

Views on the
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The relationship between society and the individual is presented in powerfully differing ways in the novels *Oryx and Crake*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and *The Woman in the Dunes*. While Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* shows how the individual views society as a source of sadistic entertainment or wealth, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* shows a relationship in which society rejects the individual. In turn, Kobo Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes* shows a relationship in which society forces the individual into servitude. *Oryx and Crake* presents a society in which individuals living in the time before "the flood" (this story's apocalypse) have lost all sense of social ethics. The prevailing theme in this society seems to be sadism (in a non-sexual way); the major forms of entertainment for people involve the enjoyment of human suffering. The best examples of this are the two primary forms of entertainment that Crake and Jimmy enjoy in their youth: Internet games and Internet shows. Games such as "Barbarian Stomp," "Blood and Roses," and "Extinctathon" all pit society on one side and utter destruction on the other, with the side of utter destruction usually winning (77-81). Their enjoyment of such games shows the appeal that death and destruction have to individuals in this society. The example of their Internet shows, however, is even more disturbing. Whereas the games Crake and Jimmy play are fantasy, the shows they watch are not. Shows such as "Felicia's Frog Squash," "hedsoff.com," and "deathrowlive.com" all display acts of violence inflicted on real people for the entertainment of the viewer (82-83). And there is such a high demand for these shows that Crake suspects that some of the executions are staged; he says that "the viewers wanted to see the executions, yes, but after a while

these could get monotonous” (83). Individuals in this society have reached such a high level of corruption that acts of real violence have to be manufactured in order to meet demand. Aside from the enjoyment of violence, these individuals have also reached a new level of sexual depravity. Even a simple thing such as viewing the news has to have some level of sexual stimulation to keep people entertained; for this, there is the “Noodie News,” a news show in which all of the anchors are completely naked (81). The worst example of sexual depravity comes in the form of a website called “HottTots,” where tourists are filmed “doing things they’d be put in jail for back in their home countries” (89). The videos involve children as young as eight performing sexual acts for the entertainment of the viewer; one only has to be 18 to legally view these websites, though Jimmy and Crake are able to get around this speed bump to view the content at an even younger age. Another major theme in *Oryx and Crake* is elitism. Just as the individual in Jimmy and Crake’s society has lost all appreciation for the value of human life, so too has the upper class lost all empathy for the lower class. Society is now divided into two classes: the elites, who live in the protective paradise of the compounds, and the plebans, who live in crowded, diseased, and dirty cities. The elites of this society view the lower class as a way to make money, no matter the cost to human life. The most disgusting example of this is the corporation “HelthWyzer.” This company develops cures for diseases, but at some point in history, they ran into a problem: they figured out that if they cured all of the diseases, they would no longer generate any profit. In order to remedy this problem, they began hiding new, man-made diseases in the vitamins they sold to the pleband population;

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once the virus exploded into the population, they released an antidote onto the market — but in limited quantities “ so they’re guaranteed high profits” (211). What is most terrifying about the sadistic and morally corrupt individuals of Oryx and Crake is that their unethical characteristics can be found in real-life society today. People are already enthralled by violence in entertainment and games, and there are plenty of real websites where one can go to see horrible violence, physical and sexual, inflicted on real human beings. And that is the ultimate claim of Oryx and Crake: that human beings do not value the lives of other human beings. The text poses the questions: is the society shown in Oryx and Crake the inevitable endpoint for our own society? And is humanity sadistic by nature? The text believes so, and its answer to this problem is the ultimate example of the devaluation of human life: Crake’s decision that mankind is too imperfect and cruel to continue, and must be wiped out and replaced. Another book rife with different human relationships is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The most interesting relationship in the book is that between Oscar Wao and society. One of many questions that this text asks us is, can an individual who is unable to form a positive relationship with society survive? The text shows us that a person who does not fit into society’s standards is not valued by society. Oscar is the quintessential nerd, growing up in a time when there was nothing cool about being a nerd; he loves to watch anime (*Robotech* and *Akira*); he loves to play role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*; he is overweight, unathletic, and unattractive. He is unable to understand and follow social rules. He speaks in a way that is unacceptable to society, using words found only in dictionaries or comic books. Worst of all, because of his social

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awkwardness, he is never able to interact with woman, a problem that constantly weighs on his soul. In addition to being ostracized by society as nerd and a gamer, Oscar is also an outcast because of his race. Because he is of a mixed ethnicity, “ The white kids... treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color... shook their heads. You’re not Dominican” (49). Unfortunately for Oscar, he is unable to fit into the standards of society in any way. It seems that the text is trying to show us that society itself is unethical in its harsh treatment of those who do not fit its mold. This rejection by society so upsets Oscar that he feels forced to take drastic measures to eliminate the pain. He becomes so depressed and downtrodden by his status as an outsider that he tries to take his own life. This becomes somewhat paradoxical in trying to find an answer to our original question; had Oscar succeeded in taking his own life, then society would have won, and the answer would be that rejection by society is an individual’s death sentence. Fortunately, at least in this story, the individual is not killed by his rejection and is able to live on. Unfortunately, Oscar does end up losing his life by the end of the story. Instead of losing his life out of depression, however, Oscar is able to find his own strength and stand up for what he believes in. In the end, Oscar is able to transcend his rejection by society and accept himself for who he is. However, he does have a little bit of help in doing this by finally having a relationship with a woman. It seems, then, that an individual can survive without a positive relationship with society in general, but not if he or she is entirely alone; people must have some sort of positive human relationship to help them. Oscar’s final letter, which is delivered to Yuniore after his death, ends with a reference to Joseph Conrad’s

Heart of Darkness. But instead of quoting the famous words of Kurtz, Oscar proclaims, "The beauty! The beauty!" (355). By the end of the story, Oscar is able to get out of the wilderness of the society that has rejected him and find the beauty in the wild of his own individuality. The primary human relationship in *The Woman in the Dunes* is presented through the story's use of utilitarianism. The story of Niki Jumpei is the story of what happens to an individual when he is forced by society into a life he does not want. At the beginning of the story, Niki has unknowingly been trapped in a society that places no value on the individual. The village does what is best for most of its inhabitants at the cost of a small minority group, who are forced to live in holes and keep the village from being overrun by the ever-encroaching dunes of sand. Niki realizes this but does not agree with it; his mentality is that an individual's ultimate responsibility is to himself, whereas the villagers see the plight of the individual as unimportant when compared to the plight of the group. Niki continues to resist the whims of the villagers, but after they withhold water from him, he concedes to the labor he has been forced into. This is the beginning of his descent into acceptance of his new life. He begins to rationalize his new existence by thinking that "work seemed something fundamental for man, something which enabled him to endure the aimless flight of time" (158). This is the message that the text is trying to convey: man, when forced into an existence he does not originally want, will eventually accept that existence. Though Niki begins to lose his rebellious spirit, he still seeks to return to his old life outside of the hole. This culminates in one ultimate jailbreak, though it is an unsuccessful one that ends with his capture and return to the hole. But even after this failure, he

still desires some semblance of his old life and requests of his captors that he be able to leave the hole once in a while to see the world outside. They agree to allow certain concessions if Niki will have sex with the woman he is stuck with while they watch. This is another main point of the text: when there is one group that is subjugated by another as harshly as Niki and the woman are in this utilitarian system, the elite group's own authority causes them to see the subjugated group as subhuman, and the subjugated group loses its humanity; therefore, this type of human relationship is an unethical one. This is exemplified by page 230 of the text, in which Niki attempts to rape the woman at the whims of those above just so he will be able to leave the hole once in awhile. After this final failure of attempted escape, more time passes, but without any attempts by Niki to get out of the hole. He still thinks of escaping, but these desires have become a sort of intangible dream; he has lost the fervor for freedom that he once possessed. At the end of the book, Niki is briefly allowed to leave the hole, but he is so used to his life in the dunes that the air above stings his throat, and the ocean appears unappealing to him (238-239). Despite this glance of freedom, all he can think about is returning back to his life in the hole. This is the final message of the text: when groups of humans are valued so little by another, they will eventually become complaisant and compliant and accept their lot in life as slaves. Each of these three stories presents a different view of the relationship between society and the individual. Unfortunately, all of these relationships seem to present a clash between the two. One is left wondering if this theme, so prevalent in contemporary literature, is a sign of the times:

is society today as immoral, destructive, and cruel to the individual as these texts make it seem?