

# Oryx and crake margaret atwood literature review examples

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



## **A Critical Paper**

Oryx and Crake by Margaret Atwood was first published in 2003; the novel is a dystopian vision of world in the not-too-distant future in which humanity has been almost destroyed through a combination of careless and self-centred scientific practices and moral corruption. Like most dystopian fiction (indeed, like Atwood's own *The Handmaid's Tale*), the novel works less as a neat prediction of the future, but an urgent warning about our contemporary society and controversial issues within it. Ultimately, then the novel is less a futuristic nightmare than a satire on current developments in bio-science and in the world of technology, as well as poking fun at some age-old human characteristics.

The central character of the novel is called Snowman and it is from his point of view that we see the events. He also reminisces about the past and at the end of the novel we work out why humanity has ceased to exist. It has been exterminated by Snowman's childhood friend, Glenn Crake, who has manufactured a plague in a high-tech bio-laboratory and unleashed it on the world. His work already involves the creation of new diseases so that his employers can profit by selling the antidote or vaccine to wholly new diseases. Atwood seems to be implying that large pharmaceutical companies are obsessed with profit, not altruism. He has also created hybrid species which roam the landscape threatening Snowman and the Crakers – humanoids who have been genetically modified by Crake. The Crakers have been developed so that they have no tendencies to be racially prejudiced, religious, sexually predatory or aggressive. In this sense they might be seen as an improvement on human beings but they have a strange, off-putting

appearance and mark their territory like dogs by urinating. Atwood seems to be sending warning signals about genetic engineering and its potential risks.

Glenn has clearly tried to play God with humanity – with disastrous consequences.

However, she clearly has other contemporary targets. In the world before the plague that Snowman (real name Jimmy) remembers in an attempt to work out where things went wrong, ordinary people lived in the cities, called Pleeblands, while the talented and gifted lived in gated communities, isolated from their fellow human beings. Atwood seems to be criticizing social isolation and division. As young men Jimmy and Glenn have bonded over appallingly violent internet web-sites – some devoted to capital punishment or to suicide – which is alarming and disturbing. Indeed, the woman they both love – Oryx – is one they have first encountered through her work as a star of internet pornography.

Snowman struggles to keep himself alive and is not a shining example of humanity: “ He does stink.... He’s rank, he’s gamy....” (7). Ironically, he acts as a mentor and teacher to the Crakers, trying to educate them about the past – before the plague. In their turn they seem to treat him as a minor deity or sage and bring him weekly food offerings. In turn he creates a mythology for them involving Crake (who, after all did create them) and Oryx. This mythology is slightly disturbing, I feel, because the Crakers had been created without any propensity towards religion, but Snowman seems to be pushing them towards one. The book ends with premonitions of worse to come: the Crakers start to exhibit signs of ambition and a desire for social hierarchy – the very things that Crake had tried to eliminate through bio-

engineering.

I found this novel fascinating in its depiction of a possible future and its implied criticism of our own society. However, I felt that Crake was not very well developed as a character and struck me as a plot device. In a similar way Oryx remained rather a mystery. The ending too is inconclusive: having assumed that he was the only human to survive the plague, Snowman discovers towards the end of the novel that other humans survived: he tracks them down, intending to kill them, but we are left wondering what he will do as he is torn on the very last page between killing them or letting them live. This might make a good starting point for discussion – Does Snowman kill the humans he discovers at the end of the novel? – but made for an ending that I found inconclusive.

## **Work Cited**

Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*. 2003. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. Print.