but profit in a large scale. Oryx's story gains the voice it lacked in *Oryx and Crake*: her struggle is no longer the romantic tragedy imagined by Jimmy, his personal enigma to be deciphered, but a tale of exploitation which is recurrent for the women in *The Year of the Flood*. In the counterpart reading, the novels present a critical perspective of the dystopian world created. It is no longer just the portrayal of a bad place with its highly corporative world lacking emotion and full of isolation and lost dreams (as it might lead us to

conclude in a isolated reading of *Oryx and Crake*) nor is it the economical hell and unfair social reality with no concern for humans (as in *The Year of the Flood*). It is a system that encapsulates both visions and points to other possible ones.

When put together, the system can be better analyzed and criticized. The critical quality of these dystopian novels is unveiled as well as the space for hope in Baccolini's terms ("The Persistence" 520). Contestation and opposition come from ex-centric subjects and the ambiguous open endings maintain the utopian impulse within the work, and not outside it as in classical dystopias. As critical dystopias, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* together are able to map a world and then point to alternative ways of living in it and of critically thinking of it. If the reader, the one possessing the tools to perform this reading, will think critically of his or her own world as Moylan's Marxist reading wishes for, it remains a possibility emphasized in the challenge most critical dystopias propose to their readers.

2.3 *Oryx and Crake*: One Utopia and Two Dystopias

Oryx and Crake depicts an imagined world which is in many ways worse than the reader's reality. Dystopia often presents hybrid narratives. Atwood, as it is a characteristic of her work, seems to push this hybridity to the edge. She puts together a narrative of a traditional dystopian portrayal of a character, who goes from total ignorance to resistance to an unfair system, to survival account, and a coming of age narrative and a kind of memoir.

Atwood's texts present an interesting play with utopian and dystopian perspectives. In both novels, images of utopia and dystopia are constructed and reconstructed. What is utopian for one character is not for another. Visions of alternative ways of living often change from dystopian to utopian perspectives and they alter constantly in the narratives. In the two following sections, I analyze these utopias and dystopias in the novels and the way they are presented and represented.

In her reading of the novels, Howells points to the double visions present in *Oryx and Crake*: “the most striking feature of *Oryx and Crake* is the way everything is doubled, not only the title and the epigraphs but also the narrative structure, while not surprisingly there are two dystopian visions” (*Margaret Atwood* 172). The first dystopia rests upon Snowman’s attempt to survive amongst the wreckage of civilization. In the following episode, the narrator describes the protagonist’s experience of survival:

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.

“Calm down”, he tells himself. He takes up a few deep breaths, then scratches his bug bites, around but not on the itchiest places, taking care not to knock off any scabs: blood poisoning is the last thing he needs. Then he scans the ground below for wildlife: all quiet, no scales and tails. . . .

He undoes his plastic bag: there’s only a single mango left. Funny, he remembered more. (*Oryx and Crake* 3-4)

Here the dystopian narrative comes close to a survival account. But, as the novel progresses, the narrative acquires more than this initial survival tone. Snowman creates a mythology for his present world and tells his own story in order to give meaning to his current experience. Progressively, the self-reflective quality grows more intense and Snowman’s desperations are expressed in the world of writing and storytelling.

When Snowman compares himself to a castaway character, he resorts to the image of a castaway making lists and describing daily life in the form of writing. He concludes he is not such figure because he has no readers. Yet, recording his life and making lists is all Snowman does. The novel itself may be read as Snowman’s account of the impressions of his life as Jimmy. His survival narrative is full of lists, book references, and never-ending

imaginary conversations, as the following quotation shows. It presents a saying from one of Jimmy's previous teachers: "We are not here to play, to dream, to drift. We are here to practice Life Skills. 'Whatever,' says Snowman." (47) The need to tell pervades *Oryx and Crake*. By the end of the novel, his survival is strictly linked to his ability to write and tell stories. Because he creates a reality for himself and attempts to reconstruct his past through narrativization, he is ultimately able to live in that present dystopia and cope with it. He needs that understanding to attribute meaning to his current experience. Snowman is living the end of civilization, the worst dystopia of all.

The second vision of a dystopia remarked by Howells is Snowman's account of his previous apocalyptic life as Jimmy, a rich young man from the Compounds who used to love and value art and literature, unlike the rest of his society. Dystopia takes place in this second layer because Jimmy's world is again worse than the reader's: capitalism presents itself in its wildest form, violence and sex are completely commodified by video games and sex industries, whereas science serves corporations, providing new products without any ethics involved in trials. This layer of the novel has a much more satiric tone mixed with a mocking coming of age narrative since the protagonist's journey throughout the narrative concludes with him or her becoming more mature. In *Oryx and Crake*, the tone mocks a coming of age narrative because in the end Jimmy does not become a better, mature adult, and the irony lies in the fact that he knows it. The self-awareness Jimmy has in relation to his own process of maturity as well as the many references to coming of age narratives he had contact with because of his past reading habits are portrayed in the following passage:

A great man must rise to meet the challenges in his life, says a voice. Who is it this time? ...

"I haven't grown as a person, you cretin," Snowman shouts. "Look at me! I've shrunk! My brain is the size of a grape!"

But he doesn't know which it is, bigger or smaller, because there's nobody to measure himself by. He's lost in the fog. No benchmarks. (279)

Jimmy is characterized as a sensitive young man, an artist, someone who is able to see how bad society has become. In a coming of age narrative tone, the reader accompanies Jimmy from childhood to maturity but, as mentioned, there is no maturity. Jimmy is a failed hero. As Hannes Bergthaller points out, he fails in dealing with his sexual urges and personal appetites (732), thus putting himself in a constant position of non-action. Jimmy's failure is another instance of Atwood's play with dystopian tradition. Instead of depicting a character that gets more and more politically engaged throughout the novel, pointing to a critique of the system, the protagonist portrayed initially seems to be criticizing his society, but he just watches as the problem unfolds, never getting involved with it, and is lost in his personal experiences, paradoxically aware of and alien to the world around him. Only when it is too late – again, a rewriting of dystopia, since traditionally the main character is able to perceive his reality before the worst happens – does he start trying to reconstruct the events that led to the destruction of the human race. But even at such point, he does not grow; instead, he creates a new persona for himself, Snowman.

In Snowman's dystopian narrative, self-reflexivity once plays an important role because of Jimmy's obsession with words and language as well as his storytelling impulses and the way he uses them in order to understand his reality. As a child, he turned his parents' marriage into a comic show. He would perform it to his classmates at the school cafeteria: "His right hand was Evil Dad, his left hand was Righteous Mom" (*Oryx and Crake* 68). As a young man he constructs a story for Oryx. The narrator tells us, "There was Crake's story about her, and Jimmy's story about her as well, a more romantic version; and then there was her own story about herself, the one that is never told, which was different from both, and not very romantic at all" (133). In both cases, his storytelling abilities provide him temporary

acceptance by a group and becomes a way for him to make sense of his world. It becomes a survival skill.

Howells investigates the double images in *Oryx and Crake* – the title, the setting, the two male figures – but she does not discuss the effects this double dystopian vision creates. Atwood unsettles her dystopian visions with a different perspective for the genre. In the first layer of dystopia, the one which is apparently the worst scenario possible – the end of civilization – an unexpected utopian scenario is set. The Crakers, the gene-spliced humans created by Crake to replace humanity, are for Snowman the ultimate non-human. “Do they make jokes?” (359) is his question to Crake when he first listens to the explanation of how the Crakers were made. This questioning is a reflection of what Snowman/Jimmy values in humans: creativity and imagination. Portrayed ambiguously, these creatures expose the best and the worst qualities of humans. However, the Crakers do seem to have a better relationship with the environment. The novel poses the question whether they are a better alternative at all since they are peaceful creatures, willing to learn and share.

In the second dystopian layer, the question posed is whether we do not already live in a dystopian-like world. The similarities between the reality presented by Atwood and our own are certainly disturbing. Corporations take control over the central government, violence and sex are freely available on the Internet as a form of entertainment, the extreme objectification of the female body is considered normal, humanities are rejected in favor of hard sciences for progress’ sake only, unethical experiments are run by pharmaceutical industries, etc. The afterword in the end of the novel, in which the Canadian author states that all scientific data used in the narrative is actually real or based in real scientific possibility, corroborate the perception of the present as a dystopia.

Jayne Glover says on the matter:

Oryx and Crake . . . takes the idea of the relationship between utopia and dystopia a step further, not just showing us what a dystopian world could be, but asking both how we find ourselves in a dystopian world and where in fact the boundaries lie between utopia and dystopia. (207)

The claim Glover makes is directed at the notion of ecological thinking, but it is certainly useful to cast light on the blurring of utopia and dystopia in the novel. Atwood plays with both traditions showing the utopian common place of a foreigner trying to understand a utopian culture – Snowman trying to understand the Crakers – and the dystopian cliché of a character’s journey to understand the horrible truth of a system – Snowman through his own recollections as Jimmy as he finally comes to terms with Crake’s final plan to eradicate humans.

Moreover, by the double dystopian scenario presented the possibility of utopia rises from the first layer of the novel in an ironic manner. It is only because the narrative of Jimmy’s youth exists with its depiction of a dystopian capitalist system that the reader is able to perceive the utopian quality of the other layer of dystopian narrative, the post-apocalyptic scenario. Atwood plays with post-apocalypse being at the same time a nightmare vision, a dystopia of the end of the world, but also a utopian possibility, since the Crakers live peacefully within the environment. The irony lies in the fact that the Crakers are the epitome of the very things Jimmy is against – the ultimate use of science to eradicate what are for him essential human qualities: love, wordplay, sense of humor – but it is only because his narrative exists that the reader is able to think of the Crakers’ new world as a form of utopia.

This game with perceptions of a given reality as utopian or dystopian leads to the discussion of how utopia and dystopia are presented as perspectives in the novel. When pointing to Jimmy and Crake as doubles, Howells states, “The Crake-Jimmy pairing is the first time that Atwood has explored this doubles theme in relation to men, where the story is

told from the perspective of the sidekick, who kills the superhero and survives, obsessed by Crake's ghost and riven by guilt" (*Margaret Atwood* 177). What is interesting for the discussion here is that the two characters mentioned also present different perspectives regarding what utopian and dystopian scenarios are. Both of them agree that the world they live in as young men is dystopian. Crake affirms in a conversation with Jimmy, "As a species we're in deep trouble, worse than anyone's saying . . . we're running out of space-time" (*Oryx and Crake* 347), and Jimmy considers that the world "is now one vast uncontrolled experiment" (267). The two young men agree that their society is collapsing and that it needs improvement. However, Jimmy's and Crake's views on how to achieve a better world collide.

Bergthaller states that *Oryx and Crake* is a novel about asking "how to tame the human animal" (735). For him, Jimmy represents the embodiment of the humanist tradition, of the project of taming the human animals through literacy and of championing art as a way of extracting the best of humans. What is interesting in Bergthaller's reading is the proposition of Crake being not the product of his own capitalist-driven culture (as critics such as Danette DiMarco, Coral Ann Howells, and Pilar Somacarrera argue), but rather the one to literalize the pastoral fantasy of humanism: "he has employed the tools of genetic engineering in order to breed the wildness out of man, creating a species of human beings that will be congenitally unable to soil the planetary *oikos*. The Crakers have been thoroughly and permanently housebroken" (735). I believe this reading is relevant to make us think of the way in which Atwood combines the figures of Jimmy and Crake (and thus Snowman) as being at the same time heroic, tragic, corrupted, sympathetic, and pernicious. However, Bergthaller forgets that by the end of *Oryx and Crake*, the Crakers start developing symbolic thinking, a fact that leads them towards religion and art. Thus, art seems to prevail as relevant part of being human in the end of the novel.

Crake's desire to create a social utopia is what leads to Jimmy's ultimate dystopian narrative. Crake's dreams are Jimmy's nightmares and Snowman's reality. Atwood plays with notions of utopia and dystopia, even though it is up to the reader to decide if the new world is rather dystopian or utopian. The ambiguities of both perspectives are extensively portrayed throughout the novel. As Bergthaller argues, the comfortable reading of Jimmy as champion of humanities frequently disregard the fact that he turns a blind eye to important matters most of his life (734). He does not do anything to change his dystopian reality. On the other hand, Crake sets forward his project to make the world a better place, at least in his view. The positions of hero and villain are intertwined in the novel in many levels, especially if we consider that Snowman creates the figure of Crake as a god in his mythology. By the end of the narrative the utopian and dystopian sides are blurred together, as well as the apparently simple perception Jimmy and Crake have regarding what utopia and dystopia are.

As I have been arguing, *Oryx and Crake* presents instances of utopia and dystopia, if one is to consider Sargent's definitions. Utopia is present in the Crakers' society, which lives harmoniously with the environment, a great contrast with the narrative of Jimmy's youth, which consists of a dystopian narrative. Dystopia is also portrayed as Snowman's survival account on a post-apocalyptic world. The utopian satire is present in Jimmy's narrative, in which the tendencies of our own society are mocked and even ridiculed to create a strong criticism of the capitalist way of living. It may also be argued that Atwood is dialoguing not only with literary utopian tradition, the one that comes from Morus's text, but also to utopia as present in the form of myths, especially myths of origin. When Snowman creates a genesis for the Crakers in the tale of Oryx and Crake, he is creating a prior utopian scenario in which Oryx and Crake inhabit the Earth and a present dystopian reality in which Oryx and Crake are absent. A clear reference to the Bible, which can also be read as narrative of utopia and dystopia.

Sargent seems to point to this direction of a blurring of utopia and dystopia when he briefly discusses Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*:

. . . recent works such as . . . [Piercy's] which are clearly both eutopias and dystopias undermine all neat classification schemes. The term good place and bad place simply do not work for *He, She and It* and a substantial number of other utopias written in the past thirty years. ("The Three Faces" 7)

Clear cut definitions do not apply to works which deal with notions of hybridity, genre blurring, self-reflexivity. Authors such as Piercy and Atwood provide us with texts that show the limitations of both utopia and dystopia and carefully play with tradition and with the reader's expectations.

Certainly *Oryx and Crake* is one of these works that unsettle definitions, creating utopias and dystopias in different places, perspectives, characters, and narratives. What Atwood seems to be doing is to show how utopia and dystopia contain and are permeated by each other. The novel works on this notion not by simply referring to the matter of point of view – what one believes to be better or worse – but rather by creating utopian and dystopian scenarios that challenge the reader, presenting a self-reflexive questioning of what utopia and dystopia are.

2.4 *The Year of the Flood: Two Utopias and One Dystopia*

The Year of the Flood also challenges definitive notions of dystopia and utopia. However, in many ways the strategies and the final effect produced on the reader work in a different manner from *Oryx and Crake*. As a dystopian narrative, the 2009 novel is bleaker and more violent than its predecessor. The almost graphic social reality of the pleeblands with their riots, rapes, slave work, and brutal killings mark this dystopian narrative. The classical format of a character struggling for political consciousness and then fighting against the

system is maintained at the surface. In *The Year of the Flood*, utopian horizons are created and recreated insistently in different narrative layers.

Brooks Bouson is one of the first critics to discuss the utopian horizon present in this novel. He states, “Creating a space for utopian hope and desire in her radically dystopian novel, Atwood reclaims utopian possibility in the closure of *The Year of the Flood*” (“We’re Using Up” 23). According to him, the novel is dystopian mainly because of the portrayal of Toby’s and Ren’s lives in the pleeblands, which are marked by poverty and violence. For the critic, the utopian impulse would come only at the end, when the reader may be led to believe that Toby and Ren, along with Zeb, and the other MaddAddam members, will be able to rebuild a society. Certainly this reading is valid, but Bouson disregards other instances of utopia in the novel.

First, one needs to consider the narrative structure of *The Year of the Flood* and the way its dystopian and utopian perspectives appear. There is the present narrative of both Toby and Ren in the post-apocalyptic scenario and their narratives in the past, before the plague strikes. Intertwined with these narratives, there are sections from the God’s Gardeners Oral Hymn Book, as well as Adam One’s speeches. I believe this complex structure to be responsible for the unsettling notions of dystopia and utopia in the novel because they are presented not only as perspectives from the characters, but as an envisaging of utopia. Through the hymns and his speeches, Adam One creates a utopia to wish for not only in the form of the community he is building, a peaceful and egalitarian place to live, radically different from the violent external world, but also in a common belief of a better near future, based on the principles of this very community. The following extract illustrates this idea:

By covering such barren rooftops with greenery we are doing our small part in the redemption of God’s Creation from the decay and sterility that lies all around us, and feeding ourselves with unpolluted food into the bargain. Some

would term efforts futile, but if all were to follow our example, what a change would be brought on our beloved Planet! Much hard work still lies around us, but fear not, my Friends: for we shall move forward undaunted. (11)

Sargent states that utopias can live outside the literary written text in the form of “myths, oral tradition and folk songs” (“The Three Faces” 10). The author argues that such tradition is the root for utopianism and that they exist at some level in almost any culture: “All these eutopias have certain features in common – simplicity, unity, security, immortality or an easy death, unity with God or the gods, abundance without labor, and no enmity between homo sapiens and the other animals” (10). The Gardener credo certainly shares these features and it is possible to read Atwood’s *Gardeners* as a rereading of these traditional forms of utopia as well as an example that these traditions are not natural but created – in the case of the novel, by Adam One. Utopia can be a human impulse for Sargent, but the direction of that impulse is human made. Atwood carefully plays with this notion in the novel, making the reader sympathetic to this greenie religious cult only to later on plant ideas that it was all planned and thought by its prophet, Adam One. There is a hint in the novel that the God’s Gardeners may be a religion designed by Adam One in order to have some people adopt vegan and ecological ways of living. In Toby’s narrative, this notion is expressed, especially when she is elevated to Eve status and discovers some inconsistencies in the actions of high status Gardeners such as the use of computers (which is forbidden for ordinary members) and the presence of spies in the Compounds. Even Adam One’s religious beliefs are portrayed as false during some conversations between the religious leader and Toby.

The pleeblands are certainly the most obvious place for dystopia in the novel. Atwood pushes the depiction of a highly capitalist society to its limits, creating scatological and even bizarre images in the novel:

Toby's new job was with a chain called SecretBurgers. The secret of SecretBurgers was that no one knew what sort of animal protein was actually in them: the counter girls wore T-shirts and baseball caps with the slogan *SecretBurgers! Because everyone loves a secret!* They paid rock-bottom wages, but you got two free SecretBurgers a day. . . . The meat grinders weren't 100 per cent efficient; you might find a swatch of cat fur in your burger or a fragment of mouse tail. Was there a human fingernail, once? (*The Year of the Flood* 33)

Besides the terrible working conditions, the scenario is the worst possible, especially for women. While at that job, Toby is brutally raped daily by her manager and is expected to keep quiet about and grateful for it. Ren, after losing everything she has – a chance to a college education and money – eventually assumes her own body as meat to sell when she becomes a prostitute. Both women experience abuse and commodification of their bodies in the pleeblands and the way they are oppressed mirrors previous dystopias whose oppression is particularly harsh on women, such as Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Bousoon observes how women's bodies are carnified (his term) by men in the novel ("We're Using Up" 13). However, while Toby seems to follow a typical dystopian journey of a character that moves from ignorance to knowledge and then to political awareness – using Moylan and Baccolini's terms – Ren's narrative acquires a coming of age tone, leaving out political engagement against the system.

The presence of Adam One's sermons also destabilizes a solely dystopian reading. Similarly to Octavia Butler's protagonist in the *Parable of the Sower*, Adam One, with the God's Gardeners cult, creates multiple oppositions to the system. The God's Gardeners form not only a religion or system of beliefs, but also a way of living. They act on society, in the material world. They preach the coming of the Waterless Flood and they prepare for it. The

following quote from one of Adam One's sermons shows how the Gardeners act: "Let us construct our Ararats carefully, my Friends. Let us provision them with foresight, and with canned and dried goods. Let us camouflage them well" (*The Year of the Flood* 91). They form an opposition not only to standard Christian beliefs when they incorporate scientific discourse, but also to capitalism and mass culture. Thus they create a counter-narrative to the system in which they are irrevocably inserted.

Counter-narrative is a term used by Raffaella Baccolini to discuss the persistence of an oppositional narrative or point of view in a given work of dystopia. The counter-narrative is expanded in the critical dystopia, being a counterpoint for the mainstream system of the dystopian narrative. It portrays the system's contradictions and proposes alternatives. As Moylan, who also adopts the term, argues,

They [critical dystopias] consequently inscribe a space of a new form of political opposition, one fundamentally based on difference and multiplicity but now wisely and cannily organized in a fully democratic alliance politics that can talk back in a larger though diversive collective voice and not only critique the present system but also begin to find ways to transform it that go beyond the limitations of both radical micropolitics and the compromised centrist "solutions" of the 1990's. (*Scraps of the Untained Sky* 182)

The critic is again making a link between the literary and the social in his Marxist reading, but it is certainly relevant to consider his thoughts on the construction of counter-narratives and the way they, through a collective struggle of creating such narratives, are able to challenge a given system, proposing alternatives to it.

I do not think, as I mentioned earlier, that *The Year of the Flood*, on its own, can be read as a critical dystopia, but it is in this novel, not in *Oryx and Crake*, that a collective dimension of a counter-narrative is found. Jimmy/Snowman, in *Oryx and Crake*, presents a

counter-narrative in the classical dystopian format. He is a character that generates a clash between himself and the system, but only the God's Gardeners, in the *The Year of the Flood*, project a collective instance and overtly vocalize alternatives to this system.

Instances of a counter-narrative can be found in Adam One's sermons, in the hymns and in Toby's and Ren's narratives, although the tone varies. It changes from prophetic, as in the sermons, to almost skeptic in Toby's point of view. Counter-narratives defy the dystopian discourse of the system, creating room for a possible utopian horizon. In the sermons, for example, present reality in the narrative is given as dystopian if one considers the Biblical genesis. If humanity fell, exiled from paradise, it abandoned an initial state of utopia to live in a dystopia. The Gardeners credo corroborates this Christian view:

What commandment did we disobey? The commandment to live the Animal life in all simplicity – without clothing, so to speak. But we craved the knowledge of good and evil, and we obtained that knowledge, and now we are reaping the whirlwind. In our efforts to rise above ourselves we have indeed fallen far, and falling farther still; for, like the Creation, the Fall, too, is ongoing. Ours is a fall into greed. (52)

For the Gardeners, humans have fallen from paradise and need to work in order to be able to regain it. The Waterless Flood is the longing for a new social utopia, a utopia that the Gardeners have started constructing. Thus, Atwood is somehow rewriting biblical tradition and settling a new vision of apocalypse as utopia.

For Toby and Ren, the God's Gardeners' building is a refuge, a place for utopia. For Toby, they are a protection from the violence of the pleeblands, the only place where she can find some peace after her father's death. Her first description of the Garden is highly utopian:

She gazed around in wonder: it was so beautiful, with plants and flowers and many kinds she'd never seen before. There were vivid butterflies; from

nearby came the vibration of bees. Each petal and leaf was fully alive, shining with awareness of her. Even the air of the Garden was different.

She found herself crying with relief and gratitude. It was as if a large, benevolent hand had reached down and picked her up, and was holding her safe. (43)

Right after her first night in the Garden, Toby ponders about the Garden and its inhabitants: “Curious angels, thought Toby. Not all of them angels of light” (48). Comparing these two quotations, it is possible to notice that Toby realizes the Garden is not all good, even though the Garden is a better place for her than the pleeblands. In this way, this utopia inside a dystopia corroborates Atwood’s own statement that one cannot live without the other. In her book of essays *In Other Worlds*, she states, “Ustopia is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite – because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other” (66), an argument that echoes Moylan and Baccolini’s idea of dystopia being the dark side, not necessarily the opposite side of utopia. Ren also finds a utopian scenario in the Garden. Having lived there as a child, she returns to the memories of her childhood later on in her life in order to find comfort and knowledge of survival:

I wondered what I was doing on the Earth: no one would care much if I wasn’t on it any more. . . . But then I remembered how the Gardeners used to say, *Ren, your life is a precious gift, and where there is a gift there is a Giver, and when you’ve been given a gift you should always say thank you.* So that was some help. (227)

The Garden becomes thus not only a physical place of a social utopia, but also a mental state of utopia. The God’s Gardeners are able to create a utopian space for a community beyond physical barriers in a highly dystopian world.

One of the strategies to unsettle the reader's expectations and call attention to the construction and reconstruction of utopian and dystopian scenarios is certainly self-reflexivity. *The Year of the Flood* in its many layers of narratives pushes the reader into being aware and critical of what he or she is being told. Toby's narrative in third person often critically analyzes the content of the Gardener's credo and its authenticity, while Ren's first person narrative tends to push the Gardeners back to a utopian place. The following extracts, taken from Toby's and Ren's narrative respectively illustrate this argument:

“The strictly materialist view [said Adam One] – that we're an experiment animal protein has been doing on itself – is far too harsh and lonely for most, and leads to nihilism. That being the case, we need to push popular sentiment in a biosphere-friendly direction by pointing out the hazards of annoying God by a violation of His trust in our stewardship.”

“What you mean is, with God in the story there's a penalty,” said Toby.

“Yes,” said Adam One. “There's a penalty without God in the story too, needless to say. But people are less likely to credit that. If there's a penalty, they want a penalizer. The dislike senseless catastrophe.” (241)

Sometimes I dreamed about Zed. . . . He'd smell comforting, in the dream – like rained-on grass, and cinnamon, and the salty, vinegary, singed-leaf smell of the Gardeners. (214)

Adam One's sermons sets the utopian tone, but this tone is changed and reworked in Toby's and Ren's narratives, being often linked to skepticism in the former and to nostalgia in the latter. The Garden as a utopian scenario is portrayed in a critical way, as it is typical of Atwood's novels. It is not solely a utopian or dystopian scenario.

Initially the narratives of both Toby and Ren in the post-apocalyptic setting mirror the survival account. What seems at first a completely dystopian context with hostile creatures – the wild animals and the violent human survivors – and lack of food eventually leads to a utopian prospective, in which members of the God’s Gardeners are able to survive and create a new society. This possibility is shown when Ren considers the survivor Gardeners’ plan for the future: “He’s [Croze] full of plans. They’ll [the survivors] build this, they’ll build that; they’ll get rid of the pigs, or else tame them” (395). The perspective of a new order is then opened, although, as it is typical of Atwood, the open ending of the narrative is ambiguous. The reader does not know if the voices singing in the direction of Ren, Toby, Jimmy, Amanda, and the Painballers are good or evil, a sign of death or life. It is impossible to know, by the end of the novel, if this new group actually possesses all the necessary tools for long term survival, even though there might be a utopian horizon of possibility in it.

Bergthaller, when discussing *The Year of the Flood*, argues that this novel is about the reconciliation between humans and nature (737). For the critic, the ultimate reason the Gardeners are able to survive is because of their understanding of sustainability:

a reconciliation of the nature of human beings as evolved biological creatures, with all frailties and flaws it entails, with their need for an imaginary order that transcends it and, as it were, extenuates these biological givens. (739)

I read this “need for an imaginary order that transcends it” as social dreaming, that is, as utopia, in Sargent’s terms. It is precisely because of the creation of a utopian horizon that the Gardeners are able to survive in a dystopian reality, both in pre- and post-apocalypse. What lacks in Jimmy’s wish for a better world is exactly this dimension of a collective struggle to imagine and actually trace a better reality. In this way, Atwood addresses utopia both in its literary and social dimensions. In *The Year of the Flood*, these two instances are intertwined:

the Gardeners create a social utopia through their practices at the rooftop and a literary one through Adam One's sermons and hymns.

In Bergthaller's article, there is no mention of utopia or dystopia in the ways I discuss here, but I believe it is possible – and even desirable – to attempt an approximation, especially when one is to consider the relation between survival, storytelling, and utopia. For the critic, the power of imagination and the capacity to tell stories is not neglected in *The Year of the Flood*. Critics often read *Oryx and Crake* as a novel about storytelling and the power of words because of Jimmy/Snowman's anxieties, but *The Year of the Flood* provides an interesting and intriguing counterpart to the matter. The God's Gardeners cult allies an ecocritical view of life with a valorization of the power of imagination. For them, as Bergthaller poses, the question of the survival of humans is an ecological one: "It is not enough to simply survive – what is needed is a symbolic order within which the fact of survival can appear meaningful and 'good'" (738). Through their utopian credo, the Gardeners are able to attach meaning to survival because at the core of their practices lies an attempt to devise a sustainable ecological way of living.

The end of the world in this narrative seems utopian after all, for reasons that differ from *Oryx and Crake*. While in the 2003 novel the utopian scenario is raised from the notion of an alternative species – the Crakers – in *The Year of the Flood* final utopia is presented by the same humans trying to arrange themselves differently. The reminiscent God's Gardeners possess the tools of survival because of their previous learning experience in the utopian space of the Garden. For them, apocalypse, that is, the end of the world through the Waterless Flood, consists of a utopia because it brings together the promise of a new, more sustainable future. *The Year of the Flood* is a dystopian narrative permeated by utopian impulses and scenarios that challenge the final view of dystopia as being a completely bad place because, from this negative scenario, a better one can be envisioned. In this text full of ultimate

situations of suffering, abuse, and violence, the characters – and potentially the readers – critically travel through places of utopia and dystopia, seeing them from different perspectives, from different constructions, drawing on them to find hope in the open, ambiguous ending of the novel.

2.5 Re-reading Dystopian Tradition and Genre Blurring in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*

In the prior two sections, I discuss the many ways in which both novels intertwine utopian and dystopian perspectives in engaging and challenging ways. These many layers of utopia and dystopia form oppositional strategies that question issues such as consumerism, capitalism, and sexism while proposing alternative ways of thinking about society. Although no definitive answer is given in the novels' open endings, the critique of the system, together with these alternative propositions, provides an intriguing debate on the utopian and dystopian perspectives presented in the novels. As critical dystopias, they constantly oppose and alternate so-called standard ways of living and provide an on-going dialogue with utopian and dystopian traditions. Because of their genre blurring quality, the novels rewrite patterns and revise both the *status quo* and the above mentioned traditions. Through self-reflexivity, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* stress the role of survival through storytelling. After all, storytelling is the element that pervades all the different experiments with generic fiction – science fiction, survival narrative, etc. – in these two texts.

The first obvious re-reading of a genre is certainly the so-called Last Man fiction. In this kind of narrative, started with Grainville's prose poem *The Last Man*, published in 1805 in France, the life and times of the last male human being alive is told. In Grainville's *Le Dernier Homme*, the protagonist Omegarus is the last child born in the world, and even though he is not properly the last man – that is, the last man alive in the planet – it is up to

him to continue human race's reproduction. In that, he is a last man, since the hope of humanity's survival as a species lies with him. The tone in Last Man fiction, which often resorts to Grainville's text, is apocalyptic and in this kind of narrative humanity is dying out because of either fertility problems or natural disaster.

Certainly the most prominent work in the tradition of Last Man fiction is Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, published in 1826. Atwood ironically dialogues with this novel, especially in *Oryx and Crake*. In *The Last Man*, Lionel Verney is a young man of noble descent who is ultimately the sole survival of human race, which has been eradicated in the 21st century because of a plague. Lionel is instructed by his brilliant friend, Adrian, who helps Lionel, his wife and kids to find a new place to escape the plague. Both *The Last Man* and *Oryx and Crake* share the displacement of human beings from the center of life on the planet and there is a final feeling that life in the world might go on without humans. However, in *Oryx and Crake*, the tone is much more questioning.

Science, which in *The Last Man* comes too late to prevent human extinction, is exactly the cause of human extinction in *Oryx and Crake*. Jimmy/Snowman, like Lionel, is immune to the plague and can count on a much brighter friend. However, instead of the benevolent gentle scholar Adrian, Atwood's novel presents us Crake, an uncanny opposite of Adrian who condemns not only humanity to death but his best friend as well. Women are also portrayed as an ironical revision of Shelley's *The Last Man*: instead of the loving Idris, the tamed Perdita, and the arrogant sensual Evadne, in *Oryx and Crake* there is the mysterious figure of Oryx, who seems to be all and none of these women. Howells describes Oryx as having "multiple shifting identities" (*Margaret Atwood* 181), always escaping stable and coherent definitions. Oryx does not even have a "real" name. She always wears masks, becoming the most appropriate character in each scene of her life: she plays the role she needs, she embodies the adequate story in order to survive.

The 2003 novel can be read as revision of Shelley's apocalyptic tale, but an ironic, rather than tragic one. Tom Van Steendan provides a reading of Shelley's *The Last Man*, as well as *Frankenstein*, as a paratext to *Oryx and Crake*. His reading is focused on the idea of dystopia as a warning and he is interested in discussing the author's intention, which I believe only limits his arguments. However, he points to the way Atwood ironically rewrites Shelley's text in the form of parody by reworking figures of the scientist and the monster. It is possible to trace a connection between Crake and Victor Frankenstein, as well between Snowman and the Monster. It is not the focus of this thesis to discuss the rewriting of such figures, but I agree with Van Steendam when he says the 2003 novel may be read as a parody of Shelley's. At some point in the narrative, Snowman cries out to Crake, "Where's my Bride of Frankenstein" (199). This quotation shows how the character himself, Snowman, is aware of the similarities between his own fate and the Monster's in Shelley's text.

The Year of the Flood also works in a dialogue with the Last Man tradition but on a different front. Instead of a last man, there are last women. Women, in the plural, as if to mark the plurality, multiplicity, and diversity of women in opposition to a universalist image of a last man. The matter of religion is also reworked. While in *The Last Man* Shelley presents a fanatic group rooted on purposes of greed and ambition, Atwood's God's Gardeners are ambiguous. Adam One's figure is covered in mystery. Presented in his sermons as a prophet, in Toby's narrative as a political leader, and in Ren's tale as a fatherly image, he is also portrayed as a multifaceted and fragmented character. The issues that are presented in Shelley's novel in a straight-forward, clear cut light and are considered source of evil or goodness are all blurred in Atwood's texts. What happens is a questioning of this black and white view of science, religion, women and human survival. Even the matter of storytelling is reworked. While in *The Last Man* there is a prophetic manuscript with the tale of the last man, Snowman's account in *Oryx and Crake*, Toby's lists, Ren's diary, and Adam One's

sermons in *The Year of the Flood* offer nothing but fragments of a story. Even though storytelling is a driving force that compels the protagonists to live in a hostile world and make sense of it, it is not seen as a definitive, organized activity. Storytelling is, again, manifold. Both novels can thus be read as tribute to and parody of Last Man narratives, especially Shelley's.

Regarding the blending of generic fiction traditions in critical dystopias, Baccolini affirms:

Another factor that makes these novels [critical dystopias] sites of resistance and oppositional texts is their blending of different genre conventions. Drawing on the feminist criticism of universalist assumptions, singularity, and neutral and objective knowledge and acknowledging the importance of difference, multiplicity, complexity, situated knowledges, and hybridity, recent dystopian fiction by women resists genre purity in favor of a hybrid text that renovates dystopian science fiction by making it politically and formally oppositional. ("The Persistence" 520)

Differently from classical dystopias, counter-narratives of critical dystopia are emphasized by self-reflexivity in a narrative that uses the conventions of different genres and subverts them. Therefore, the revision of a tradition such as the Last Man fiction proposes not merely a different context and arrangement for such motif, but rather a critique of traditional assumptions such as the role of women and men, the meaning of scientific discourse, the ambiguities of religious discourse, and the survival of humans. It amplifies incongruence and idiosyncrasy.

Another striking dialogue with Last Man fiction involves Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, published in 1954. The protagonist, Robert Neville, is immune to a catastrophic disease which kills the human population by causing some sort of vampire-like symptoms in

the victims (the novel is actually a major influence for the zombie apocalypse genre) making them unhuman. Neville's attempts to find a cure for the disease and his killing of the not-human creatures are intertwined with flashbacks of his past. The similarity in the structure is obvious if one is to think about *Oryx and Crake*. However, unlike the zombie or vampire-like humans or plague mutants, what Snowman has to face is actually a new environment and new ways of living. On the matter, Lee Rozelle observes:

Oryx and Crake modifies the dynamic between last man and group of post-apocalyptic creatures because – unlike . . . other Matheson progeny – the Crakers pose no threat to Atwood's omega man. The Crakers serve as metonymic 'floor models' to exhibit alternative versions of humanity within millennial contexts, not simply in arriere-garde outrage but in far more unsettling philosophical speculation. ("Liminal Ecologies")

The Crakers and Snowman do not compete; on the contrary, they create a relation of co-dependency in which Snowman is their prophet and the creatures give him food. These modified humans – or posthumans – are not a threat to Snowman's life as in Matheson's book and most Last Man fiction. On the contrary, the Crakers care for him. Snowman's problems with them regard their creation by Crake, not their existence as a kind of threat or danger.

In Matheson's novel, when the creatures capture Neville and sentence him to death, the tone is pessimistic. The last man on earth is about to die and a new order will begin. One that seems to be not human. What Atwood does in her novel is to present the Crakers, strangely not-human in their mating habits and their genetically modified physical aspect and behavior, as ambiguous creatures. The ongoing question in the novel is whether they are not a better option than humans: they are apparently harmonious, peaceful and love-caring creatures. By the end of *Oryx and Crake* and of *The Year of the Flood*, the Crakers seem to have developed symbolic thinking creating a figure of Snowman and maybe a religion. There

is an interesting point to be made here. The apparent fall of the Crakers into symbolic thinking in the end of the novels can be read as a fall in the three mythologies presented in the novels: 1) a fall from the perfect life Crake had designed for them, 2) a fall from a life without human failures, mythologized by Snowman, and 3) a fall from animal life into human life in the God's Gardeners credo. Are the Crakers humanizing themselves? Is this a good thing after all? The open endings of both novels leave a utopian and a dystopian horizons open.

Rozelle discusses the representation of the Crakers in terms of ecocriticism going against most readings of *Oryx and Crake* as a pessimist novel. The argument does seem valid in this discussion of rewritings of a dystopian tradition. What Atwood seems to be discussing again is an anthropocentric perspective in the way we currently see it in our culture. Humans have died off, but the rest of the world is still going on. The remaining question is whether apocalypse is a bad thing after all. Differently from Matheson's *I Am Legend* in which pessimism prevails, with the remaining cured mutants not preserving so-called human qualities such as mercy and care, *Oryx and Crake* is much more ambivalent regarding the existence of the Crakers. They are devised as peaceful and innocent creatures.

In *The Year of the Flood*, similarly, mutants are not the enemy; on the contrary, the enemies are other humans. The painballers who kidnap Ren and brutally rape Amanda are not monsters modified by a disease, but human survivors of the apocalypse just like them. The questioning in this novel is not only ecological. It also touches upon the issue of human survival being ultimately worthy. By reverting the usual plot, Atwood is again leading the reader to question the value of human survival, at least if it is done by maintaining violent patterns of behavior of our current society.

What allows this constant dialogue with previous dystopias, including the ones mentioned above, is the genre blurring quality of Atwood's novels. They are not solely

apocalyptic tales. As I have been arguing, they present traces of a coming of age narrative, survival narrative, and castaway account. Atwood insistently blurs these genres and reconstructs them in her novels, creating hybrid texts that are self-aware and critical. Dystopia, then, becomes an umbrella term for these novels, which experiment on generic fiction, exploring the assumptions of what is natural and what is not.

Jimmy/Snowman and Ren, in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* respectively, appear as parodic characters in a coming of age novel, even though the strategies for these parodies differ. The journey of an artist from childhood to maturity is interrupted, failed or mocked in the novels. While Jimmy never becomes the mature adult engaged in politics the reader expects him to be, Ren does seem to grow by the end of the novel, even though she does not clearly engage in a political struggle herself. In Jimmy/Snowman's tale, there is also a dialogue with the formation of an artist genre. However, once again, the expectations fail because, even though Snowman becomes a storyteller and a mythmaker, he is not an artist in the sense of someone with a greater understanding of the world – in the fashion of 19th century novels about artists. On the contrary, his tale happens precisely because of his lack of understanding. It is the tale of his failure.

Another recurrent element in *Oryx and Crake* is satire. Moylan makes a distinction between dystopia and satire, but it is necessary to acknowledge that both traditions are really close and that, in a sense, dystopia is derived from satiric accounts. Atwood also plays with this apparent distinction, by making her dystopia also a satire of our current society. Linda Hutcheon, when pointing to the difference between parody and satire, says that satire “[is] usually decidedly moral in its intent (“Parody” 203). She later on claims that satire “uses that distance [critical distance] to make a negative statement about that which is being satirized” (203). According to the critic, parody can be satirical in tone – a fact that contributes to the

confusion between the terms satire and parody that Hutcheon attempts to resolve. It seems to be the case of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, in a minor extent. The names she uses in her texts to label capitalist enterprises and companies such as CorSeCorps, OrganInc Farms, AnooYoo Spa, etc, are certainly ironical and satirical. It has the effect of ridiculing and exposing negatively the satirized elements – in the case of the novels, high capitalism. Atwood's novels play with their own satirical tone when they subvert the conventions of satire, not restoring the *status quo*, but rather presenting utopian possibilities.

One of the epigraphs of *Oryx and Crake* is taken from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a satire of science at the time of its publication, and the other is from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, a novel about an artist figure. Critics such as Coral Ann Howells have pointed to the clash of ideas presented by these two quotations:

Here male and female voices are counterpoint, where Gulliver's statement insisting on objectivity and 'plain matter of fact' in his tale is immediately challenged by Woolf's female artist figure who places her emphasis on human emotions with all their uncertainties and also their moments of vision. Reason versus imagination, science versus art, but do such binaries really exist?
(Margaret Atwood 172)

For Howells, the novel can be read in light of how imagination is a quality shared by scientists and artists alike, an inherent human quality. I agree with her reading, but I would add that the epigraphs also work as a foreshadowing of Snowman's conflicts in narrating his tale: the straightforward narrator he wishes to be or the free artist who is able to create a world for him. Throughout the narrative, Snowman assumes both roles: as Gulliver, he also claims to tell a fantastic story based on what really happened; as an artist figure in the molds of Woolf's modernist novel, he creates a mythology for the Crakers, transforming his uncertainties and doubts into fiction. These two distinct forms of storytelling collapse in

Atwood's dystopia, creating the effect that for Snowman, as well as for the reader, none of these strategies work.

The castaway report narrative, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, is also revised. Snowman's narrative in *Oryx and Crake* is a self-aware and self-critical dialogue with such tradition. The novel resembles a castaway narrative, ironizing Snowman's situation, showing how the reading of such narratives at the same time shapes his experiences and proves them completely inaccurate. The following quotation shows how Snowman's thoughts are intertwined with narratives of survivors and castaways:

It is important, says the book in his head, to ignore minor irritants, to avoid pointless repining, and to turn one's mental energies to immediate realities and to the tasks at hand. He must have read it somewhere. Surely his own mind would never have come up with pointless repining, not all by itself. (51)

Snowman makes references to castaway narratives and life-skills manuals only to find them pointless. His focus is usually on the language used and not on the skills necessary for his survival for, as I have been arguing, language for him is a place for survival.

In *The Year of the Flood* there is an unsettling remembrance to castaway reports. In Toby's narrative, the standard mode of making lists, finding food, looking for shelter, and suffering from prolonged periods of isolation is maintained, but it is important to stress that the fact that the narrative is constructed around a woman's experience of survival consists of a striking instance of revision, since such narratives usually portray men. The same can be said of Ren's portion in the novel, but it must be added that the beginning of her account is certainly ironic. She seems bored rather than desperate, sometimes even calm, trying to live as if nothing had happened at all.

The major characters in both novels – Snowman, Toby, Ren, and Adam One – do not fall into the category of stereotyped characters, even though in a superficial reading they

might give this impression. Snowman is the castaway who is losing his mind, Toby is the tough survivor, Ren is the fragile girl who against all odds happens to survive, and Adam One is the fanatic religious leader. However, as the narrative progresses, these rather fixed perceptions of characters are questioned. Snowman becomes a mythmaker in search of his own identity, and the tale of his own survival becomes strangely secondary while he goes to the Paradise Project building looking for food. His real search is for himself and the story of Oryx and Crake is no other than his own, as Carol Osborne remarks (26). Toby, in the end of *The Year of the Flood*, is the one to say a prayer and ask God for forgiveness, whereas Ren goes through hard times to save Amanda. Finally, the character of Adam One is given a different perception in Toby's narrative. He is shown as a political leader, rather than a religious one. The God's Gardeners' credo seems to have been carefully crafted and not inspired by God, as Adam One led them to believe. In sum, the characters in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* are multiple and fragmented and the different instances of parody highlight this quality.

It is also possible to trace a parallel between Atwood's texts and other women's dystopias. In *Man's World*, published in 1927, Charlotte Haldane presents a technoculture future in which women are controlled by a rigid caste system that revolves around the male scientist. Women are considered only by their capacity of reproduction. The novel may be read as a critique to the way science objectifies women and, even though the love affair between Nicollete, the rebellious girl, and Bruce, the scientist, may ambiguously present a counter-narrative, it is easy to associate this sexist scientific world to the one depicted in *Oryx and Crake*. Although in Atwood's novel there is not a rigid system that control women's reproduction, it is science that dictates the paradigms to be followed. Moreover, the view of science as the only source of knowledge silences in a more radical way minority groups – including women. The objectification of women and its effects are felt in the figure of Oryx –

seen only as a stereotypical Asian woman by the eyes of both Jimmy and Crake – and the protagonists of *The Year of the Flood*, that suffer from a normalized gender violence.

This matter of normalized gender violence is treated in Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (published in 1937 under the pen name Murray Constantine). The novel presents a dystopian future in which the Nazi won the war. After seven hundred years of such event, women are almost eradicated. Considered by the Nazi government as less than human, few survivors are left to live only for reproduction purposes. Women are deprived of all rights and live in extreme conditions. The most horrifying feature of *Swastika Night* lies in that women are legally considered not human. The violence perpetrated against them is justified and encouraged by the state. This extreme violence is presented in Atwood's novels, especially in the pleeblands, where women are prey to men. The CorSeCorps let criminals act on their own and women are traded and brutalized without causing any commotion. Actually, in the pleeblands, violence against women is an everyday occurrence that causes no alarm, it is part of the daily life, as I shall discuss in Chapter 3.

Moylan and Baccolini in *Dark Horizons* state, "At the same time we must recognize changes in the utopian traditions, we need to recognize that those traditions still exist" (8). Critical dystopias are both tributes to and questioners of utopian tradition, and one of the textual strategies used for such effect is genre blurring. This way, the narrative acquires multiple instances and establishes a self-aware dialogue with tradition. As Moylan observes, critical dystopias "deliver substantial analyses of our immediate 'dystopian world' but also develop a significant counter-narrative against their multiple dystopian realities" (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky* 194). Moylan's discussion here is centered on the films *The Matrix* and *Pleasantville*, but it certainly applies to Atwood's novels under discussion. Together the novels work as counter-narratives that question many levels of the given dystopian scenario.

I argue that the thread uniting these multiple counter-narratives in the novels is storytelling. Jimmy's obsession with words and stories as a child and teenager provides him with the storytelling tools he uses in his post-apocalyptic incarnation as Snowman. These tools make his survival possible. It is because of his constant search for a meaning for Oryx and Crake's tale and the myths he tells the Crakers that he is able to survive. He finds a reason to stay alive and a way to be provided with food and care. Similarly, the Gardener hymns and sermons, never appearing in written form, provide the necessary knowledge of survival for Toby and Ren. It is because of this oral tradition that they are able to stash food, find inner strength, and display knowledge for survival in hostile situations. Moreover, many instances of storytelling serve as counter-narratives of the system: Jimmy/Snowman's is for the valuing of art in a world that rejects it in favor of science and the God's Gardeners' religious one counter-points the extreme capitalist logic of consuming and not caring for others – animals or humans.

In the introduction of this section, I mention Adrienne Rich's famous essay about writing as re-vision and I finish my argument going back to it. Atwood's revision of utopian and dystopian tradition in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* is made by blurring the boundaries of generic fiction and highlighting counter-narratives rooted in the power of storytelling, that is, the power to create narratives and pass them on. The final survival of the protagonists is due to these counter-narratives, which have a metafiction concern in the center of them. In the following chapter, I analyze how gender is treated in this critical dystopia and how storytelling is not only thematized regarding dystopia, but also related to the notion of a narrative of apocalypse.

CHAPTER 3: TELLING STORIES ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD

3.1 Retelling Apocalypse

Oryx and Crake and *The Year of the Flood* are dystopias that deal with the theme of apocalypse. In both novels humanity comes to an end and few survivors are left to carry on human culture. Taking the idea of apocalypse as the end of an order and the beginning of a new one, apocalypse is treated in an ironic and revisionary way in Atwood's novels. The texts appropriate notions of biblical apocalypse and play with them presenting the so-called reluctant elects, the ones chosen by God, and depicting the violence directed to and pervaded by the non-elects. This perspective counters the traditional biblical apocalypse in which the elects are often the focus. Although apocalyptic logic is subverted in both novels, each does that in different ways. Ultimately, they are retellings of apocalyptic narratives. They portray the arrival of a new order while the remains of the old one are obliterated or appropriated by survivors, who are the ones to attribute meaning to this apocalyptic situation.

Marlene Goldman defines the narrative of apocalypse as "a story whose key vision portrays the 'old world' being replaced by the new" (3). She adds that Canadian narratives of apocalypse present an "ironic tension" since they never convey a complete sense of a substitution of one order for the other. In her view, Canadian authors often explore the leftovers of apocalypse: the ones that remained from the old order and cannot fully adapt to the new one. For her, this revision of apocalypse is done through often fragmentary and ironic texts. It is important to note here that Goldman's stress on the fragmentary and ironic revision of apocalypse in Canadian literature is not an assertion that all Canadian texts are rewritings of the traditional biblical view. She mentions authors who do endorse apocalyptic logic (7) but her claim is that Canadian authors' appropriation of apocalypse has been more subversive than American ones. She argues that this is due to the United States' early pilgrims and their

notion that the new land was actually a new heaven. She claims that in Canada this view could never fully take place.

Goldman's point is to show the recurrent presence in Canadian texts of a questioning of the apocalyptic logic made by ex-centric and fragmentary perspectives, not all of them in dystopian narratives. Indeed apocalyptic fiction does not mean dystopian or science fiction literature. Goldman's analysis encompasses novels such as Joy Kowaga's *Obasan* and historical novels such as Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. For her and for critics such as James Berger, the notion of apocalypse is an event that can divide the world into a before and an after.

Berger presents in his *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* three possible attributions to the word apocalypse: 1) "the actual image of the end" (5), 2) catastrophes that resemble the end – such as traumatic events that cause a sense of rupture, of a before and after, such as the Holocaust, and finally 3) revelation that "in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end" (6). In my reading of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* as counterparts, these three senses of apocalypse are present, as I shall discuss.

3.1.1 Retelling Apocalypse in *Oryx and Crake*: The Tale of the Reluctant Elect

In *Oryx and Crake*, apocalypse strikes when humans reach near extinction because of the lethal virus in the BlyssPlus pills created by Crake. As Oryx says when the plague starts spreading, "It was in those pills I was giving away, the ones I was selling. It's all the same cities, I went there" (380). Snowman is apocalypse's reluctant elect. He is given immunity to the disease without knowing it and is suddenly responsible for the humanoid creatures, the genetic engineered Crakers, without wanting to do so. He acts out Crake's wishes, but he accepts his role of survivor reluctantly. Crake assigned to Snowman the role he would later on

perform: “Then, one lunchtime, he [Crake] said, ‘If anything happens to me, I’m depending on you to look after the Paradise Project. Any time I’m away from here I want you to take charge. I’ve made it a standing order’” (375-76). Later on, in the same conversation, Jimmy would contest this leading role in case of emergency: “but one, your security’s the best, and two, there’s people in here much better equipped than I am” (376). At first Jimmy thinks Crake means to replace him in case of a kidnapping event, a common act in the corporate world of the novel. But later on, as Snowman, he is able to connect the facts and see that Crake had arranged it all, including his supposed death, or “assisted suicide” (404), as Jimmy initially refers to in the letter he writes after his apocalyptic experience.

In Crake’s plan, the Crakers are the inhabitants of the new heavenly world. They are the elects, the ones chosen to survive apocalypse. The destruction of humanity is just a side effect in his intent of expurgating evil of from world and trying to transform it into a better place. As Crake explains, the new world would have “no more prostitution, no sexual abuse of children, no haggling over the price, no pimps, no sex slaves. No more rape” (194). His vision is not only to eradicate problems concerning sex solely, but also those related to food, since the Crakers do not need to hunt or cook because they are caecotrophs, that is, they can digest unrefined plants by eating their own excrement. For Crake, solving the problem of power (regarding sex and leadership, which would be eradicated), dealing properly with the environment (no problems getting food in the caecotrophs diet), as well as erasing the possibility of symbolic thinking (no art and no religion) are keys to a better society, and he makes these characteristics as genetically inherent to the Crakers.

Crake’s vision of a better society can be linked to the Western tradition of apocalyptic narrative, which derives mainly from the Bible with the visions of St John the Divine. It is no wonder that Crake’s project is called “Paradise”. The pun, an Atwoodian marker (Dvorak’s “Margaret Atwood’s Humor” 114), highlights the fact that Crake’s paradise is different, it is

man-made: it is Paradise not paradise. One might read the change of letter, which forms the word “dice”, as a hint of Crake’s playing dice with human’s lives and to a certain extent to playing god. The non-elect (humanity in general) are to be destroyed so the elects (the Crakers) can live in their paradise. In the biblical narrative, similarly to Crake’s plan, the non-elect are unimportant, punished with extreme violence and left to die so that a new heaven can take place.

The presence of a reluctant elect, Snowman, troubles the traditional apocalyptic logic in the novel. Katherine Snyder points out that Jimmy, Snowman’s early persona, has followed Crake’s script and that only in the end of the narrative is he able to “revise the script . . . even while he unavoidably plays out his assigned part” (481). Snowman then in his role of reluctant elect can retell the apocalypse. The novel could be read as Snowman’s attempt to find and attribute meaning to his apocalyptic experience. When he narrates his past or creates a cosmology for the Crakers, he is rewriting apocalypse, attempting to subvert the role Crake had earlier assigned to him – the role of a mere caretaker of the Crakers.

Crake wants to have someone to take the Crakers to a new environment, make sure they are able to survive in it and then disappear. When Jimmy asks Crake why not trust other Paradise Project specialists with the second in command position regarding the Crakers, Crake says, “You have a great ability to sit around not doing much of anything. Just like them” (*Oryx and Crake* 376). Crake does not expect Jimmy to do much or to survive. The assumption Crake makes about Snowman’s death is implicit in the text, since the genius Crake seems to believe that his best friend did not possess the knowledge nor the skills required for survival in long term and the beginning of *Oryx and Crake* asserts it: Snowman is starving to death. But even though Snowman’s role in apocalypse is designed by Crake, he is the one to tell the events after all; he is the one in charge of choosing a perspective to have their version of the story

told. The narrative then presents the perspective of the reluctant elect, and not of the elect proper as in biblical apocalypse.

In this rewriting of apocalypse, Atwood exposes the cruelty in apocalyptic logic, which, as in the Bible, follows the notion that human history has a clear beginning and end. In the beginning there was Creation, followed by the Fall of Man, a catastrophe which leads to the Resurrection of Christ, who will choose the ones to be saved, and culminates in the End, apocalypse itself, with the replacement of the current world order by a heavenly paradise for God's chosen people (Goldman 21). Within this logic, violence takes place to be forgotten later on. Forgetting is, after all, required for the new world order to take place. For the idea of a new heaven to hold, a new era of peace and justice to be successful, the previous experience of extreme violence needs to fade away from the memory of the elects.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the eradication of all humans is treated as a major catastrophe and not as a necessary measure. Through the eyes of Snowman, the reader is shown the destructive aspect of apocalypse and the violence regarding the non-elect. When Jimmy first sees signs of the plague, he calls it "the Red Death" (381) and later on he stands as the only witness to the global pandemic, as the narrator describes it:

The hastily assembled epidemic managers called the shots – field clinics, isolation tents; whole towns, then whole cities quarantined. But these efforts soon broke down as the doctors and nurses caught the thing themselves, or panicked and fled. (398-9)

Snowman later states that Jimmy was not in shock for the things he was seeing live on TV about the plague. He even says, "The worst part of it was those people out there – the fear, the suffering, the wholesale death – did not really touch him" (400). The experience of accompanying the pandemic on TV is described like as being in a movie. Actually, Snowman/Jimmy's perception of things as fiction is intensified in this part of the novel, when the apocalyptic event *per se* – the plague – strikes. When he kills Crake, the scene is

experienced and described “in slow motion” (383), and his final confront with his friend is depicted by him as “melodrama so overdone that he and Crake would have laughed their heads off at it” (382).

The epitome of Snowman/Jimmy’s narrative impulse is when he finally writes a letter considering all that happened and the reasons for the apocalypse (404) which tellingly stops when he is about to elaborate on Crake’s reasons, a sign that maybe Snowman can see his own involvement in the catastrophe and avoids dealing with it. Even though Snowman claims that Jimmy did not care for what was happening, his incarnation as Snowman proves the contrary: his guilt haunts him, a constant reminder of the fate of humankind. Because of Snowman’s presence as a reluctant elect, the violence directed at the non-elect is not forgotten, thus subverting the traditional apocalyptic logic that demands the erasure of this violence so heaven can take place properly.

Furthermore, Atwood complicates Snowman’s position when she has him perpetrate violence against non-elects. When taking the Crakers out of the Paradise headquarters to a new environment by the beach, he sees a man and a woman in the late stages of the disease. Snowman is able to identify it because “the sweat of blood was on his forehead” (410). He shoots these two people when they try to come closer. Moreover, when the Crakers point out that these people are actually similar to Snowman by saying “it has extra skins, like you” (411), he replies: “It’s nothing. It’s a piece of a bad dream that Crake is dreaming” (411). He attributes the current situation to Crake, and his guilt and mourn are directed at his dead friend, now a deity in the cosmology he himself created for the humanoid creatures – making Snowman thus responsible for creating an apocalyptic myth himself. Snowman’s ambiguous position – being a reluctant elect that at the same time rejects and perpetrates the violence against non-elect – is one of the elements that contribute to the revisionary quality of Atwood’s rewriting of the apocalyptic narrative in this novel.

Snowman, in *Oryx and Crake*, is the one to narrate the apocalyptic events and to tell what the world was like before and after Crake's genocide. However, his vision is not that of an elect, living happily in the peaceful world promised, but rather that of a disruptive presence. He did not fit society before, but he does not fit the Craker's way of living either. He is a kind of ghost. The ghost, according to James Berger, is "the ultimate survivor, for it has actually died and continues to exist", returning to tell a story (50). It is true Jimmy does not in fact die in the novel, but one may account for his symbolic death as Jimmy who then adopts a new name, Snowman, which relates both to his status as a last man and to his situation as an aberration. Ildney Cavalcanti points to the significance of the name Snowman. According to the critic, it is a metaphor for his current situation, since the well known "abominable Snowman," the *yeti*, has its feet pointing backwards ("Restos de Natureza" 76). Snowman's fate is to look constantly back to his past. He is the last of his kind (or so he believes) and he is too different from the Crakers to live among them. Like the legendary *yeti*, he is isolated. Snyder comments on this relation between Snowman and his past: "Snowman is haunted by memories of the past, or rather, he is himself a kind of ghost, a specter of the past who haunts an unimaginable present yet is denied the consolation of a future" (473). His presence in the novel is certainly haunting as he continually lingers on, mourning over and over his personal losses: "Had Oryx loved him, had she loved him not, did Crake know about them...? . . . And was there any difference? And so on and so forth, spinning the emotional wheels and sucking down the hooch until he could blank himself out" (*Oryx and Crake* 400-01). Even when Snowman comes back from the trip to the Paradise headquarters, when he confronts the skeletons of Oryx and Crake and acknowledges his responsibility in the genocide, he is still marked by loss. Snowman ponders when he enters the place in which both the plague and the Crakers started: "Darker than the dark, and some of that darkness is Snowman's. He helped with it" (389). The realization of what happened does not bring him relief, but rather a sense

of failure. He is still a survivor of apocalypse. His use of words and stories as saving graces – as I discuss in Chapter 1 – mark in language the way he deals with apocalypse. He tries to save words, collect them, but still words themselves are a constant reminder that the old order is doomed since their referents no longer exist in the material world. The Crakers are not able to understand what the remainings of the old world order are; for instance, they do not know what buildings are for, or books.

In *Oryx and Crake*, there is no allegory for divine vision. The presence of intertexts is observed mainly through Snowman's "burning scrapbook in his head" (12), which is marked by the voices of his father, teachers, mother, and lovers, as well as by literary references to novels such as *Frankenstein* and *Robinson Crusoe*, and colonization manuals and castaway reports. These intertexts work as a way to emphasize the fragmented nature of the apocalyptic experience. Goldman says, "[Canadian rewritings of apocalypse] invoke these tropes to highlight the fragmentation generated by the apocalyptic storms that continually threaten to destroy all traces of human history" (20). For the critic, this fragmentary quality is necessary for the ironic tone of the text to be grasped since it exposes the logic of apocalypse as artificial and not as a natural course for humankind. The punishment of the non-elect is shown as cruelty and the settling of a new order of things is made ambivalent.

Oryx and Crake is certainly a narrative pervaded by nostalgia which divides the world into a before and an after. In the beginning of the novel, Snowman is at the beach helping the Crakers in the middle of the remains of his world:

a hubcap, a piano key, a chunk of pale-green pop bottle smoothed by the ocean. A plastic BlyssPlus container, empty; a ChickieNobs Bucket O'Nubbins, ditto. A computer mouse, or the busted remains of one, with a long wiry tail. (7)

In this list of items, the previous world order is encompassed: technology (the computer mouse and the hubcap), unethical genetic engineering (ChickieNobs), recklessness for the

environment (the pop bottle), some piece of art, broken (the piano key), and the embodiment of human's greed and selfishness and cause of humanity's destruction – the BlissPlus. Snowman asks himself if he is feeling nostalgic when watching the Craker kids play at the water, but he dismisses it. What he is unable to see is that his nostalgia is related to the wreck he sees in the seashore, that is, humanity's remains.

Berger says that this nostalgic attitude towards the remains is more complex than it appears and adds that in “many science fiction post-apocalypses, what survives is some version of humanity in the midst of the inhuman. Humanity in its essence – such is their claim – is what apocalypse unveil” (10). For the critic, nostalgia is not a reactionary position, on the contrary. It is rather a mechanism for transmission of culture that brings the past into the present. When Snowman looks at the remains of humanity, his attitude is not simply one of stating that the world before was necessarily a better place. On the contrary, he feels tormented by the past. He acknowledges his failure and his useless previous life, but he is still compelled to revisit that past – his personal past, especially – viewing in it a way to understand what is human in himself.

Snowman is not only a storyteller, but also a collector, first of words, and later of memories of humanity. The three senses of apocalypse according to Berger are presented for him: 1) the image of the end (when he sees people dying live on TV); 2) the division of the world in before and after (his nostalgia); and 3) a final revelation (the unveiling of himself and his own role in the plot that made humanity extinct).

3.1.2 Retelling Apocalypse in *The Year of the Flood*: Challenging the Notion of Elect

In *The Year of the Flood*, the rewriting of apocalypse is rather different. Notions of elect and non-elect are made more ambivalent since there are two ways to read apocalypse in the novel. The first relates to the event of the supposed Waterless Flood, the belief of the God's Gardeners in a happening that will strike humanity and start a new beginning: “For the

Waterless Flood is coming, in which all buying and selling will cease, and we will find ourselves thrown back upon our own resources, in the midst of God's bounteous Garden. Which was your Garden also" (126). The second is the actual reason apocalypse happened: Crake, the scientist who designed the BlissPlus pill that killed almost all humans. In the novel, these two visions of apocalypse collide creating a more complex questioning of apocalyptic logic. In *The Year of the Flood*, it is not mentioned if the God's Gardener's were involved in Crake's plan.

The God's Gardeners' religion is apocalyptic, even though they subvert its most traditional view. In a Christian framework, they believe in the advent of the Waterless Flood, an event that will hit the planet and only a few will be able to survive. The following excerpt, part of one of Adam One's sermons, works as a summary for the group's system of beliefs:

We God's Gardeners are plural Noah: we too have been called, we too forewarned. We can feel the symptoms of coming disaster as a doctor feels a sick man's pulse. We must be ready for the time when those who have broken the trust with the Animals . . . will be swept away by the Waterless Flood, which will be carried on the wings of God's dark Angels that fly by night, and in airplanes and helicopters and bullet trains, and on transport trucks and other such conveyances.

But we Gardeners will cherish within us the knowledge of the Species, and of their preciousness to God. We must ferry this priceless knowledge over the face of the Waterless Flood, as if within an Ark.

Let us construct our Ararats carefully, my Friends. Let us provision them with foresight, and with canned and dried goods. Let us camouflage them well. (91)

Differently from the traditional Christian view of Jesus Christ judging and selecting the ones to live, the God's Gardeners preach that survival is a matter of having the right knowledge. The Gardeners *cherish* knowledge. They do not brag about it or claim that they are the only

ones to have it. In their credo, they do not mention that they are the ones chosen by God, on the contrary. They see themselves as people who have paid attention to the coming disaster. They compare themselves to doctors, and not prophets. They do not claim having received a call from God. In fact, for them, the call was made to humanity, but they were the ones who listened to it. They were able to see the signs of disaster on Earth, through analysis.

Anyone could survive, provided they have the knowledge to do so. The members of the cult, through Adam One's speeches, are instructed to prepare Ararats, storage of food supplies, to learn how to hunt and recognize hostile species. Ararat is the biblical place where Noah's ark landed. The God's Gardeners are open to accept new members and they even help people who do not share their religious background. Their knowledge for survival is not considered exclusive to their group and their way of passing it on through storytelling is never considered the only possible way to survive. Of course, one may argue that by the end of the novel the group of survivors is consisted of mainly Gardeners, but there are others as well. The God's Gardeners' appropriation of Christianity and its assimilation with science erases the belief of a god choosing people, one of the basic elements of apocalyptic logic. Survival relies on knowledge of how to do so, not on an arbitrary decision made by a deity.

Thus, the God's Gardeners criticize the arbitrariness of some religions regarding apocalyptic views. Moreover, the group combines different kinds of escathology – a branch of theology concerned with the end of the world or of humankind. As Goldman puts it, escathology is the teachings of the “last things” (14): prophetic and apocalyptic. In the prophetic kind, there is the notion of a new world being built in the “here and now” (15), that is, real politics and plans to follow in order to transform the world into a better place. The Gardeners recycle and reuse products, forbidding any kind of material derived from animals. Conversely, in the apocalyptic kind of escathology, the logic is that redemption cannot happen in this world. Divine intervention will destroy it and a new order will start. The Gardeners combine the

previous view of prophetic eschatology of making the world a better place with the apocalyptic eschatological vision embodied in the concept of the Waterless Flood. Toby is the character who is vocal about this apparent contradiction when she, fresh among the Gardeners, thinks about their strict rules: “why be so picky about lifestyle details if you believed everyone would soon be wiped off the face of the planet?” (*The Year of the Flood* 47). By presenting contradictory views on apocalypse and questioning their logic, Atwood, in *The Year of the Flood*, exposes and subverts the apocalyptic logic as found in the Bible. Both eschatologies coexist for the Gardeners without one annulling the other.

Goldman states, “Canadian writers are particularly drawn to intertextuality and frequently parody canonical narratives” (19), and I analyze in Chapter 1 how Adam One’s speeches can be read as a parody of Christian sermons. However, this mixture of prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology can also be read as a kind of parody. The God’s Gardeners are taking actions to make the world a better place (recycling materials, reusing objects, not killing animal life, etc) but they simultaneously believe that these efforts will lead to nothing because the world will end with the Waterless Flood. Critics such as Frederic Jameson have pointed out how *The Year of the Flood* is a novel about religion (“Then You”) and how religions are constructed through discourse. The interesting aspect of this novel is that Atwood apparently erases the binary opposition of apocalyptic logic in the portrayal of the God’s Gardeners and their actions. In their unusual view of the world – science in a Christian framework – and their disregard for the category of the elect and the non-elect – there is no call from God. Moreover, their focus on action co-existing with their faith in “the End” contributes to question the central opposition that lies in the heart of apocalyptic logic: either prophetic or apocalyptic eschatology.

Considering apocalypse the result of Crake’s plan, it is also relevant to look at the novel as a view of apocalypse from the perspective of the non-elect – now considering that Crake had

chosen the elect, the Crakers, and the non-elect, the humans. Ren and Toby (and later on, Amanda, Shackie, Croze, and Oates) are incidental survivors, people who were not supposed to have lived, according to Crake's intention of substituting humanity for the Crakers. They are the non-elects who suffer the violence of the destruction of the old order in favor of a new one.

Ren describes the post-apocalyptic world around her: "There were bundles of rag and bone. 'Ex-people', said Croze. They were dried out and picked over, but I didn't like the eyeholes. And the teeth – mouths look a lot worse without lips" (*The Year of the Flood* 339). The corpses of the victims are scattered throughout the remains of the old cities. Ren herself could almost have been one of them. She escaped by chance, because she was locked up in the strip club where she used to work. The new environment is hostile to human life not only because of the terrible weather conditions but also because of the now wild genetic engineered animals that run freely. As the narrative goes on, other human survivors also come to be a threat. Nevertheless, because of the instruction received from the God's Gardeners, Ren and Toby do have the knowledge to survive, even though they suffer the destruction of the end of the world they know and have to face a new reality. They are able to keep track of the days and, as Adam One instructed, they ration their food supplies and they know how to hunt when necessary.

Berger claims that "the survivor's knowledge is often knowledge of a radical transgression of moral boundaries" (48). When following his argument, he gives the example of the victims of war crimes and of the Holocaust. He considers the figure of the survivor as post-apocalyptic *per se*. In *The Year of the Flood*, Toby, Ren and Amanda obtain this kind of post-apocalyptic knowledge. The three of them had experienced violence and abuse, but certainly during the Waterless Flood their suffering becomes more intense. They face human cruelty in a manner they had never felt before. If formerly their abuses were influenced by greed, fear or money,

now they are victims of senseless evil. When their persecutors kidnap them, they do not steal or try to extract from them the knowledge to survive. They kill and rape for violence's sake. Besides bearing witness to genocide, these three women characters face difficult situations: Toby practices euthanasia in her former rapist and Amanda is kidnapped, tortured and gang-raped by another group of survivors. Finally, when Amanda, traumatized, is rescued by Ren and Toby, she asks, "What is the point?" Toby replies: "This is not the time . . . for dwelling on ultimate purposes" (430). But the question pervades the entire novel. Why is such evil being committed? What is the point of surviving? In the name of what, since the previous world order is gone? It is not the focus of this work to analyze the matter of evil, but this questioning helps us to think about apocalypse through the eyes of the non-elect and to examine the consequences of extreme violence perpetrated simply because they are non-elects. They first survive the plague and later on have to survive the chaotic remains of the old world.

Unlike traditional approaches to apocalypse, the novel presents the perspective of the "traumatized victims" (Goldman 18). What is interesting is that these perspectives are very ambivalent as is most traumatic testimony. There is no nostalgia in Ren's and Toby's narratives. Differently from Snowman, they do not have a complex relationship with their past as moments to treasure, even though in Snowman's narrative these moments are compellingly ambivalent. Ren and Toby – and the same can be said of Amanda – have been survivors long before the advent of the Waterless Flood. Their experiences with poverty and abuse have already shaped them as people surviving an unfair system. These characters' storytelling abilities are linked to a more practical use: the one that makes survival – bare survival – possible. They are not collectors of words, hanging on them in order to preserve an old order. They use the knowledge conveyed by such stories in very practical ways.

Toby has the necessary tools to survive because she had listened to Adam One's speeches carefully, such as the following one:

While the Flood rages, you must count the days, said Adam One. You must observe the risings of the Sun and the changings of the Moon, because to everything there is a reason. . . . or the Night will come in which all hours are the same to you, and then there will be no Hope. (*The Year of the Flood* 163)

She uses her pink notes to keep track of time and not lose her mind. She is aware of the environment around her and she is able to perceive when the genetic engineered pigs start attacking her. Toby is always prepared both mentally and physically for the changes in the post-apocalyptic world because of Adam One's preaching.

Ren, in turn, learns at a young age how stories can affect people's lives. The first episode occurs when she and Amanda invent a story about Bernice's family that was not true and she feels incredibly depressed about the terrible consequences of their lie, which included a killing. She later regrets: "I hadn't mean any harm, or not that kind of harm. But now look what had happened" (152). Moreover, when Ren's own mother comes up with a story to justify her inconsequential actions, the girl feels how it is to be the victim of a story:

Her story was that I'd been traumatized by being stuck in among the warped, brainwashing cult folk. I had no way of proving her wrong. Anyway maybe I had been traumatized: I had nothing to compare myself with. (213)

The way Lucerne's storytelling affects Ren teaches the girl how one could manipulate others using words. She would later see that she herself could do the same if she wanted to get the acceptance from the other kids at the Compounds: "I saw the temptation. I saw it clearly. I would come up with some bizarre details about my cultish life, and then I would pretend that I thought all these things were as warped as the HelthWyzer kids did. That would be popular" (217). She even uses the power of words to get some kind of vengeance on Jimmy: "Your

enemies could use your writing against you, I thought, but also you could use it against them” (226). In the post-apocalyptic scenario, she uses some knowledge from Adam One’s stories to help herself endure her lonely isolation at the airlock, being thus able to survive: “Adam One used to say, If you can’t stop the waves, go sailing. . . . Which meant that even bad things did some good because they were a challenge and you didn’t always know what good effects they might have” (279). With this knowledge, she handles her present situation.

Moreover, she manipulates her own story in order to be welcomed among other survivors, the MaddAddam group. Romantically involved with Croze, she does not mention her past as prostitute to him: “But then I’d have to tell all about what I used to do at Scales – not just the trapeze dancing . . . but the other things, the feather-ceiling room things. Croze wouldn’t want to hear about that” (395-96). In my counterpart reading of the novels, I say that Snowman/Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* is a collector of words, a keeper of human culture, while Toby and Ren in *The Year of the Flood* are actual recipient of stories. They learn through them and incorporate them into their lives, changing them at times, as in traditional oral cultures.

I agree with Susan Watkins when she says that many contemporary apocalyptic fictions written by women avoid the tragic narrative of blame and suggest “the importance of plural, hybrid narratives and spaces that reproduce or rewrite the contortions or conundrums of the apocalyptic future(s) that face us” (134). Watkins uses Greg Garrad’s concept of tragic and comic apocalypse which is defined by the level of the individual’s acceptance of the apocalyptic event (128). *Oryx and Crake* preserves at some extent the narrative of guilt and tragedy, even though it ironically rewrites apocalypse with the presence of a reluctant elect. However, *The Year of the Flood* represents the survival of women, reversing the logic of the Last Man narrative presented in *Oryx and Crake*. When the novels are put together, it is

possible to read the 2009 text as a rewriting of the tragic apocalypse presented in the previous novel, in this case, an even more complex rewriting of apocalypse.

According to Watkins, tragic apocalypse occurs when, in an apocalyptic tale, the individual is unable to influence the outcome. This is the situation with *Snowman*; he may be able to reevaluate his life and deal with his guilt, but he cannot or may not change the situation around him. He is the last survivor and he is dying. The tone of *Oryx and Crake* is certainly tragic. In *The Year of the Flood*, a comic frame of apocalypse takes place, according to Watkins: human intervention is possible; the survivors may be able to rebuild society once more as the narrative does leave room for this kind of interpretation. Watkins states that Atwood “associates the tragic apocalyptic narrative with masculinity in *Oryx and Crake* and the comic with femininity in *The Year of the Flood*” (128). The women survivors are open to face the post-apocalyptic situation and revert it in their favor. Survival in *The Year of the Flood* implies shaping a new reality, not simply denying it.

Another difference between *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* is the racialized and gendered aspect of apocalypse observed in the latter novel. Goldman points to how extremely violent the actions portrayed in the biblical Revelations in relation to women are and discusses how the “silence that surrounds apocalyptic violence also raises an important question: is it a coincidence that people remain ignorant of the gendered and racialized violence at the heart of apocalypse?” (26). For her, the answer lies in the fact that apocalyptic violence needs to be forgotten so a new heaven can be founded. The Babylon Whore is tortured, brutally murdered, and her flesh is eaten, according to St John the Divine, but it is necessary to erase the memory of the elects doing so once new heaven is installed. Therefore, Revelations is a paradoxical, palimpsest even, kind of text. In the rewritings of apocalypse from ex-centric points of view, this gendered violence is foregrounded and exposed.

In Atwood's novel, Amanda suffers tremendous abuse in the hands of another group of survivors. So does Ren, even though she claims it "was worse for Amanda than for me" (*The Year of the Flood* 242). Women seem to be target of apocalyptic violence. The same seems to happen in *Oryx and Crake*, when Oryx is murdered by Crake in the first apocalyptic scene Jimmy witnesses. In *The Year of the Flood*, Shackie, Croze, and Oates go to Scales after the end of the world claiming the place "had a reputation" (335), and, initially, they feel in the right to watch and stalk the two reminiscent girls dancing there. Not only does women's situation in post-apocalypse mirror the gendered inequality of the world before it, but it amplifies its scope.

The novels present two different approaches to apocalypse. The women in the latter novel refuse the tragic frame of apocalypse and decide to take action and protect each other. In *The Year of the Flood*, this oppositional view is made because the God's Gardeners erase the difference between elect and non-elects. Also, the non-elects guide the narrative, depicting the apocalyptic violence they suffer. With these two novels, Atwood subverts and rewrites apocalyptic logic exposing the cruel logic of traditional views on apocalypse.

3.2 Dystopia and the Representation of Women: Survival and Storytelling

A vision of a future which is a bad place for women is no news in speculative fiction. Many utopian writings frequently reproduce in their visions of a better world the oppression regarding women commonly found in patriarchal societies. Very often science is still a realm of men, and women are often relegated to the domestic sphere. It is no wonder that in many dystopias women are one of the most oppressed groups. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on a totalitarian regime that controls women and their bodies. In Jeannette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*, women are seen as sexual objects that often undergo bizarre surgery interventions in order to appeal to men in a society marked by extreme consumerism.

Suzette Elgin's *Native Tongue* presents a group of women exploited and silenced by men, working on terrible conditions as linguists. These are few contemporary examples of dystopian narratives by women that deal with issues of gender inequality in a speculative fictional framework.

Oryx and Crake and *The Year of the Flood* can be added to this list of dystopias depicting women's oppression. In the first novel, Oryx is treated as the stereotypical eroticized and exotic Eastern woman. Always trapped into Jimmy's view of her, she is constantly "seen, commercialized and desired through her body" (Lins 96). She never has a voice in the novel, since her story is told by Jimmy/Snowman. The latter novel portrays women as protagonists but again they are shown in situations of oppression and abuse. When Toby is orphaned and finds herself without any money or expectations, she considers the public opinion on her situation: "at least she had something of marketable value, namely her young ass" (*The Year of the Flood* 28). This view summarizes how society in general sees women in the novel: as objects and commodities to be traded, sold, and taken. The other women prominent characters, Ren and Amanda, live similar experiences of being exploited. What marks a difference between the two novels is that in the latter one, women are able to tell their experiences themselves. Differently from the silenced Oryx, Toby and Ren are able to be in charge of their own stories.

Karen Stein claims that "by telling stories, Atwood's female protagonists come to terms with their personal histories, assert their perspectives, and resist attempts of others to silence them" (155). The critic highlights the fact that storytelling is a way to compose and inscribe a social self (154) and points to the many storytellers in Atwood's fiction linking their act of telling their stories to the power acquired with this act. Thus telling stories, having a voice, is a way to be empowered. She states that "finding a voice is part of the survival strategy, a means to

gain power and control” (158). Stein considers the relation between storytelling and survival in a similar manner I propose in this thesis.

In *The Year of the Flood*, Ren narrates her own life, attempting to find out who she really is. Always relegated as the fragile girl (both Toby and Amanda many times in the narrative reinforce this point of view), Ren, by the end of the novel, is finally able to make her own decisions, putting herself in the position of the rescuer which is traditionally associated with a male figure. Tellingly enough, Ren’s narrative starts with her writing down her name beside the mirror “*Renrenren*, like a song” (6). Ren’s own voice is reassured throughout the text that is ultimately about the oppression she endured in her life: parental neglect, poverty, alienation, sexual exploitation, incarceration and abduction.

Snowman is the storyteller in *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood’s first male protagonist. Sharon Rose Wilson remarks that “Snowman acts as trickster creator: his attempt to keep words from becoming extinct succeeds in that he manages to tell the story we read” (“Blindness” 187). Eleonora Rao, in turn, makes the link between Snowman’s storytelling and survival: “The act of storytelling, here as in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, has multiple resonances. It is a means of survival that allows Snowman to avoid sinking into a world where words lose their consistency, use, and meaning” (111). One might argue that Jimmy is also in a marginal position. He is a words person in a world that privileges numbers people. He does not fit in this society and his tale can certainly be read as the account of an outcast. However, Atwood makes explicit Jimmy’s position as a privileged white man whenever Oryx is introduced. Her silence pervades the entire narrative in opposition to Jimmy/Snowman’s insistence on creating stories and myths. Oryx’s story is never totally unveiled and Jimmy’s attempts to discover her real personal history are punctuated by her enigmatic laughs.

Oryx’s laugh haunts Jimmy/Snowman’s narratives. In his incarnation as Jimmy, whenever he asks about her supposed past as sex slave, Oryx’s laugh is the answer. Disconcerted by it,

Jimmy replies immediately: “I don’t do them [sexual acts] against your will’, said Jimmy. ‘Anyway you’re grown up now.’ Oryx laughed. ‘What is my will?’ she said” (*Oryx and Crake* 166). Susan Hall states that “on one level, Atwood’s portrayal of Oryx is surely meant as a critique of racist and patriarchal structures that perpetuate the silencing of women, especially women of color, but there is more to her daring representation of Oryx than this critique” (192). For her, the complexity of Oryx lies in her laugh. She reads Oryx’s laugh after Jimmy’s attempts of getting details of her past of sexual abuse and exploitation as a manner Oryx has to express her subjectivity, relying mostly on Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa”. Her laughs temporarily subvert the logic of her relation with Jimmy: the exotic fantasized woman and the male gazer. With her laugh she destabilizes the apparent tranquility of the relation: she forces Jimmy to see her as an object of desire, she makes him see the power politics underlying their relation and his position as the powerful one. This knowledge disconcerts Jimmy and he attempts to protect himself against a possible accusation of being a child pornography consumer: “‘I only saw that one’, said Snowman” (*Oryx and Crake* 163). In this passage, a conversation between Jimmy and Oryx that occurred in one of the many nights they spent together, Jimmy is referred to as Snowman, a reference that I read as a sign of Snowman’s recognition of his own guilt. Since Snowman is telling the story of Jimmy, when he refers to his post-apocalyptic self, the one capable of being critical, he is acknowledging his role as participant of something negative, even though he initially tries to deny it. In his incarnation as Snowman somehow he is able to perceive his responsibility towards things (including not only Crake’s genocide but also his role in the sex market consumerism) in a way his persona as Jimmy is not capable of. I add to Hall’s comments on Oryx’s laugh the fact that when it appears again in Snowman’s mind, in the post-apocalyptic world, it gains a new meaning: Oryx’s laugh is the reminder of Snowman’s own culpability regarding the situation he is now living. The laugh mocks his suffering and he feels “that

silvery laugh, right in his ear” (362) making him uneasy again, aware that he is not solely a victim, but also a victimizer.

Oryx is central to the novel. Her importance is attested in the title – which bears her name – in most of Jimmy/Sonwman’s longings about her and in her crucial role in the spread of the virus that destroys humanity. However, Oryx never has the chance to tell her story in her own terms. Coral Ann Howells observes that “Oryx has never has a chance to emerge from the stereotype image of the sexually desirable Oriental female” (*Margaret Atwood* 180). She is often compared to Zenia, another exoticized enigma in Atwood’s previous novel, *The Robber Bride*. However, I believe that a reading of Oryx as merely an enigma is not revealing of her disturbing presence in the novel. Her silence may be read as a way to tell a complex story of oppression both as a woman and as a racialized body. Fiona Tolan argues that “eastern Oryx’s narrative perpetually threatens to also turn Atwood’s typically affluent western reader into a voyeur; making him or her complicit in Jimmy’s morbid fascination” (*Margaret Atwood* 288). This portrayal creates a strong critique in the text. When the reader is led to initially sympathize with Jimmy and his outcast situation and later on when he is shown in his consumption of child pornography and other sex industry products, Atwood seems to be criticizing the exploitation of racialized women and children. This critique is not addressed to governmental politics or corporate greed logic; on the contrary, it is directed to an everyday man, Jimmy, who at first view seems nice and sensitive. Following this reading, Oryx’s silence is unsettling because it might expose a complicity in a system that treats women and, especially, racialized women as commodities.

As I have been arguing, *The Year of the Flood*, read in counterpart with *Oryx and Crake*, opens up the debate about the naturalization of violence against women. The link between Oryx’s experiences and Toby’s, Ren’s and Amanda’s is undeniable. These women experience abuse and exploitation and have their bodies treated as one more product. Tolan sees

Atwood's dystopian vision as "a body-oriented consumer society" (*Margaret Atwood* 283). Considering the two novels together, it is possible to say that Toby and Ren, especially, are able to vocalize some issues related to the violence against women that Oryx in her silence cannot do in *Oryx and Crake*.

Brooks Bouson discusses how Atwood makes literal corporate cannibalism with the fast food chain SecretBurgers, which, under the approval of the private security force CorSeCops, use actual corpses in their meat grinds: "During the glory days of SecretBurgers, there were few bodies found in vacant lots" (*The Year of the Flood* 33). But another aspect of this corporate world is its treatment of women. On that, Bouson states, "*Year* also draws much of its abject horror from its vision of the male 'carnification' of the female subject: that is, the reduction of the woman to a fleshly object or to meat or to a rotting corpse" ("We're Using Up" 13). In this capitalist logic of turning everything and anything into a product to be sold, women are not to be spared. Atwood extends this logic to her dystopia not only in the depiction of issues of commercialization of women in the sex market and the selling of an impossible beauty pattern that leads to expensive and ineffective beauty treatments, but also in the portrayal of women's bodies as product and the brutal violence they suffer.

Susan Bordo reads the body as medium for culture. For the critic, the discipline and normalization of the female body perhaps the only gender oppression that exercises itself, although to different degrees and in different forms, across age, race, class, and sexual orientation – has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control. (2363)

Women's bodies have been controlled and oppressed throughout history. The major form of control Bordo addresses in contemporary society is the excessive worry with appearance. Women all over the world attempt to change their bodies in order to fit a standard of so-called femininity, a characteristic that Bordo acknowledges changes through times.

The violence perpetrated towards women is at some extent justified by a patriarchal discourse that defines women in opposition to men, especially in terms of their biological bodies. Moira Gatens mentions how “the notion woman as ‘lack’, as ‘deformity’, or deficiency, appears in the work of ancient philosophers such as Aristotle, and in the work of twentieth-century thinkers, such as Jaques Lacan” (vii). Women are the negative side of the binary opposition of men/women. They are also frequently associated with the negative side of other binaries such as culture/nature, time/space, and mind/body.

In an article about the relation between body and writing, Sandra Almeida draws on how the mentioned conception of binary opposites, particularly the culture/nature one, to discuss how women are associated to a land to be conquered. Considering colonial reports and literary texts, the critic reflects on how women’s bodies have been treated as objects throughout history (“Corpo” 96). A woman’s naked body has been traditionally and emblematically used as a metaphor for a new land and its colononization. Sexual intercourse, including rape, is seen as a way for men to assert women as their possession (“Corpo” 98). Women, then, carry on their gendered bodies the marks of this gendered violence.

Atwood’s dystopian novels project the discourse of patriarchal justification of violence against women’s bodies to ultimate consequences. Seen as inferior, as bodies to be commodified, the women in these texts suffer a gendered violence that is normalized by society. As common in dystopian narratives, Atwood, by means of exaggeration and amplification of a current social matter, puts in evidence the way women’s bodies are perceived in patriarchal and capitalist culture. If in *Oryx and Crake* “violence and pornography have been entirely normalized within popular culture” (Tolan, *Margaret Atwood* 285) and the effects of this reality are exploited on a psychological level (considering Jimmy) and on culpable voyeuristic implications (in the presence of Oryx), in *The Year of the Flood* the consequences of the normalization of violence are shown in brutal and painful ways. It is

no wonder that Ursula K. Le Guin remarks that the 2009 novel is “more painful” precisely because of its account on the lives of initially powerless women. In the pleeblands, the vision of a woman suffering all kinds of exploitation is nothing new. Actually, as violence is normalized by culture – mainly through the Internet with websites such as HottTotts, Tart of the Day, and Superswallowers – people start getting used to it.

When the narrator Ren, as a child, walks around the pleeblands, she observes: “the vacant lot was empty. No winos, no pleebrats, no dead naked women” (76). It is interesting the way young Ren adds “no dead naked women” to her observations. In fact, the pleeblands convey a clear symbolic message in relation to women’s bodies: they are meat. Women are seen as objects for male pleasure and when they are no longer usable, they can be disposed of in vacant lots without any kind of punishment or even horror by the part of the population. People find it common that the CorpSeCorps declare such acts as of no importance for investigation. When Toby, as a young woman, hears at her job that Dora, an employee who was being sexually abused by her boss, Blanco, was found dead and her body was cut to bits, her immediate reaction is to ask if Blanco was the killer. Her colleague then says, “Of course it was him. He’s bragging” (36). Women are the easiest victims in this space that configures women’s bodies as disposable meat.

It is in Toby’s narrative that the woman bodies are more often compared to meat and this comparison becomes a recurrent image in the sections of the novel related to her. When her boss at SecretBurgers, Blanco, “promotes” her to sex slave (in his abusive mind, it is a promotion), she is finally reduced ultimately to her body, and she follows the pleebland space symbolic message that women are meat and mere objects. A striking image of the way women’s bodies are configured in this space is the tattoo displayed in Blanco’s back: “an upside-down naked woman whose head was stuck in his ass.” (36) Women are treated as if they were headless beings and their bodies are prey to men. Before raping Toby, Blanco

degrades her: “Skinny bitch, I’m promoting you. Say thank you” (37). Her body then is finally constrained to the norm of use and disposal. She is performing what the norms of that space expect from her.

When I mention space symbolic message, I am referring to Doreen Massey’s observations of how spaces are gendered. Space is an important factor in the construction of gender relations and one’s identity. Spaces convey symbolic messages that are, therefore, gendered. Spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood (Massey 179). Space would then constrict mobility depending on the gendered message transmitted, and the ones that occupy this space without following this message are target to violence and exclusion. Sandra Almeida argues that the excluded and marginalized subjects are the ones to suffer in their bodies the consequences of the fears and anxieties of contemporary society (“O Poder” 304). She considers how this violence, especially perpetrated on women’s bodies, has been portrayed in many literary narratives in the past years. For the critic, women protagonists of such texts often use writing as an element that destabilizes power relations that relegate women’s body as targets of violence.

My point in this work is that in Atwood’s more recent dystopia, the spaces of the Compounds and pleeblands recurrently present the symbolic message that women’s bodies are commodities. Moreover, these spaces, in consonance with the tone of dystopian narratives, extrapolate the fears and anxieties of contemporary society by means of portraying a culture in which violence towards minorities is always justified. In the name of a so-called security, the CorSeCorps are free to retaliate and perpetrate violence against individuals of the pleeblands and even of the Compounds. Because of the exaggerated fear of violence, the society portrayed in both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* becomes violent and

normalizes it to the point of using this violence as form of entertainment. Nonetheless, the novels focus on the violence and the discourse that accompanies it regarding women's bodies. Oryx is sold by her own mother in order to help her family escape poverty. In the pleeblands, as a child, she is exploited by many men as a child worker, porno star, and sex slave. Later on, in the Compounds, she is a corporate prostitute who becomes Crake's personal sex worker and is used to spread the virus worldwide. Toby, also because of her poverty, has to endure sexual abuse by her manager. Only when she goes to live among the God's Gardeners is she able to escape the vision of her body as something to trade. Ren, in turn, when she goes back to the Compounds as a teenager, feels how her body is constantly exposed: "I couldn't get used to [the new clothes] . . . and how my bare arms stuck out from the sleeves and my bare legs came out of the bottom of the knee-length, pleated skirt" (*The Year of the Flood* 215). She knows, however, that in her previous Gardener clothes she would never adapt to the symbolic message of this new space. She finally becomes a corporate prostitute, again going with the system that exploits and treats women as products.

Ildney Cavalcanti uses the notion of "feminist dystopias" to refer to works which present patriarchal "hells" of oppression, discrimination, and violence against women, thus mapping our contemporary social environment. . . . On one level, these fictions offer an antidote to the banalization of misogyny, . . . they bring patriarchal values and attitudes which in most cases pass unnoticed (because they have undergone the process of banalization) into full view. ("Articulating" 1-2)

What *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* expose is the extreme capitalization of the image of women that are part of our society now and what might be the impacts of such images that usually portray women as passive beings or even glamorize violence perpetrated against them (Kilbourne). The space of hope is found in their ability to tell their own stories and to appropriate other stories, making thus their own survival possible.

It is possible to see these women in Atwood's fiction as tricksters. The figure of the trickster is very much used to talk about Atwood's protagonists. Instead of the hero, who saves and sacrifices, the trickster is able to affect and create his or her own reality. On the role of the trickster, Wilson states that "Atwood's survivors are trickster creators, using their verbal 'magic' to transform their worlds" ("Introduction" xii). Oryx does not survive and is unable to actually tell her story, but Toby and Ren in some way are able to comment on her story too by presenting their own stories of exploitation and commodification. Ultimately, they survive the system and even though they still face predatory men in the post-apocalyptic scenario, they are willing to change the environment, to protect each other and build a new reality for themselves.

In a counterpart reading, the logic of consuming violence via Internet in *Oryx and Crake* is seen as culpable, not on a personal level, as Jimmy feels as a young teenager, but as a collective act responsible for the abuses of women such as the ones portrayed in *The Year of the Flood*. This reading implies that the consumption of gendered violence has effects on the society. It is not relegated to one's individual distorted form of pleasure. Jimmy may have failed to see Oryx as part of a group of women that share the same kind of story (Tolan, *Margaret Atwood* 287), but by reading the two novels together, the reader is pushed to see the relation between this cultural normalization of violence on video and the actual violence perpetrated in real women.

3.3 Telling Stories about Humanity

The final layer of storytelling to consider here is the mythmaking project devised by Snowman for the Crakers in *Oryx and Crake*. What Snowman does is to transform his own personal history into myth. Nonetheless, by doing that, he interferes in the Craker's way of thinking, provoking them and showing that what Crake thought to be genetically impossible –

symbolic thinking – is actually part of the building blocks of humanity, in which these humanoid creatures are based. This act of telling stories to the Crakers enables Snowman's own survival since it gives him a reason and motivation to keep looking after these creatures he considers boring, as the following quotation shows: "they [the Crakers] accepted, without question, everything he [Snowman] said. Much more of this – whole days, whole weeks of it – and he could see himself screaming with boredom" (408). However, this storytelling allows human's capacity to create art and stories to survive.

I have already discussed how the Crakers' eating habits as well as their apparently genetic indisposition for violent behavior mark them as different from humans. Furthermore, they apparently do not express gender culturally. Women and men are divided into different activities that are the ones frequently associated to animal behavior rather than human culture. Women take care of the offspring as most female animals and men use their urine to protect the group from wild animals, probably reflecting Crake's biological vision on men and women as simply female and male. As Tolan points out, "gender remains, but deprived of its cultural expression, it is reduced to biological function" (*Margaret Atwood* 295). What I believe Tolan is referring to is the notion that the Crakers are closer to animal behavior than to humans. In fact, there seems to be no inequality among the genders and they relate to each other according to the mating season. Also, the Crakers cannot express sexual desire.

Deprived of any association with human culture for they cannot write or read and they have never been exposed to the world before the plague kills off humans, the Crakers ironically were given the names of prominent humans like Abraham Lincoln, Marie Curie, Simone de Beauvoir, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Benjamin Franklin. These names, nonetheless, are devoid of meaning for the Crakers: they are just names without cultural reference. One may infer that Snowman is actually trying to create a culture for the Crakers, a culture that may convey

meanings in names and things. Not necessarily like in his previous culture, but at least one that makes the Crakers overcome their limited linguistic and cognitive abilities.

Carol Osborne points out the fact that by the end of the novel the Crakers seem to be developing a way of thinking that resemble the previous humans, with religion and artistic expression. The Crakers start considering Oryx and Crake as deities because of Snowman's stories. When he leaves to search for food in the Paradise Project, the Crakers make a material representation of him and chant to it, believing that by doing this Snowman would come back to them. With this act, the Crakers show that they have developed symbolic thinking. Osborne considers the impact of Snowman's tales on the Crakers:

The myths of origin have set the stage for the Crakers to reverence language, since words were created by Oryx, and their curiosity, love of repetition, and eagerness for stories suggest that they have the ability, with time, to expand their vocabularies and become more proficient communicators. What seems the most important aspect of the mythology Snowman has invented, however, is the sense of community that results from the ritual telling of the stories, for it sets a precedent for how stories may function when Snowman goes to meet the humans. One of Snowman's imagined scenarios, after all, the one he does not dismiss, involves the trading of tales, and the mutual understanding that may result from the survivor's having shared the horror of the apocalypse. (40)

The mythology Snowman creates influence the Crakers in the sense that they start creating their own culture. They start valuing language because, according to Snowman, Oryx created all the words in the myth of origin created for them. They then become eager to learn new words. Moreover, they develop a sense of community derived from the moments of storytelling. The way the Crakers repeat Snowman's tale, the use of elements such as fire, and the further material representation of Snowman point to the birth of a ritual. The relevance of storytelling as a way to share experience is thus emphasized.

Snowman helps the Crakers develop, but not in the way Crake predicted. Initially, the scientist puts Oryx to teach them how to identify animals and hostile elements in the environment. He says to Jimmy: “Simple concepts, no metaphysics” (363). Snowman, however, pushes the Crakers towards a more inventive, curious view of the world. He creates a mythic genesis for the universe and for the Crakers. Oryx and Crake are the benevolent and powerful deities in this mythology. The following extract shows how Snowman explains to these humanoid creatures the end of humanity in the form of a myth: “And then Oryx said to Crake, *Let us get rid of the chaos*. And so Crake took the chaos, and he poured it away” (119). After one of his sessions of storytelling, one of the Crakers women asks: “Oh Snowman, tell us about when Crake was born” (120). This episode shows that the Crakers are learning how to interact with a story and attempting to maybe expand on it in their own terms. They are developing an oral tradition, one that involves Snowman telling stories to them and them relating to him. About their material representation of Snowman, the Crakers say: “We made a picture of you, to help us send out our voices to you” (419). The Crakers have learned how to act creatively in the world, even if it is on the most basic level – something that Crake wanted to eradicate completely.

Storytelling at this level enables the survival of human traits. It is interesting to see how the other levels of storytelling in the novels studied here – Snowman’s story of his earlier persona, Jimmy; Ren’s diary and her experience with the meaning of telling a story; Oryx’s absent story; Toby’s lists that convey narrative experience – seem to culminate in the survival of the very essence of humans, at least in the terms proposed in the novels: the ability to tell stories. When, in the end of the *The Year of the Flood*, the Crakers sing, apparently going in the direction of Snowman, now in company of Toby, Ren and Amanda, the narrative advances into a step never before approached: the encounter of the Crakers with the survivors of humanity. Atwood’s ending is typically ambiguous. Will the Crakers be able to evolve? If

yes, what will their interaction with humans be like? Will they keep Snowman's mythology and develop a culture out of it? How are they going to deal with gender difference? These questions remain unanswered, but storytelling still remains at the core of it. Storytelling seems to be the answer in Atwood's narratives, a way of both perceiving and creating the world.

3.4 The Meaning of Telling Stories

The issue of storytelling has been tackled in Atwood's previous novels. The figure of the storyteller as someone who has power over his or her own personal history, and how this vocalizing of one's story can be seen as an act of survival permeates the Canadian author's work. Novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace*, and *The Blind Assassin* present this connection between the act of storytelling and survival. Nonetheless, in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* this connection is made more strongly.

Either in the post-catastrophe world with humanity almost extinct or in the highly capitalist society that commodifies women and banalizes forms of violence and exploitation, survival means staying alive in these incredibly violent environments. Snowman/Jimmy, Toby, Ren, and Adam One use their stories to stay alive. Snowman/Jimmy uses it not to lose his mind in a hostile scenario he has to face on his own. Toby writes down her lists during her period of wreck survival and follows the advices she learned from previous stories to keep herself going. Ren learns about the power a story can have in people's life being both the storyteller and the one the story is about, learning from these experiences how to use the power of a story to make a better living for her in her violent world. Adam One uses stories to convey survival knowledge for the members of his religion. All these instances of survival are endured through the act of storytelling.

Nevertheless, the two novels studied radicalize the issue of storytelling and survival in one more layer. In fact, if we analyze the first layer of this dystopia, the one of the highly capitalist society, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* are novels about a world in which storytelling loses its value. In this dystopia, information – especially if it is related to scientific knowledge – matters more than art. Actually, information seems to be more important than sharing experiences face to face, the most basic form of storytelling. In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy and Crake spend their teenage years surfing illegal websites filled with pornography, torture, and even deliberate executions. The two boys spend their afternoons playing games or going online together, but without much contact. The narrator explains the situation: “Crake had two computers, so they could sit with their backs to each other” (88). Jimmy initially feels uneasy about this lack of contact. As the narrator observes, “It did seem weird to have the two of them in the same room, back to back, playing on computers” (88). This lack of contact would later on prove to be convenient when the two friends watch extremely violent or pedophilic porn. Back to back, they do not have to face each other during these experiences. As adults, the pattern continues: they seem unable to connect, to understand each other, even though they are supposedly best friends. Their inability to share their experiences – something encouraged by the factual science oriented society they live in – leads to the ultimate disaster. Jimmy could not perceive what was around him. His relation to storytelling comes as a form of personal expression that never reaches other people fully: he eventually tells stories to himself.

In *The Year of the Flood*, this same culture that values only science is portrayed. Storytelling becomes, then, a form of opposition to this technology oriented culture. With the God’s Gardeners, a marginal group in society, storytelling is valued as a form to convey knowledge. The Gardeners are not encouraged to talk about their personal past experiences, as the narrator presents when Toby first joins the cult: “it hadn’t taken Toby long to realize that the

Gardeners did not welcome personal questions” (102). However, they do share their experiences in the present and treasure this sharing as their most valid form of conveying knowledge, since the written word is forbidden. In their limited environment, the God’s Gardeners are able to resist the pressure of a society that is leading itself to destruction both culturally, with its devaluing of art and lack of critical thinking, and environmentally, with politics that disregard the consequences of pollution and overpopulation. By the end of the novel, most of the survivors are Gardeners, people who learn through sharing and that are able to pass this knowledge on by telling stories and learning from them.

This world that relegates storytelling and overvalues merely information, discouraging the sharing of experiences among people, is the depiction of a society that lacks critical thinking. This absence of criticism is shown in both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*: corporations controlling society, unethical scientific experiments, impossible patterns of beauty that are used to give profit to cosmetic products and surgery, exacerbated consumerism, commodification of women and their bodies, banalization of violence, disregard for environmental issues, etc. Atwood goes one step further, even, when portraying the extinction of humanity.

In Walter Benjamin’s influential text “The Storyteller”, the critic presents a discussion of the role of the storyteller in a social level that is similar to the one Atwood’s novels address. Benjamin talks about the beginning of modernity and how information was being more valued than stories: “If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs” (89). For the author, modern society considers information more valid because it can be verified and stories, as a source of knowledge, cannot. In *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* Atwood draws on the scenario Benjamin exposes and projects its tendencies in an exaggerated fashion as dystopias

often do. In both novels the absence of storytelling leads to the doom of humanity and its existence in marginal forms is what ultimately makes human survival possible.

Benjamin connected the end of telling stories mostly with the rise of the novel, which he considers a genre of individual activity. For the German philosopher, the sharing between a listener and a teller is essential for the community value of storytelling: For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to (91). In *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, the same interaction between listener and teller and the necessary repetition are valued and their lack is what is being criticized. But one might not disregard the fact that this discussion about the importance of storytelling is presented in the novelistic format. Furthermore, dystopias do seem to have a social appeal to readers, provoking them to rethink their own realities, as critics such as Frederic Jameson and Tom Moylan state.

In her critical dystopia, Atwood criticizes corporate culture which encourages people to turn a blind eye to social issues and maintain a pattern of behavior focused on individualism. The image of the two friends connected to the Internet in the same room not sharing experiences is disconcertedly quite related to our times. This strong critique of alienation is at the surface of novels and the more critically aware the reader is, according to critics such as Moylan, the more he is able to connect the world of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* to his or her own. A critique of the lack of action regarding environmentalism and a debate on ethical bioengineering, the novels project their dystopian realities on the effects of a culture that only cares for money and individual profit, neglecting art and even the mere act of having people talking to each other. Both texts present the deterioration of human relations and its cruel consequences: the indifference towards others and the banalization of the violence perpetrated at the ones at the margins. In Atwood's bleak

scenario, a world without interaction among people and with a focus only on profit leads to catastrophe.

Storytelling means survival in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* in a radicalized manner if one is to compare these novels to Atwood's previous work. More than the survival of the protagonists that tell their stories to keep themselves alive, in the two layers of these dystopian novels, what is at stake is the survival of human culture. In both novels, this culture is kept and modified through oral tales. The reader is taken to the beginning of human culture – with stories shared by the fire and lessons being passed through tales of experience. In an Atwoodian way, the end is the beginning and the beginning is also the end. In a cyclic view of both history and literature, stories are at the core of humans building blocks. As the Crakers learn to create their own stories, both novels leave room for speculation on how human culture will develop after the encounter of these two different, but seemingly human, species.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Language has been a common theme in dystopias, either as a form of controlling people's lives (In a coercive force of a totalitarian regime, in the oversimplification of words in a corporate culture, etc.) or a way for dissident citizens to express themselves. Ildney Cavalcanti has pointed out to the way women's dystopian writings have presented the issue of language in its core:

Contemporary feminist dystopias overtly thematize the linguistic construction of gender domination by telling stories about language as instrument of both (men's) domination and (women's) liberation. . . . Women's resistance is observed in these fictions in terms of the strategies they develop to evade a dystopic linguistic order by means of the construction of what I have termed utopias of and off language. ("Utopias of/f")

Language can become a utopian space in a dystopian world, a way to escape a terrible reality and create a better one, but it is, in my view, mainly a way to survive in a hostile environment. It is through language that characters in many dystopias – not only Atwood's, but also by other authors such as Jeanette Winterson, Octavia Butler and Suzette Haden Elgin – are able to survive. This survival is a way to deal emotionally and even physically with a terrible situation and is also a manner to oppose the *status quo*. Throughout this thesis, I propose that, in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, storytelling is a means of survival for the protagonists.

When Snowman narrates his life in *Oryx and Crake*, he is doing so in order to maintain his sanity and deal with his guilt, being thus capable of surviving emotionally in his environment. His mythmaking to the Crakers, however, more than providing him with a way to understand his own personal history, is a tool for surviving physically. In *The Year of the*

Flood, Toby uses Adam One's speeches to obtain the necessary knowledge to survive mentally and physically – she keeps track of the days, of her sanity, and is able to cultivate and find food – while Ren experiences the pleasures and dangers of storytelling in the pre- and post-catastrophe worlds. Moreover, these characters are the last survivors of a culture and their stories of the end of the world allow human culture to still exist. In the end, stories constitute what is left of humans.

The notions of dystopia and utopia, storytelling and the role of language, and survival conflate in this thesis. Throughout the chapters, I aimed at analyzing these notions in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* and at showing how they appeared in each novel, comparing and contrasting their meanings in the complex web of information Atwood provides in her dystopian world. By introducing the reading of the novels as counterparts, I focused on the multiple levels of the conceptions of dystopia and utopia as well as on the different meanings of storytelling and their relation to the theme of survival in the two works. I believe this strategy stresses the plurality of meanings of both storytelling and survival rather than restricting them to a simplistic analysis of cause and consequence. My main objective in relating storytelling and survival in Atwood's novels' dystopian scenarios is to consider the many ways these two themes are approached in the novels and to show that the relation between storytelling and survival is established in at least three levels in the chosen texts: 1) in their self-reflexive quality – the way they are, even though in different ways, novels about the artifice of telling stories; 2) in their depiction of a dystopian reality, in which storytelling is an important counter-narrative and; 3) in their revision of apocalypse, in which storytelling is, at the same time, what makes human survival possible and what is left of humans.

Both narratives portray the consequences and impacts a highly capitalist culture has on people. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* are texts about how storytelling is used

as a means of survival but they are also about what happens if storytelling is forgotten by society. The critique to our own world is present as it is in most dystopian works. The two texts provoke a reflection upon the values of our society by means of extrapolating the tendencies of nowadays reality. The conclusion of such critique is a bleak scenario in which, paradoxically, the absence of storytelling causes the destruction of humanity but, concurrently, storytelling is the tool that makes a new beginning for humans possible.

MaddAddam, the third novel in Atwood's trilogy, points to the ways in which storytelling creates utopian scenarios. Toby is the prominent focalized character in this volume, which presents different characters in their own acts of storytelling in the post-apocalyptic setting. But rather than a conclusion, *MaddAddam* provides again multiple possibilities and another open ending, more hopeful than the previous novels, but still Atwoodianly ambivalent and ambiguous. In my view, this novel does not jeopardize my interpretation of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* as counterpart novels. Moreover, the 2013 novel may be better analyzed as a sequel rather than providing a counterpart reading. Even though some episodes from the previous two novels are mentioned – such as the rupture between Adam One and Zeb –, they are not completely resolved and are not the major aspect of the novel, which focuses on a new threat to humans and Crakers: the Pigoons, bioengineered pigs with human brain tissues.

The need for storytelling pervades *MaddAddam* as well, although in a different way: the Crakers finally start developing their own stories and presenting their own questionings of their mythology. Toby, as the main focalized character and storyteller, also provides an intriguing narrative vantage point that switches perspectives, presenting multiple characters perspectives inside her narrative, some of them true, some of them false, some of them utterly ambiguous. The narrative is a fabric of stories held together and the reader has to step into them, trying to find his or her pattern. Survival again underlines these stories, but a new kind

of survival, the one related to war expectations, appears. This latter text contributes differently to the critical dystopian scenario created by the Canadian author. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* together can provide a critical analysis of a social system and the counterpart reading of these two novels make it possible. *MaddAddam* is the “what happens next” part of the story and, as Susan Watkins remarks, apocalyptic writing by contemporary women “uses sequels to generate new, gendered ideas about time, narrative, and history” (119). Studying the interconnections of storytelling, dystopia, and survival in this new novel as well as how *MaddAddam* positions its counter-narratives is certainly a task for a future research.

In this thesis, I trace a pattern related to Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, proposing that storytelling is linked to the notion of survival. As I argue, each novel thematizes storytelling and survival in a diverse manner. In *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman’s movement towards storytelling is what makes him survive, preserving his sanity. His failure in his attempt to tell a story straightforwardly exposes the building blocks of the act of telling stories. On the other hand, *The Year of the Flood* portrays women attempting to regain their agency through the act of telling their own stories. They share their experiences orally in a world that devalues such interaction. Moreover, they are able to survive apocalypse because they learn how to survive because of the oral tales they listen to. In this sense, storytelling works as a way to convey knowledge of survival.

Storytelling works as survival in multiple levels of the narratives in both novels. One might say that so it is in relation to other speculative fiction by women, namely the ones mentioned along this thesis. This realization leads me to consider why storytelling has become a recurrent theme in contemporary speculative fiction by women. A possible answer may be that storytelling makes it possible the survival of the sharing of experience. As Walter Benjamin observes in “The Storyteller,” the act of joining in to listen to a story which has

ultimately something useful to a given community reaches an end with Modernity (86). Stories are then considered as not factual and not verifiable, whereas information is. Speculative fiction by women writers now turn back to storytelling to question what the social consequences of this disregard for oral tales are, somehow extrapolating on Benjamin's assertions about the end of telling stories. In futuristic or apocalyptic scenario, these writers pose the matter of storytelling as a key factor for the constitution of humanity. A privileged focus on science and factual information is often portrayed as a path to destruction and ruin. The sharing of experience, rather than an unreliable form of knowledge, is revalued as an everlasting conductor of knowledge. Analyzing the ways in which Atwood and other women authors reconsider the social implications of storytelling is an intriguing topic for future academic investigation.

It may be interesting to conclude my argument on the relation of storytelling and survival in Atwood's dystopian scenario invoking the image of the game Blood and Roses, the monopoly-like pastime of Jimmy and Crake in *Oryx and Crake*. In this trading game, one may trade an achievement of humanity for a catastrophe, thus being able to avoid it. Nonetheless, as Jimmy, and later on as his persona, Snowman, remarks ironically, the Blood player usually wins but "winning meant you inherited a wasteland" (81). In the end of *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman lists the major catastrophes of the world when he is about to encounter other human beings, but he also imagines the prospective future, sharing a story with them. In a similar vein, in *The Year of the Flood*, both Blood and Roses are together by the fire: the rapists and murderers Painballers sitting side by side with the compassionate rescuers Toby and Ren. Willing or not, they share their experiences.

Ambivalent as they may be, stories allow survival in this hostile world. Stories encompass both the Blood and the Roses of humankind and it is precisely because of that that they should not be forgotten. Surviving does not mean the erasure of the past, but rather a

rewriting of it, a different way to (re)create it. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, in their own manner, are novels about this act of re(telling) the world and thus being able to survive in it.

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