

Plato's ideal society in oryx and crake



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Stories are an important part of society, an element that provides humanity with a way to connect, separate, cry, laugh, be happy or be sad. In fact, life is nothing but a story. Human history is a story. The universe is just a massive collection of stories that make up one big dissertation that put you into the current position of reading this compilation of ideas on this paper. The stories that create human history are not only influenced by events, but also by myths. Myths are sacred stories that are not to be taken literally and influence individual everyday decisions that people make. They convey an idea that an author or storyteller considers important, an explanation of why something is the way it is, or how people should act. These myths attempt to show how people should go about certain situations. Plato realized the importance of these myths and made sure the population in his ideal society is given a mythology to protect them, which is exemplified in the novel *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood.

We know that Plato considers the relationship between people and the myths they are taught important because, in *The Republic*, it is written “‘ About gods, then,’ I said ‘ such, it seems, are the things that should and should not be heard, from childhood on, by men who would honor gods and ancestors and not take lightly their friendship with each other,’”(386a). This means that people know the power of the relationship between gods and mythology and the decisions they make. The heroes of mythology show how to obtain glory, popularity, and fame. Plato knows that people want these things, so he does not trust them to interpret the myths correctly, for instead, they will interpret them in a way that makes them feel good, which might not be the way the myth was supposed to be depicted. There could be an overarching

theme in a story of a good thing, such as forgiveness, but if the hero seeks revenge on someone in the story on their way to learning forgiveness, people could misunderstand the purpose of the story and act vengefully.

A considerable reason that people won't understand stories is symbolism. Plato does not think that people will understand symbolism in stories, due to the fact that symbolism, while usually having a specific meaning, has room for interpretation, for different symbolic ideas may mean different things to different people due to differences in experience and perspective. In the novel, Jimmy recalls " Watch out for art, Crake used to say. As soon as they start doing art, we're in trouble." (361). Art, a form of symbolism, would lead to everything Crake had done to destroy. Art, which is considered by many a means of expression, is a form of worship in Crake's mind. Making something more beautiful than it really is, or causing it to represent an idea would flirt with the creation of gods, idols, new mythology other than what Snowman has taught them, afterlife, war, and so on. Symbolism is especially troubling due to the idea that people have difficulty realizing what symbolism truly represents. In the novel, it says " They's struggled with pictures at first - flowers on beach-trash lotion bottles, fruits on juice cans. Is it real? No, it is not real. What is this not real? Not real can tell us about real," (102). The Crakers do not understand the connections between what's real, and what represents real, which leads to misinterpretation of just about anything symbolic, which would be bad for the Crakers in the eyes of Crake.

Plato also explains that stories must be carefully told, for he says "" And we must, further, also throw out all those terrible and fearful names applied to this domain: Cocytus, Styx, ' those below,' ' the withered dead,' and all the

other names that are part of this model and which make all those who hear them shiver, as is thought," (387b). This suggests that the quintessential society must be fed their stories with care, and one reason for this is that the heroes of these stories that the people look up to must do heroic things, such as be kind, protect, and forgive. If the heroes are doing these actions, it encourages the population to do such actions. Bad actions, such as seeking revenge, retaliation, and hate will encourage behavior that is not beneficial for society. This leads to an important concept in Plato's myth making, which is trust. Plato does not trust myth makers to create myths that portray heroes in an entirely positive light. The myths must also be easy to comprehend and be told with precision and consistency, which is shown after Snowman explains how the Crakers came to be. The novel says " Snowman learned [internal consistency is best] earlier in his life when lying had posed more of a challenge for him. Now even when he's caught in a minor contradiction he can make it stick," (96). This shows the difficulty in creating these stories, and how Snowman has to remember every little detail he includes in every one of his stories. When he messes up, like when he tells the Crakers to " piss off", or when he mentions toast, he gets upset because he knows that they do not know of these phrases, and has to scramble to explain things in a way that would make sense to the Crakers. The difficulty of making these stories is no small task and requires great trust. Crake trusts Snowman to take care of the Crakers and follow his rules about speaking to the Crakers. Plato's lack of trust seems justified in the novel because Snowman thinks " These people were like blank pages, he could write whatever he wanted on them," (Atwood 349). This represents the fact that people are gullible and will believe just about anything someone tells them

and giving someone such power begins to make them myth maker seem more like a god than the gods in their stories.

Plato also discusses the importance of guardians not fearing death. He says “ Do you suppose anyone who believes Hades’ domain exists and is full of terror will be fearless in the face of death and choose death in battles above defeat and slavery?,” (386b). If guardians fear death, they will not be brave or bold, and the people will not either, for they will mimic their leaders. Those who go into battle will not win due to fear of death, and a potential enemy could overcome them and potentially take over the city. The kind of protection that is driving civilization away from fear is explored in the novel. When the Crakers ask about the deeds of Crake, Snowman explains that “ In the chaos, everything was mixed together. There were too many people, and the people were all mixed up with the dirt... The people in the chaos were full of chaos themselves, and the chaos made them do bad things. They were killing other people all the time... They ate [the Children of Oryx] even when they weren’t hungry,” (103). Snowman does not want to lie, so he tells a kind of twisted truth. The Crakers are asking for the events that Crake decreed, but instead, he gives is a symbolic truth about values, about how Crake felt, and the truth about why Crake did what he did. Snowman has to do this because he does not want to plant seeds of fear in the minds of the Crakers. This is interesting because Snowman creates a loophole in Plato’s logic of guardians. Plato’s believes that if a leader is fearful, then the people will also be fearful.

However, if the people are not aware that their leader is fearful, they will not be afraid. This is exactly what Snowman does. He knows that if the Crakers

are aware of his fear, they will be afraid also, so to keep the Crakers from being afraid, he masks his fear and puts up a wall of false confidence that convinces the Crakers to not be afraid. He understands that he can't both be fearful and lead the Crakers well, so not being afraid will allow the Crakers to retain confidence in their leader. When the Crakers ask what the dead bodies are when they revisit the compound, Snowman shields the Crakers from his fear again, saying "[the bodies are] part of the chaos. Crake and Oryx are clearing away the chaos, for you, - because they love you - but they haven't quite finished yet," (352). Snowman fears the unknown, which is represented by the bodies of Oryx and Crake, so in order to keep the Crakers from feeling the same way, he tells them another twisted truth. They are asking about what the physical bodies are, but he instead gives them an answer that tells them what the bodies represent, which the Crakers take literally. Had he told the truth, it would hurt the dynamic between the Crakers and Snowman, which would hurt the society of the Crakers tremendously, for they would have no structure or explanations without a leader to provide them. It is also important to note that an ideal society is entirely dependant on perspective. Plato's ideal society is perfect for just one person: Plato. He took what he found best in society and removed what he thought was bad. Crake did the same thing. He was clearly the only one who thought his society was ideal because every person that survived to see the Crakers found them far from ideal.

Stories will always be an important part of society, and their significance can't be ignored. The stories are extra important in Plato's vision of an ideal society because he does not believe that people will comprehend them

correctly and must ensure that the messages the stories have been straightforward and timeless. The difficulties of this are demonstrated throughout the novel *Oryx and Crake*, implying that while the theory of Plato's society is sound, in practice, all societies are flawed, and when you try to fix those flaws, more flaws emerge. The guardians of the people must also not be fearful of death, for it will create problems between the relationship between the guardians and the people. Mythology plays a big part in the ideal societies of both Plato and Crake.