Teacher's Guide for *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood
St. Cloud State University Common Reading Program 2015-16
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Oryx and Crake is a novel that lends itself to study by many disciplines. Because Margaret Atwood is meticulous in her effort to base details of her story on scientific processes currently being researched or produced in labs around the world, her work is also of value in the sciences and social sciences. So while English instructors will find Atwood's work interesting from a literary perspective, instructors in the sciences will find the novel valuable to help students focus on the potential consequences of genetic experimentation and allow them the opportunity to discuss ethics and research. Instructors in the social sciences will be interested in the ways her work addresses questions of class and social strata, as well as raises fundamental themes of human nature and society.

About the author

Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) is an award-winning Canadian author who has published fourteen novels and numerous collections of poems and short stories. Many of her novels, including *Oryx and Crake*, are what Atwood refers to as speculative fiction. Texts in this genre take their inspiration from things that have happened or are currently happening, and then allow them to play out in often disturbing ways. In doing so, they ask readers to think about the implications of contemporary technologies, political philosophies, and social mores. Atwood maintains an active presence on the Internet, especially Twitter and Facebook, where she regularly interacts with her readers and fans.

Margaret Atwood's Official Website: http://margaretatwood.ca/
Margaret Atwood on *Oryx and Crake* as Speculative Fiction:
http://archive.tvo.org/video/164665/margaret-atwoods-oryx-and-crake

Primary characters

The importance of naming and renaming is illustrated throughout the novel by the primary characters' names. Naming echoes Adam and Eve.

Jimmy/Snowman: Jimmy is the protagonist of the book who has renamed himself Snowman shortened from the abominable Snowman. The novel is told from his point of view from the current time when he is Snowman to his memories of his past when he was still Jimmy. In the online-game Extinctathon, Jimmy has the codename Thickney which his best friend Crake picked for Jimmy after an extinct bird, but unlike Crake, the name Thickney falls away. A mid-range student in high school, he has strong verbal abilities which are not appreciated. He attends Martha Graham Academy, a falling apart liberal arts college as the liberal arts are no longer appreciated. After graduating with a degree in Problematics, he works for several years as an advertisement writer for AnooYoo, a company/compound specializing in self-improvement. Jimmy grows unhappy with the work and his life. Crake helps him get a new job

at RejoovenEsense, the high end pharmaceutical company/compound where Crake works. His new position is to do the ad campaign for BlyssPluss, a drug to increase sexual performance, protect against sexually transmitted diseases, prolong youth and act as male and female birth control to lower the world's population.

Glenn/Crake: Crake is Jimmy's best friend. They become friends in high school and fill their free time with online-games, surfing the web, and looking at online porn. Originally known as Glenn, he takes on the name Crake in Extinctathon, one of the online-games he plays with Jimmy. He keeps this name throughout the book. He is a brilliant and disturbed man. He graduates top of his high school class, he goes onto a prestigious college, Watson-Crick Institute, and becomes a talented geneticist. He works at one of the most powerful pharmaceutical companies/compounds, RejoovenEsense, where his unit is called Paradice and works on immortality through two major initiatives, the first being the BlyssPluss Pill. The second is the creation of a new species of humanoids, the Children of Crake or Crackers.

Oryx: Oryx is a mysterious woman whom both Jimmy and Crake love. Born in a poor village, her mother sells her to a man who uses her and other children to make money selling flowers to tourists in an unknown city. Later, she is sold to participate in pornographic movies. A man sees her online and buys her. He moves her to San Francisco where he and his wife keep her locked in the garage until authorities free her and order him to send her to school. Crake hires her when he was in college for her sexual services requesting someone who resembled a girl who Jimmy and Crake saw on a pornographic site when they were teenagers. Jimmy believes that the adult Oryx is the same person as that girl, though Oryx never confirms this for him. Crake later hires her again, but this time to be a teacher for the Crackers to explain simple concepts and communicate with them. She also markets BlyssPluss globally for Crake. Jimmy and Oryx become lovers despite Oryx's romantic relationship with Crake.

Narrative structure

The narrative structure of *Oryx and Crake*, which switches regularly between Snowman's present and Jimmy's past, can make following the plot a challenge. As with several other of her novels, Atwood includes multiple narrative threads in *Oryx and Crake*. In this case, one thread follows Snowman as he tries to make sense of what his once-sheltered world has become, and another traces Jimmy's development from young boy to adult.

It might be helpful for readers to think of the Snowman thread as the primary narrative, which in turn frames the secondary, digressive narrative of Jimmy's development that unfolds through a series of flashbacks. The two threads aren't separate, though, but instead intertwine in ways that provide crucial insight into the story as a whole. Their intimate pairing allows Atwood to explore the dystopian world she has created in a more complex and fully realized way.

The emotional intensity and focus on relationships found in the digressive narrative might be explained by Snowman's isolation. The harsh conditions of the world he finds himself in make him long for human contact, safety, and comfort. Since he can't find any of these in his miserable present, he retreats to the past, even when his memories are painful. That pain

attends both positive memories, which make him feel even more alone when he returns, and also the recollection of behavior he regrets.

For the first six chapters, most of the action occurs in the secondary narrative, which follows an essentially linear path. Beginning in Chapter Seven, though, the primary narrative begins to take on a more concrete shape. Driven by hunger and a need for weapons, but also perhaps by a desire to return to the epicenter of the global epidemic, Snowman sets out for Paradice, the birthplace of the Crakers. We can understand the structure of the primary narrative from this point on as a quest, a narrative form with a millennia-old tradition. Quest narratives generally follow one or more protagonists as they try to accomplish a goal – for example, rescuing a family member or retrieving a valuable object – and then return home again safely. The path to complete the objective is full of obstacles and challenges that the protagonist or protagonists must overcome.

The flashbacks continue throughout Snowman's quest, though, and as the reader learns more about Jimmy's complex relationship with Crake and Oryx, it becomes clear why this particular journey is so fraught. In the end, Snowman/Jimmy is forced to confront his own complicity in the spread of the epidemic, and also in the deaths of his two closest friends.

Chronological timeline of Jimmy's Life: http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/440513/Jimmys-Life/

Note to Teachers: Triggers, Language, Mature Themes

Oryx and Crake is not a children's or a YA book, and it includes themes and scenes that may be triggers for some people. In particular, the novel addresses sex trafficking and teenagers' sexual, drinking and drug-taking activities as well as language that might offend some people.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a critical term drawing our attention to the ways in which texts quote, refer to, and influence each other. Here are some examples of ways in which Atwood plays with other texts in *Oryx and Crake*:

- "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten these little hands" (*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene i). Lady Macbeth utters these words in a maddened, guilty state as she recalls the murders of Duncan, Banquo, and others in a semi-conscious state.
- The Bible, especially the Garden of Eden and the story of Noah and the flood
- Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the "God complex"

Other dystopian texts students might be familiar with include *Divergent*, *The Giver*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Lord of the Flies*, *Ender's Game*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Many dystopian works assume that we have read other dystopias, especially the early and most famous ones.

Traditions in Literature and Film

Utopianism and Dystopianism

When describing his Paradice project, Crake explains to Jimmy that his goal is to create a new and improved human race, a race freed from violence, hierarchy, and territorialism, and whose members can live a self-sustaining existence indefinitely (305). The impulse to construct a perfect, peaceful world is often defined as utopian, and has a history dating back millennia. The biblical Garden of Eden is one such utopian space, as is the Republic that Plato imagines in the fourth century BCE. But the word *utopia* itself does not appear until 1516, when Thomas More coins it to serve as the name for an imaginary island nation that appears, like the future earth of Crake's vision, to have solved all of the world's problems. Study of the etymology of the word *utopia* reveals three parts, all taken from Greek: *u-topos-ia*, which translates literally into English as "not-place-place." Critics believe that More included the second "place" to both affirm and deny the existence of Utopia: it is a "not-place" that is also a "place." So while today, a *utopia* typically refers to a perfect society, one that has addressed all of humanity's problems, for More, it simply referred to meant a place that might or might not exist. But he complicates that idea almost immediately in *Utopia* by also referring to the island as a *eutopia*, a "good-place-place," which is the likely origin of the positive connotations of the term *utopia* in the present day.

The opposite of a eutopia is *dystopia*, or "bad-place-place," which imagines the flipside of perfect, well-functioning societies. Dystopias, which emerge in literature in the late eighteenth century and then flourish in the wake of the first two World Wars, often describe nations ruled by totalitarian governments that suppress individuality and use fear, brutality, and surveillance to keep their populations in line. George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, which depicts Winston Smith's failed attempt to break free of a violent, oppressive regime, is among the clearest examples of the genre. Orwell's Oceania, one of three global superpowers, is overseen by Big Brother, a political figurehead who demands the unquestioning loyalty and abject self-sacrifice of his people in service of a greater good. That good is only perceived, though, since the daily life of the citizens of Oceania is marked by extreme shortages of food and supplies, slave-like labor, and the constant threat of being beaten or killed for non-compliance with an uncompromising set of rules and regulations.

Curiously, many of the concepts central to the dystopia can be found in Thomas More's *Utopia*, which similarly suggests that achieving perfection on a societal level requires a rigid and uncompromising governmental force. It also depended on the work of a slave class made up of foreigners and criminals to function as designed. The overlap between perfection and despair in this and other texts suggests that the line between utopia and dystopia is blurrier than might be assumed, and disturbingly, that a utopia can only be achieved by subjugating the will of some or all of its population.

This blurred line appears in *Oryx and Crake*, as well. To make room for the ostensibly perfect, peaceful race he has worked so hard to create, Crake must completely destroy the human population he has come to despise, and whose members he has deemed unworthy to live in his

new society. In a sense, then, he acts like God in the story of Noah, wiping everyone away with a flood not of water but of pharmaceuticals.

Apocalyptic or Millennialist Narratives

All cultures through all of history have made stories about the imminent end of the world, especially civilization. How the world comes to an end is always more meaningful in these stories than the fact that it does. Apocalyptic science fiction began to appear after the development of the "atomic" bomb and the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The many 20th-century fictional treatments of nuclear holocaust indicate cultural anxieties about our relationship with nuclear power and nuclear weapons, as well as, perhaps, a sense of guilt or responsibility for the damage done. Different cultures express different anxieties: for an obvious example, Japanese apocalyptic literature from the second half of the 20th century differs in telling ways from works made in the United States.

Since then, however, apocalyptic narratives have the world end in different ways, depending on what we're worried about at the time. For example, apocalyptic narratives have been written about pandemics (of infectious diseases), invasion by extra-terrestrial beings, and environmental collapse and, most recently, takeover by zombies. Surprisingly common are stories of the world being destroyed by flood, present both in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (2,000-1,500 BCE) as well as Genesis in the Bible, the Torah, and the Koran.

While apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives became most popular after World War II, we can see clear instances both in Early Christian literature as well as after the Industrial Revolution, especially the early 19th century, when *Frankenstein* was written.

Technically, narratives written about the world after civilization has collapsed are called post-apocalyptic.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, and the entire Maddaddam series, expresses anxiety instead about environmental damage, especially that caused by genetic engineering.

Vocabulary

Among Margaret Atwood’s gifts is her striking sense of the nuances of words as well as the amazing size of her vocabulary. Beyond her gift with existing words, however, In *Oryx and Crake*, she creates neologisms (new words), she constructs product and corporation names following the principles commonly used now for naming such things, and she makes portmanteau words (usually by blending parts of two words to make a new one).

Vocabulary within *Oryx and Crake*

Words Found Early in the Novel

Oryx and Crake contains so many neologisms of the various kinds that it has the power and immediacy of novels whose fictional worlds present us with new slang and even languages. Since Atwood uses a number of these words in the first pages of the novel, readers might have

an easier time getting started if they have seen and thought about them before. (The following short lists of words are taken from the full lists in the section immediately after this one.)

From "Advertising Names and Portmanteau Words"

- Brainfrizz (p. 11)
- CorpSeCorps (p. 27)
- Extinctathon (p. 40)
- Kwiktime Osama (p. 40)
- OrganInc (p. 22)
- Pigoons (p. 10)
- Pleebland (p. 27)
- Rakunk (p. 38)
- Sveltana (p. 4)
- Wolvogs (p. 10)

From "Great Words to Know ('SAT Words')"

- Cache (p. 44)
- Cistern (p. 41)
- Crake (p. 7)
- Derelict (p. 45)
- Ersatz (p. 3)
- Feral (p. 38)
- Flotsam (p. 6)
- Oryx (p. 11)
- Pastiche (p. 49)
- Pedagogue (p. 7)
- Repining (p. 45)
- Slaver (p. 42)
- Sluices (p. 44)
- Soothsayer (p. 7)
- Topi (p. 5)

From "Jimmy's Collection ("Obsolete" Words)"

- Doling (p. 50)
- Manticore (p. 7)

From "Technical and Scientific Vocabulary"

- Neural (p. 41)
- Proteonome (p. 22)
- Quotient (p. 42)
- Zenith (p. 39)

From "Slang"

- Loose change (p. 27)
- Neo-con reject (p. 41)
- Nooner (p. 37)

Word Lists

The following lists of words are divided in a way to make it easy to focus on vocabulary development ("Great Words to Know") and on analyses of the novel that focus on the way its language reflects themes and patterns. One key feature of Atwood's imagined future is the lexicon its inhabitants use to refer to the new products, animals, and services available to them. This lexicon is populated with neologisms (from Greek *neo* "new" + *logos* "word"), with a particular emphasis on *portmanteau words*, also known as *blends*, which are made up of two or more existing words. *Brunch* (breakfast + lunch, first coined in 1896) is a good example of a portmanteau word; *muppet* (marionette + puppet; 1955) and *spork* (spoon + fork; 1909) are some others.

Neologisms

- Neogeologicals (p. 200)
- Vulturizing (p. 241)

Advertising Names and Portmanteau Words

- AnooYoo (p. 245)
- BlyssPluss (p. 7)
- Brainfrizz (p. 11)
- ChickieNobs (p. 7)
- CorpSeCorps (p. 27)
- Dermabraded (p. 55)
- Extinctathon (p. 40)
- OrganInc (p. 22)
- Happicuppa (p. 173)
- Helthwyzer (p. 53)
- Hoodroom (p. 71)
- HottTotts (p. 89)
- Kwiktime Osama (p. 40)
- MaddAddam (p. 80)
- Moosonee (p. 178)
- Noodie (p. 81)
- NooSkins (p. 53)
- Paradice (p. 151)
- Parogies (p. 54)
- Pigoons (p. 10)
- Pleebcrawl (p. 283)
- Pleebland (p. 27)
- Rakunk (p. 38)
- RejoovenEsense (p. 151)
- Snat (p. 51)
- SoyOBoy (p. 74)
- Sveltana (p. 4)
- SoYummie (p. 173)
- Ultratexts (p. 71)
- Wolvogs (p. 10)

Great Words to Know ("SAT Words")

- Abattoir (p. 228)
- Aberration (p. 307)
- Adamant (p. 195)
- Adulation (p. 103)
- Affable (p. 155)
- Ambulatory (p. 176)
- Aphasia (p. 261)
- Aphrodisiac (p. 120)
- Arboreal (p. 358)
- Arcane (p. 195)
- Asperger's (p. 192)
- Atrocity (p. 78)
- Atrophying (p. 41)
- Aureole (p. 190)
- Axiom (p. 210)
- Bemoaning (p. 312)
- Berating (p. 312)
- Bonanza (p. 272)
- Bovine (p. 249)
- Broadloom (p. 229)
- Bucolic (p. 276)
- Cache (p. 44)
- Canids (p. 154)
- Capering (p. 72)
- Carrion (p. 229)
- Cerements (p. 327)
- Chiaroscuro (p. 187)
- Cistern (p. 41)
- Colonnade (p. 292)
- Concatenation (p. 327)
- Contingent (p. 71)
- Cosmogony (p. 168)
- Coterie (p. 163)
- Crake (p. 7)
- Crepuscular (p. 190)
- Cretin (p. 237)
- Cretinous (p. 79)
- Cudgel (p. 248)
- Culpable (p. 91)
- Debauched (p. 152)
- Defunct (p. 105)
- Deification (p. 104)
- Demarcation (p. 360)
- Demiurge (p. 224)
- Dendrite (p. 297)
- Derelict (p. 45)
- Derision (p. 307)
- Dibble (p. 261)
- Doldrums (p. 312)
- Dolt (p. 313)
- Drivel (pp. 168, 249)
- Drudge (p. 248)
- Dupe (p. 335)
- Enigma (p. 261)
- Ersatz (p. 3)
- Erstwhile (p. 363)

- Erudite (p. 148)
- Espaliered (p. 150)
- Euphemestic (p. 161)
- Exposition (p. 351)
- Extol (p. 248)
- Fatuous (p. 250)
- Felafels (p. 54)
- Feral (p. 38)
- Ferreting (p. 195)
- Festooned (p. 223)
- Filch (p. 60)
- Flotsam (p. 6)
- Fodder (p. 197)
- Forsaken (p. 312)
- Frivol (p. 335)
- Fungible (p. 327)
- Galling (p. 104)
- Genial (p. 176)
- Gestalt (p. 194)
- Grousing (p. 164)
- Guano (p. 95)
- Harangues (p. 242)
- Ignoramuses (p. 297)
- Ilk (p. 61)
- Incarnadine (p. 85)
- Ingratiate (p. 242)
- Immolate (p. 321)
- Impetuous (p. 77)
- Innocuous (p. 249)
- Integumental (p. 176)
- Intrepid (p. 40)
- Kern (p. 261)
- Knell (p. 261)
- Laconic (p. 75)
- Laryngeal (p. 327)
- Lassitude (p. 59)
- Leitmotif (p. 154)
- Locutions (p. 195)
- Lodestone (p. 195)
- Lovelorn (p. 312)
- Lubricious (pp. 68, 317)
- Mantra (p. 110)
- Masticated (p. 333)
- Maudlin (p. 148)
- Mephitic (p. 148)
- Metronome (p. 148)
- Morose (p. 176)
- Nematodes (p. 278)
- Neologism (p. 250)
- Nihilist (p. 343)
- Nil (p. 177)
- Norn (p. 68)
- Orifice (p. 89)
- Oryx (p. 11)
- Ossified (p. 167)
- Pastiche (p. 49)
- Pedagogue (p. 7)
- Pedant (p. 81)
- Percolating (p. 276)
- Phantasmagoria (p. 222)
- Plangent (p. 246)
- Pibroch (p. 68)
- Poltroon (p. 307)
- Pompous (p. 60)
- Priapism (p. 295)
- Purblind (p. 344)
- Pustulant (p. 169)
- Quagmire (p. 249)
- Quarto (p. 344)
- Rampart (p. 28)
- Rapture (p. 372)
- Raucous (p. 123)
- Repining (p. 45)
- Requisition (p. 62)
- Roughage (p. 159)
- Ruinous (p. 190)
- Saboteurs (p. 211)
- Sacrilegious (p. 57)
- Sadist (p. 174)
- Sage (p. 186)
- Salacious (p. 317)
- Sanctimonious (p. 316)
- Saturnine (p. 195)
- Sere (p. 85)
- Serendipity (p. 68)
- Serf (p. 198)
- Slaver (p. 42)
- Slovenliness (p. 203)

- Sluices (p. 44)
- Soothsayer (p. 7)
- Sublimation (p. 85)
- Sumptuous (p. 317)
- Superfluous (p. 195)
- Synesthesia (p. 244)
- Trellis (p. 149)
- Trill (p. 95)
- Troglodyte (p. 201)
- Truncheons (p. 64)
- Tryst (p. 66)
- Unctuous (p. 317)
- Unguent (p. 317)
- Valance (p. 68)
- Verdant (p. 105)
- Verdure (p. 334)
- Vertigo (p. 147)
- Vestigial (p. 108)
- Vetch (p. 95)
- Vexation (p. 161)
- Vile (p. 60)
- Viscid (p. 260)
- Voluble (p. 74)
- Voluptuous (p. 317)
- Voyeur (p. 339)
- Wheelwright (p. 195)
- Windlestraw (p. 327)
- Yen (p. 209)

Jimmy's Collection ("Obsolete" and Rare Words)

- Alack (p. 261)
- Doling (p. 50)
- Grutch (p. 327)
- Helot (p. 248)
- Leman (p. 312)
- Manticore (p. 7)
- Opsimath (p. 327)
- Prattlement (p. 327)
- Topi (p. 5)
- Trull (p. 327)
- Woad (p. 327)

Technical and Scientific Vocabulary

- Caecotroph (p. 158)
- Coelacanth (p. 81)
- Conspecifics (p. 209)
- Encysted (p. 346)
- Frass (p. 344)
- Gat (p. 261)
- Hemorrhagic (p. 53)
- Hominid (p. 307)
- Iridicytes (p. 95; alternate spelling of *iridocytes*)
- Lithops (p. 199)
- Mastitis (p. 148)
- Mesozoic (p. 39)
- Metatarsal (p. 148)
- Microlens (p. 72)
- Morphology (p. 344)
- Mustelids (p. 154)
- Neural (p. 41)
- Pistic (p. 327)
- Proteonome (p. 22)
- Pullulate (p. 327)
- Quotient (p. 42)
- Thickney (p. 81)
- Transgenic (p. 198)
- Zenith (p. 39)

The technical term *Sus multiorganifer* is derived from Latin and translates literally as "Pig multiple organ carrier": Sus = pig; multi = many; organ; -fer = carrier or bearer (p. 202).

Slang

- Cork-nut (p. 54)
- Kak (p. 80)
- Loose change (p. 27)
- Neo-con reject (p. 41)
- Nooner (p. 37)

Fictional Languages

Atwood's fascination with language, reflected in the character Jimmy's "collection" of words as well as her use of created portmanteau, neologisms, and advertising terms reflects a common aspect of the fantasy and science fiction genres, wherein many authors have developed fictional languages along with their imagined worlds. Here are some examples of fictional works for which writers have developed languages for characters to use:

- Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (Nadsat slang)
- George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Newspeak)
- Ursula LeGuin, *The Dispossessed* (Pravic)
- Marc Okrand, linguist, *Star Trek* (Klingon)
- Will Wright and Marc Gimbel, *Sims* video game series (Simlish)
- J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (the Middle Earth languages, including Elvish)
- Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker*

Themes in *Oryx and Crake*

What follows is a list of key themes in *Oryx and Crake*. Where page numbers are listed they refer to particularly salient passages that address or illustrate these questions and issues.

Primary

Dystopianism

- **Defining Dystopia/Utopia**: Why is the novel setting/society considered a dystopia? Is it a utopia to some?
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- **Morality**: What is wrong or right? How does the continuum work? How can these moral terms be defined in the mind of Jimmy versus Crake with the Paradice Project, for example? Describing Jimmy's mother in terms of her moral compass as compared to his father is highly important and shows differing mentalities (pg. 55-58; 82ff)

Ecology, environmentalism

- **Use of Resources:** How much of the world's resources will we use to sustain ourselves? Can the earth give more to us? How can we respect our environment? The central issue of population increase with not enough resources to go around is one of the reasons Crake designs the Paradice Project and virus (pg. 292-295). The Happicuppa riots are on incident in the book that addresses this theme (pg. 178-181).

- **Tampering with Nature:** How is changing the genetic make-up of multiple organisms affecting the natural order? How does one define what is natural and what is modified? The theme of “natural” evolution vs. “synthetic” evolution is raised by the changes observed in the pigoons over time. Pharmaceutical companies in go beyond creating medicines to genetic engineering, which questions the definition of nature. Is Crake correct when he decides that nothing lies outside the realm of nature, even modifying/engineering humans? (pg. 201-203) This connects with genetic engineering. God’s Gardener’s counter-culture group remains central to this topic as well, as they fight for pure Nature without any human influence or control, a contrast to society’s mainstream.

Genetic engineering

- **Control and Perfectionism**: Why is there a need to control so many aspects of life? Why not value the imperfections? (pg. 55, pg. 100) What are the consequences of changing human, animal, and plant DNAs? How can new species be invented and controlled? For example, the pigoons develop strong, almost human-level thinking skills. Aren’t unwanted side effects, such as too smart pigoons, bound to occur?
- **Improvement at the Expense of Life**: Is an organism truly living anymore if it has been modified too drastically? For example, are the ChickieNobs so far removed from living to even be considered chickens anymore? (pg. 202-203).
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- **Moral Argument**: Likewise, are humans striving to improve themselves to the point of destruction, to the point of not being “human” anymore? Are cells ‘sacred,’ such that it would be immoral to alter or profit from their alteration? (p.56)

Social class and privilege

- **Corporate Control:** Why is every compound named after the business or company associated with it? How materialistic and greedy has the world become? Where is the equality of wealth and resource distribution? Capitalism and division of wealth creates an ultimate hierarchy with the Compounds compared to Pleeblands. Businesses take the place of governments (pg. 53)

Secondary

Information Access

- **Conspiracies:** What is the hidden information in MaddAddam? How can we make sense of the mystery of Crake's father and his death? Later, unearthed information is revealed that is morally questionable, such as the BlyssPluss Pill (pg. 181-183, pg. 210-213)

- **False Advertising/Omission of Information**: Is Jimmy's degree and career essentially used to twist words into false advertising, to build fake ethos? The BlyssPluss Pill and Jimmy's ad campaign for it acts as a key example of this moral issue (pg. 294)

Games

- **Escapism and Spectacle:** Games, such as Blood and Roses, act as a bonding activity for Jimmy and Crake in their adolescent years, helping them to escape family, school, and the fears and constraints of current society. Do limits exist for the images, ideas, and content shown on television or the Internet? For example, how is showing live suicides, pornography, real-life chaos, war battles, etc. online examined? Many once taboo or shocking subjects are treated casually, becoming simple spectacles to watch, or they become the subject of games, such as war, famines, extinct animals, etc. (pg. 82)

Art vs science

- **Value and Definition of Intelligence:** How is intelligence defined and rewarded? Students are auctioned off to universities depending on their level of brain power and skills. Are these the "smartest" and "most talented?

- **Storytelling**: What is the heart of Jimmy's story? Isn't everyone a compilation of their stories? The need to create a narrative to make sense of life, as exemplified by Jimmy teaching the Crakers with myths, stories, and legends they fully believe, provides an important theme. Jimmy also tries to create a story for Oryx when she offers little to no details about herself (pg. 91-92).

- **Naming:** What do characters names represent? What do the company and product names signify as well? What does the repetition and obsession for unique words mean, particularly to Jimmy? What is the significance of changing

names for Jimmy (he becomes Snowman) and for extinct animal names for Crake and Oryx.

Human trafficking

- **Sexual Desires and Question of True Love**: How are humans seen as commodities? Can they be bought, sold, owned, the same way other products are in this corporate-based, improvement-obsessed society? Also, how is the death of Oryx interpreted? Did Crake treat her as a human or as a commodity? (pg. 328-329)

Desire for immortality/fear of aging and death

- **Obsession for Perfection:** The current population is obsessed with appearance and quality. Everyone wants to not only live forever, but to look wonderful. Are OrganInc, AnooYoo, RejoovenEsense, BlyssPluss, etc. and the products they are engineering to further the human and animal races going too far? Can anyone expect to never age, extend their lifetime, and cheat death?
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- **Use of Religion:** Do religious beliefs play a factor in the fear of death, or do they offer comfort of a life beyond this one? Crake says there is no need for a God, but do we need some sort of a higher belief? Is it human to hold such beliefs? Crake eliminates the idea of worship from the Crakers, but don't Oryx and Crake eventually become like gods to the "perfect" specimens? (pg. 157)

Tertiary

Malthusianism

- **Valuing Human Life:** What are the implications and associations of Crake's desire to eliminate an entire species in favor of a newer, better version? Are the "older models" of humans lesser and thus suddenly disposable? Was Crake's plan a success? Are resources truly as scares as they've been made to seem to those in the compounds?

Mental Health/Depression

- **Effects of Trauma:** How do people deal with trauma? Mental, emotional, and physical ailments of multiple characters are detailed, including Jimmy's mother, Oryx, Crake, and Jimmy. How does the contrast between Snowman and the

Crakers, who are ignorant of the plague, help one understand the effects of trauma? (pg. 45)

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- **Depression:** Jimmy's mother exhibits clear signs of depression, such as the mental haze Jimmy describes, the detached reaction to his gift of the rakunk from his father. (p. 50) How is she regarded by Jimmy? His father? What do you think has made her feel like this? Is there any support for her emotional health within the compounds?

- **Body/Soul Divide**: How can characters enrich their souls instead of their bodies, concentrating on thoughts over outer perfection? How can Jimmy fathom the dystopia around him mentally? Does he simply need to focus on staying alive and avoid overthinking to let his automatic body reactions save him? (pg. 85-87) pg. 31

Parenting/what makes a good parent?

- **Empathy and Self-sacrifice:** Does Jimmy's mother showcase empathy or care toward him with her decision to leave? Do Jimmy's parents sacrifice their feelings, needs, or desires to best help their son? What do they understand about him? What does he understand about them? (pg.61-63). What are the connections between parents and children for Jimmy, Crake, and Oryx? What makes a family?

Exercises and Questions for Discussion

Before Reading:

- What is a quest? What are some of its key elements? Can you think of any examples of quests?
- Our society often focuses on achieving physical perfection and longevity. What are some of the ways this focus is evident? What are some of the consequences of this focus?
- Many people living in the twenty-first century use technology on an almost constant basis. How do you use technology? How have new technologies changed the way you communicate? Have they changed the way you interact with others? Do you think these new technologies change your expectations for those interactions? If so, how?
- If you want to learn about a new topic, what are the strategies you use to gather that information? Where do you go first?
- Think about what it would be like to be one of a small number of survivors after a global catastrophe. What would you do? What skills could you draw on?

While Reading:

- Many people in *Oryx and Crake* seem obsessed with the quest for physical perfection, prolonged youth, and extreme longevity. What are some of the ways characters in the novel try to achieve this perfection? What do you think Atwood is trying to say by depicting this obsession?
- Technology is highly advanced in the society in *Oryx and Crake*. Do different social classes use technology in different ways? How is technology used for good in the novel? For evil?
- Characters in the novel have easy access to information - with just a few clicks, they can find anything that they want, including information that some might consider disturbing or dangerous. Should there be any limits to the kinds of information that people should be able to find? If so, who should set and enforce those limits?
    - Is there any information that the characters of *Oryx and Crake* are unable to locate? If so, what? And what prevents them from finding it?
- The Children of Crake are meant to be a new species that will not have the imperfections and attachments of our own nor repeat the mistakes we made. What are some of their particular challenges for survival? Is Snowman a help or hindrance to them?
- Snowman discovers that despite himself, he's invented a new creation myth, simply by trying to respond to the "why" questions asked by the Children of Crake. In contrast, Crake claimed that "God is a cluster of neurons," though he'd had trouble eradicating religious experience without creating zombies. What do these two moments suggest to you about the nature of spirituality and its evolution among cultures?
- What slang do you see the characters using when they are teenagers?
- Here is a list of portmanteau words, which are made up of the parts of other words. What words are they assembled from: *muppet*, *spork*, and *brunch*. As you read, make a list of the portmanteau words that Atwood creates to refer to the products of the corporations. What words are they assembled from?
- What associations do you have of the characters' names? (Jimmy, Snowman; Glenn, Crake; Oryx; Eleanor Roosevelt; Abraham Lincoln)

After Reading:

- The ending of the novel is open, allowing for speculation by the reader as to the fates of Snowman, the Children of Crake, and the other humans. How do you envision Snowman's future? How do you envision the future of the Children of Crake. What about the future of humanity—both within the novel, and outside its pages?
- Atwood describes her writing as 'speculative fiction'. Despite sounding far-fetched, everything Atwood describes has the potential to be reality; many things are currently being researched or could be developed using currently available research. How does this shape your reading of the book?
- In talking about her work as speculative fiction, Atwood suggests that her work is an exploration of the consequences of scientific research in our time, so imminently real.

She explicitly wants to address the moral and societal implications of these scientific activities. Should literature be used in this way? Why or why not?
- Where is the government in *Oryx and Crake*?

Assignments and Activities

- Snowman creates completely fabricated stories to explain objects the Crakers bring back to him. The cumulative effect seemingly begins to create a new mythology. Create your own origin myth: Identify a discrete, everyday object in your life. Develop a brief creative, narrative that explains its creation and purpose. This should NOT be based on actual evidence for its origins, but rather a speculative story. As a class, share your origin myths and outline the architecture of the origins.
- Identify at least 3-4 of Atwood's portmanteau words and mark the page number of at least one occurrence of each.
    - Define them to the best of your ability. (Not all words will be easily definable.)
    - Discuss their significance in the context of the novel.
    - Identify their component parts.
    - Write a paragraph that discusses Atwood's use of neologism (that is, the creation of new words) more generally, and in particular the function it serves in the genre of speculative fiction. In other words, consider why Atwood uses this particular lexical strategy in *Oryx and Crake*.
- Atwood has said that genetic modification is not necessarily good or bad in itself, rather it's the choices we make about it. After reading *Oryx and Crake*, to what extent do you believe genetically modified organisms should be regulated by government? At what level? Formulate your view in a letter to the editor.
- Compare and contrast Jimmy's and Glenn's support systems as they transition from high school to college. Reflect on your own experience as a student. Compare and contrast your experience to Jimmy's and/or Glenn's:
    - Are there aspects of their transition you can relate to? If so what are they?
    - What support systems are most important to you?
    - How does your society support you as a student?

Beyond the Book

Atwood's follow-up book, *The Year of the Flood,* takes place during the same period of time as *Oryx and Crake*. Many of the characters from *Oryx and Crake* appear. The story focuses on the God's Gardeners, a religious group focused on green living founded by Adam One. The book follows the story of two women, Toby and Ren, who had been part of God's Gardeners. They are two of the few still alive after most of the human population has been wiped out by a fast moving virus. Toby is hiding in a former spa, using her God's Gardeners skills to survive. Toby is a trapeze dancer at a high-end sex club locked in quarantine. As they try to find others still alive and fight off predators they remember their days when they were part of God's Gardeners.

Further readings and resources

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