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## **LITERARY VISIONS OF POST- -APOCALYPTIC WORLDS IN THE WORKS OF MARY SHELLEY, MARGARET ATWOOD AND MAGGIE GEE**

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**DEBATE**

**Antropoceno, utopia e distopia**

## ABSTRACT

Once hailed as the pinnacle of evolutionary progress, the human subject has more recently been under severe attack due to the destructive potential that has been unleashed by humans, especially in the last two hundred years. As a result, contemporary literature and art is replete with images of a utopia without humans. Many writers see humans, or rather human destructiveness, as the real plague on the planet and offer visions of utopia placed in the post-apocalyptic post-human era. Drawing on Patricia Vieira's seminal article titled "Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of the Anthropocene", I will first discuss how Mary Shelley portrayed ecological awareness in her *The Last Man*. I will then move on to examine how increasing ecological destruction leads to (post)-apocalyptic visions in the works of Margaret Atwood and Maggie Gee. My aim in juxtaposing two contemporary writers with Mary Shelley is to show that despite their different socio-historical contexts, these women writers have produced works that can not only be read as visionary and cautionary tales but that also promote heightened ecological awareness as an antidote to destructive and – ultimately – self-destructive tendencies of humankind.

## KEYWORDS

Anthropocene. Post-apocalypse. Speculative science fiction.

In spite of our proud domination of nature, we are still her victims, for we have not even learned to control our nature  
(C.G. Jung).

What will the future bring? From time immemorial this question has occupied men's minds, though not always to the same degree. Historically, it is chiefly in times of physical, political, economic, and spiritual distress that men's eyes turn with anxious hope to the future, and when anticipations, utopias, and apocalyptic visions multiply  
(C.G.Jung, CW 10, Par 488).

**T**he Age of the Anthropocene, during which humans have become the predominant force shaping our planet, has affected the world to a degree that was unthinkable at the start of the period, roughly, the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The industrial age transformed the Earth to a degree unimaginable by the innovators who laid the brickwork for the new system that would shape the centuries to come. In the pre-industrial period, the majority of world population lived in rural areas. They would warm themselves with wood, drink the milk from cows, or eat the vegetables they would grow themselves. Everything they ate was pure, no fertilizers were used. They breathed the pure air, now very difficult to find even on mountaintops. How, then, did we manage to destroy nature in such a relatively short time to a point where we are now constantly haunted by a sense of impending doom? A major factor that is contributing to the speedy demise of our ecosystem is global warming, which is affecting the entire planet, and hence the animals, plants, and all vegetation. Is there anything we can do to stop this downward spiral into destruction or at least slow its progress?

Humans have always tried to alter ecosystems and dominate nature in order to meet their needs. This effort certainly gained a new momentum during the industrial age with more advanced machinery. An important consequence of industrialization was urbanization whereby there was a drastic increase in the population of big cities. The consequent destruction of the countryside and the concentration of large numbers of people in cities led to deeply transformative and irreversible changes in society. As Vince (2014, p. 11) points out, cities are “artificial constructs of densely packed – purpose-built living spaces, which act as giant factories consuming the planet’s plants, animals, water, rocks, mineral resources”. As Vince (2014, p. 6) further observes, “today we have the capacity to change plant life. We have transcended natural cycles, altered the physical, chemical, and biological processes of the planets. We can create new life in the test tube, bring extinct species back from the dead, grow new body parts from cells or build mechanical replacements”. As Vince suggests, humans have certainly come to exercise powers that would have seemed magical only a century ago. Yet with power comes responsibility and it is at this point that humans are tragically failing at the cost of not only the planet, but also themselves.

It is admittedly very difficult to predict how the world will be a thousand years from now. Ultimately, we just cannot know with certainty how rapidly the changes will take place or what consequences they will have. According to Roy Scranton, we can adapt to the new world of the Anthropocene if we learn to die as an individual and to die as a civilization. As Scranton (2015, p. 27) aptly points out, “to die as an individual means to

let go of our predispositions and fear. Learning to die as a civilization means letting go of our particular way of life and its ideas of identity, freedom, success and progress". Thus, the greatest challenge we are facing seems to be a philosophical one: "understanding that this civilization is dead" (SCRANTON, 2015, p. 15). As Scranton suggests, the human species has to adapt to changing circumstances and transform on a fundamental level in order to survive, perhaps even thrive, in the era of the Anthropocene. This change on the individual and collective levels should also be accompanied by the subversion of habitual forms of thinking and acting, as well as a wider questioning of what civilization means. Without a complete overhaul of anthropocentric thinking that informs especially western civilization with its progressive ethos, an eco-friendlier future that is based on respect for all non-human life forms does not seem possible.

Another important book on the subject is *The End of Nature* (1989) by Bill McKibben who observes that a paradigm shift is necessary to address the big changes taking place on Earth. In his words: "We are no longer able to think ourselves as a species tossed about by larger forces – now we are those larger forces. Hurricanes and thunderstorms and tornadoes become not acts of God but acts of man. That was what I meant by the 'end of nature'" (MCKIBBEN, 1989, p. xvi). In the Anthropocene, most humans are literally "playing God" and manifesting great abundance and technological progress, but they do not seem equally concerned with the moral implications or the consequences of their actions. Neither do they seem to be aware that humanity as we know it is dangerously close to the point of no return. It is certainly (self)-delusional to assume that the resources on the planet are inexhaustible and that the ecosystem can indefinitely "survive" the destruction wrought by humans.

Although it has enjoyed widespread currency, the concept of the Anthropocene itself has increasingly been debated and problematized by many scholars. Jason Moore, for instance, suggests that the Anthropocene argument poses questions it cannot answer and cannot explain on how the alarming changes in our world came about: "Questions of capitalism, power and class, anthropocentrism and dualist framings of "nature" and "society," and the role of states and empires – all are frequently bracketed by the dominant Anthropocene perspective" (MOORE, 2016a, p. 5). Crist, on the other hand, draws attention to the "shadowy repercussions of naming an epoch after ourselves" and maintains that "this name is neither a useful conceptual move nor an empirical no-brainer, but instead a reflection and reinforcement of the anthropocentric actionable worldview that generated "the Anthropocene" - with all its looming emergencies – in the first place" (CRIST, 2016, p. 14). Similarly, Donna Haraway (2016, p. 50) makes the strong point that "The scale of burning ambitions of fossil-making man – of this Anthropos whose hot projects for accelerating extinctions merits a name for a geological epoch – is hard to comprehend".

As Moore aptly points out the Anthropocene perspective is flawed mainly because it retains the binary of Humanity and Nature. The Capitalocene argument offers a more concise and solid perspective:

First, it insists that the history of capitalism is a relation of capital, power, and nature as an organic whole [...] Second, the history of capitalism cannot be reduced to the burning of fossil fuels, in England and everywhere else. It is a history of the relations of power and re/production premised on the cash nexus. Third, the Capitalocene argument challenges the Eurocentric – and

frankly false – view of capitalism as emerging in England in the eighteenth century (MOORE, 2016b, p. 81).

The term Capitalocene – the age of capital – can also be seen as more accurate because:

[I]t has the advantage of naming the culprit, locating climate change not merely in fossil fuels, but within the complex and interrelated processes of global-scale economic-political organization stretched over histories of enclosures, colonialisms, industrializations, and globalizations, which have both evolved within nature's web of life as well as brought ecological transformations to it (DEMOS, 2016, n.p).

From this perspective, the Capitalocene offers a necessary corrective to the Anthropocene by specifically locating the root of the problem in the capitalist system.

The Anthropocene argument has a wide reach and has proven useful, yet it should be complemented with the perspective of Capitalocene. Hence, I completely agree with Schneiderman who argues that

The term *Anthropocene* might best be thought of as a struggle for a cognitive grasp on a unification of human and natural history that is at once expansive and increasingly more pressing than modes of production construed narrowly as internal to but autonomous from the eco-epochal. These cognitive gains are useful to us to the extent that they do not forfeit the specificity of the Anthropocene as a fact of industrial capitalism, that strange fact that many partisans of the term seem intent on affirming and denying simultaneously. This contradiction may concern a certain difficulty in defining “industrial capitalism” in the first place. Otherwise, we are fine with the term *Anthropocene*, as long as it does not do what many fear it might: lead us away from the Capitalocene (2017, p. 180-181).

Throughout history, poets and writers have utilized the power art to evoke new sensibilities and awareness in people. In this regard, the role literature has played in inspiring people to become better versions of themselves is abundantly clear. Most significant for my purposes in this article is literature's power to “teach” people about the power of imagination and empathy. As Vieira (2020, p. 352) argues in “Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of the Anthropocene”, the turn from utopia to dystopia in the twentieth century is “a trend that seems to have deepened in the first decades of the new millennium [...] the past one hundred years or so have witnessed the rise of dystopianism as the predominant *zeitgeist*”. This trend of rising dystopianism is undoubtedly related to the increasing disillusionment with “the Human” as the primary subject of liberal humanism. Once hailed as the pinnacle of evolutionary progress, particularly since the Enlightenment, the human subject has more recently been under severe attack due to the destructive potential that has been unleashed by humans, especially in the last two hundred years. From environmentalist groups to anti-humanist scholars, increasing numbers of people have started to debate the consequences of anthropocentrism, especially in relation

to the environment. As a result, contemporary literature and art is replete with images of a utopia *without* humans.

As I will show in the course of my discussion, many writers see humans, or rather human destructiveness, as the real *plague* on the planet and offer visions of utopia placed in the post-apocalyptic post-human era. As Vieira (2020, p. 354) further contends, “utopia and dystopia are pre-eminently political literary genres that hinge upon societal criticism and a desire for social change. It is therefore safe to assume that utopian and dystopian fiction and thought at least refract, if not reflect, the vicissitudes of collective existence and the spirit of the times”. In this sense, consulting works of literature to get a deeper sense and understanding of planetary transformations is, as ever, a very good starting point for further elaborating the subject of the Anthropocene. Drawing on these preliminary observations, I will now turn to discuss how the famous romantic writer Mary Shelley portrayed ecological awareness in her novel *The Last Man*. I will then move on to examine how increasing ecological destruction leads to (post)-apocalyptic visions in contemporary literature by focusing on *Oryx and Crake* by the acclaimed Canadian writer Margaret Atwood and *The Ice People* by the British writer Maggie Gee. My aim in juxtaposing two contemporary writers with Mary Shelley is to show that despite their different socio-historical contexts, these women writers have produced works that not only read as visionary and cautionary tales but that also promote heightened ecological awareness as an antidote to destructive and – ultimately – self-destructive tendencies of humankind.

## ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS IN ROMANTIC LITERATURE: MARY SHELLEY’S *THE LAST MAN*

One cannot deny the importance of the written word in both reflecting and shaping the views, anxieties, and prospects of humanity. Works of speculative fiction, in particular, extrapolate on current events and trends in order to show possible outcomes in the near and distant future. Works of fiction and nonfiction alike are a means whereby authors reflect their vision and/or feelings about the changes taking place on Earth. An increasing number of writers have critically depicted environmental change and its effects on nature. Throughout history, many people have gone to nature to understand the true values of life. Henry David Thoreau, like many other transcendentalists, is one such writer who sought refuge in nature. By going back to nature, the Romantics had the chance to go within and get in touch with their innermost true essence.

In his *Romantic Revelations: Visions of Post-Apocalyptic Life and Hope in the Anthropocene*, Chris Washington examines how nineteenth-century writers envisaged a world without humans or populated by other creatures. Her book particularly focuses on the works of Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, Lord Byron, John Clare and Jane Austen. These writers responded to the climate change of 1816, “the year without a summer”, by publishing works that depicted what the future might hold for the coming generations of humans. As Washington (2019, p. 4) observes, these writers “[e]stablish living with human and nonhuman others in the Anthropocene”. Romantics believe that hope for life can emerge when all hope is lost. This view is expressed by Demogorgon at the end of *Prometheus Unbound*: “to hope till Hope creates / from its own wreck the thing it contemplates” (573-4).



As Washington further suggests, the Romantics are profoundly aware of the fact that the world existed before us and it will continue to exist after us. In her words: “[p]ost-apocalyptic Romanticism urges us to forgo an obsession with our finitude that prevents us from living. Post-apocalyptic romanticism is a temporal *contretemps*; it is not located anywhere, before and after, but conceptually everywhere already the Anthropocene” (WASHINGTON, 2019, p. 7). In this context, the Romantics ask the following question that continues to be very much relevant today: Are humans necessary for the world’s survival?

Mary Shelley, the wife of the celebrated romantic poet Percy B. Shelley, was similarly interested in environmentalist issues. As the daughter of two of the greatest minds of the era, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley was well versed in several disciplines in addition to literature by the time she came of age. What is more, it is Mary Shelley who is credited as having written the first novel of science fiction, *Frankenstein*, in 1818. Published in 1826, *The Last Man* depicts the story of the survivors of a terrible plague that had catastrophic consequences. Humans lose control of the Earth while animals start to live in a world liberated from human destructiveness. Throughout the novel, there is an ongoing political battle between “libertarian anarchy and progressive social contractalism on the fate of the Earth before finally identifying both politics as irreducibly anthropocentric” (WASHINGTON, 2019, p. 67). In its masterful depiction of a broad range of environmental issues and human agency, the novel continues to have wide-ranging implications for the modern reader.

Although the title of Mary Shelley’s book is *The Last Man*, it certainly is impossible to tell for sure whether “the last man” is indeed the last man on Earth. However, what Shelley ultimately aimed at doing was to give the readers a glimpse of what the world would be like for humans facing extinction. Thus, the book reflects the anxiety of the individual in the face of events beyond his/her control: in this case, the plague. The book introduces to the reader men representing different points of view: democracy and monarchism. Both Adrian and Raymond are presented as ultimately opposing characters and yet they are both anthropocentric. Adrian feels himself to be a part of nature while Raymond represents self-interest.

These two political anthropocentric views, namely democracy and monarchism, dominate the novel. Mary Shelley criticizes these two characters as they embody disguised forms of the same anthropocentric sovereignty. Raymond is a man of the world and believes that all creatures are created to serve his ends, whereas Adrian feels himself to be a part of the greater whole and “owned affinity not only with mankind but, all nature was akin to him; the mountains and sky were his friends; the winds of heaven and the offspring of Earth his playmates; while he, the focus of this mighty mirror, felt his life mingle with the universe of existence” (SHELLEY, 2004, p. 77). However, later in the novel, Shelley stresses that these two very different political viewpoints ultimately amount to the same thing. Raymond plans reforms that will reduce all “universe of existence” to his own existence and wants to be king, whereas Adrian’s politics rejects any king. However, Adrian elevates all individuals to the stature of kings.

For Adrian, the will of man is omnipotent. He observes: “O happy Earth! And happy inhabitants of Earth! A stately place has God built for you, O man! and worthy are you of your dwelling” (SHELLEY, 2004, p. 74). While Raymond is planning a series of reforms that will transform the world into a state of paradise, he and Adrian are unaware of the plague that will destroy all of their utopian plans. The world of imaginary utopia will be turned into a dystopia. Pondering on an earthly paradise, Adrian observes: “Let this last



but twelve months... an Earth will become a Paradise. The energies of man were before directed to the destruction of his species: they now aim at its liberation and preservation. Man cannot repose, and his restless aspirations will now bring forth good stead of evil” (SHELLEY, 2004, p. 219). The novel stresses the view that anthropocentric sovereignty over the Earth is only but a dream, an illusion based on self-deception. It also foregrounds the argument that man is his own worst enemy as long as he remains locked up in his own blindness and lack of awareness. It is only through a powerful paradigm shift that man can come to realize that his utopian aspirations are doomed to fail.

Lionel, on the other hand, aims to retreat imaginatively from the horrors around him. In other words, he invokes the post-apocalyptic sublime: the clashing of the imagination with the reality of the indifferent nature as expressed in Shelley’s “Mont Blanc” where mountains, rivers, and nature go on while humans perish. As Chris Washington (2019, p. 83) maintains “the book deals more importantly with the plague and its effects. The life in the Anthropocene must be reconceived. it is a life of moral bankruptcy and ethical indifference”. Indeed, “the moral bankruptcy and ethical indifference” are symptoms of man’s self-centeredness and shortsightedness that have devastating consequences for both his own species and the planet as a whole.

The novel strongly suggests that human beings are destroyed by their self-serving thinking at the cost of all non-human life. “Moral and emotional failure, well-intentioned stupidity, thoughtless replication of past failure, unwillingness to read the lessons of history – all these collaborate with the “plague” in *The Last Man*” (MCWHIR, 1996, p. xxxii). As the number of few survivors from the plague continues to dwindle, with only Clara, Adrian, Lionel and a dog surviving, they still cannot grasp the harsh reality that their species is nearing extinction. Lionel observes: “we call ourselves the lords of creation... masters of life and death, and we allege... that though the individual is destroyed, man continues forever” (SHELLEY, 2004, p. 230). Lionel’s deluded thinking could well be a coping mechanism that helps him deal with the dire circumstances the survivors find themselves in. However, this sort of refusal to see reality for what it is will certainly lead the remaining few in the wrong direction. Lionel and his friends believe that if they can reach warm climates, they will have a better chance to stay alive. Unfortunately, this projection proves to be false. Similar to Adrian and Raymond, Lionel believes that if they migrate, they can escape the cruelty of seasons. But seasons change according to a cyclical pattern: after summer, winter will come; though milder than in the North, it will still affect the living conditions of the few survivors.

The novel as a whole maintains that the human-centred perspective that neglects the environment and other non-human animals can never be considered “kind enough”. Such a perspective is simply rooted in human arrogance and the inability to see that humans are – after all – a part in an integrated and interconnected system. When man separates himself from the whole he is embedded within, he becomes self-destructive as well as destructive.

Finally, Lionel renounces his anthropocentric views, declaring: “this is the Earth; there is no change – no ruin – no rent made in her verdurous expense, she continues to wheel round and round with alternate night and day, through the sky, though man is not her adorer or inhabitant” (SHELLEY, 2004, p. 459). Lionel’s rude awakening reveals that he has come to understand the relative insignificance of human beings within the larger scheme of things. His words reflect a much more balanced and ethical perspective in that he now realises that human beings share the Earth with others and thus have no legitimate right to impose their mastery over them. Thinking of himself as

“the master of the realm” is not only delusional but also pathetic, since no matter how much they try, humans will never be able to “conquer” nature.

According to Anne McWhir, Mary Shelley situates her novel

in the literary context of the early nineteenth century, where poems and stories treating the subject of the “last man” - the last survivor of humankind – were popular. At the same time, she draws attention to the problem of reconciling such visionary, prophetic writing with the expectations of novel-readers and, perhaps, with her own private agenda. *The Last Man* is at once a personal, even autobiographical and confessional meditation and a prophetic, encyclopedic, philosophical vision (MCWHIR, 1996, p. xiii).

Although *The Last Man* has never come to enjoy the kind of popularity and critical acclaim of its predecessor *Frankenstein*, it is still a remarkable work of literature that deals with pertinent questions. The possibility of a devastating “plague” that could wipe out both civilization and humankind continues to be a popular subject amongst contemporary science fiction writers who offer ominous accounts of alternative future scenarios.

## MAN-MADE APOCALYPSE AND BEYOND IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S *ORYX AND CRAKE*

One of the leading names in contemporary fiction, Margaret Atwood employs the genre of speculative science fiction to depict the subject of “ecological sadness” in the Anthropocene in several of her works. In this sense, she scrupulously dissects various shades of sadness most of us feel in face of the irreversible damage wreaked by humans on nature. In repeatedly addressing this subject in her critically acclaimed novels, Atwood wants the reader to think about the costs of unchecked technological progress and human short-sightedness. Paul W. Harland (2016, p. 2) observes that “the grief induced in the readers of *MaddAddam Trilogy* is a therapeutic corrective illuminated by Atwood’s embedded poetics of survival”. In the post-apocalyptic world of the trilogy, human race becomes almost extinct and is replaced by the Crakers, a species that is genetically disposed for short term thinking and supplying their immediate needs but cannot make long term plans.

The first book of the trilogy, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), is set in a ravaged world after a man-made pandemic has swept away the human species. In the words of Marinette Grimbeek (2017, p. 137), the novel “could be read as a post-apocalyptic narrative in the tradition of Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826)”. Jimmy/Snowman, the apparent *Last Man* who has survived the catastrophe of Biblical proportions, reminiscences about his past; and the story of the novel is told in flashbacks. The pre-apocalyptic world that is kept alive in his imagination is one where unprecedented advancements, especially in the field of biotechnology, had revolutionized all realms of life. However, as Grimbeek (2017, p. 115) maintains, “Violence is at the heart of the pre-apocalyptic society, and both the corporations and the pleeblands are portrayed as governed by the logic of social Darwinism, in which the strongest survive because of their exploitation of others”. Humans are portrayed as being particularly cruel towards animals whose

rights as sentient beings are completely denied. Jimmy's first memory of the destruction of animals is the burning of cows, sheep and pigs because they had been infected by a manmade microbe. Jimmy also remembers ominous changes in the environment, observing: "the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the midcontinental plains regions went on and on and the Asian steppes turned to sand and dunes" (ATWOOD, 2003, p. 24). Jimmy's father and his company worked on gene-splicing experiments and his mother, who used to be a gifted scientist as well, abandons her family because she finds her husband's work morally repulsive. She observes: "Be that as it may, there's research and there's research. What you're doing – this pig brain thing. You're interfering with the building blocks of life. It's immoral. It's... sacrilegious" (ATWOOD, 2003, p. 57). As members of the scientific elite, Jimmy's family lives in a high-tech luxurious compound behind secure walls. On the other side of the wall, the have-nots live in what is called *pleeblands*, more or less under conditions of dire poverty, hunger, crime and poor sanitation.

As he is growing up, Jimmy's best friend is the mysterious and remarkably precocious Glenn, who later becomes Crake, who always maintains an aura of careful detachment. Years later, Jimmy and Crake go to different schools: Jimmy studies arts (though it is not a popular subject anymore) at the half-derelict Martha Graham, whereas the extremely intelligent and numerically oriented Crake goes on to study science at the prestigious Watson-Crick. When they finally meet again, Crake shows Jimmy all the latest developments in the field of biotechnology. Crake is interested in all ongoing projects and continues to talk of the: "Wave of the future". As he is showing Jimmy around, Crake also leads him to the department of NeoAgriculturals which the students call AgriCouture. There, they see "a bulblike object attached to twenty fleshy tubes. At the end of each tube another bulb was growing" (ATWOOD, 2003, p. 202). Jimmy cannot make out what this is. Crake informs him that these are chicken parts, just legs or white parts. They lacked heads. Jimmy is understandably outraged with the things he sees. At the last stop, Crake takes Jimmy to the department of BioDefences, with a series of cages holding dogs. Jimmy thinks they look friendly, but Crake warns him that he shouldn't be deceived. Crake observes: "They aren't dogs, they just look like dogs. They're wolvogs – they are bred to deceive. Reach out to pat them, and they'll take your hand off. There's a large pit-bull component" (ATWOOD, 2003, p. 205). As these examples abundantly make clear, it has become commonplace for humans to temper with nature and violate non-human animals, without any real regard for the rights of the animals involved or the possible consequences of such reckless experimenting. They also remain oblivious to the fact that in so carelessly and recklessly toying with life, they themselves have become monstrous. Ironically, the hybrid creatures they create turn against their creators in the post-apocalyptic world. As Chung-Hao Ku (2006, p. 109) suggests: "Whereas the Romantic and Victorian monsters are eventually held in check, the bioengineered creatures of Atwood's post-apocalyptic wasteland do not merely reproduce themselves but also run amock. As the lethal pandemic JUVIE eliminates the human race, transgenetic beings like pigoons, wolvogs, rakunks and Crakers, outnumbering human beings, also start to challenge their dominance".

However, the scientific (and commercial) ambitions of people are by no means limited to the creation of new "hybrid" species. During the second evening Jimmy is staying in Crake's school, Crake takes him to a place called Hypothetical Scenario, where new diseases are produced. Jimmy cannot believe that Crake can support and aid the production of new viruses that would bring big profits to the producers. Crake

explains the motivations and inner-workings of “Health Wyzer” with the following words: “There is a whole secret unit working on nothing else... They put the hostile bioforms into their vitamin pills... Naturally, they develop the antidotes at the same time as they’re customizing the bugs, but they hold those in reserve, they practice the economics of scarcity, so they’re guaranteed high profits” (ATWOOD, 2003, p. 211). Both Crake and Jimmy talk about how their fathers were executed and how Jimmy’s mother left her home. It is quite likely that their fathers found out about what was going on in the company and would have reported it to the authorities. In short, they were probably killed because they knew too much.

Years later, Snowman (Jimmy) wanders around in the desolate landscape, reminiscing about his romantic crush on Oryx, his friend Crake and the incredible things that took place. He thinks that in the future, when seeing the ruins, people will wonder about what might have happened. The new inhabitants will ask: “Who made these things? Who lived in them? Who destroyed them? The Taj Mahal, the Louvre, the Pyramids, the Empire State Building – stuff he’d seen on TV, in old books, on postcards, on Blood and Roses” (ATWOOD, 2003, p. 222). One night, Crake wants to talk to Jimmy about a possible future scenario.

Let’s suppose for the sake of argument that civilization as we know it gets destroyed [...] It’s not like the Wheel, it’s too complex now. Suppose the instructions survived, suppose there weren’t any people left with the knowledge to read them. Those people would be few and far between and they wouldn’t have the tools... and once those people died, that would be it. They’d have no apprentices, no successors... All it takes is the elimination of one generation. One generation of anything: Beetles, trees, microbes, scientists, speakers of French, whatever. Break the link between one generation and the next, and the game’s over forever (ATWOOD, 2003, p. 223).

As these words show, Crake has a very detached and seemingly objective perspective, untainted by any emotional attachment to humanity. His coldness and emotional aloofness make it possible for him to carry out a plan that is designed to destroy the entire human species. In the words of Richard A. Posner (2003, p. 31-32), Crake is a “twenty-first century intellectual psychopath, with his faintly autistic, ascetic hyper-rationalism and his technic-bureaucratic talk”.

Not only does Crake aim to destroy the human species as a whole, he also aims to replace them with a ‘superior’ species who will live in harmony with nature. Crake observes:

At first, we had to alter ordinary human embryos, which we got from – never mind where we got them. These people are *sui generis*. They’re reproducing themselves, now... Also they’re programmed to drop dead at age thirty – suddenly without getting sick. No old age, none of those anxieties. They’ll just kneel over. Not that they know it, none of them has died yet (ATWOOD, 2003, p. 303).



Jimmy says that he thought they were working on immortality. Crake responds: “Immortality is a concept. If you take immortality as being not death, but the foreknowledge of it and the fear of it, then ‘immortality’ is the absence of such fear. Babies are immortal. Edit out the fear and you’ll be...” (ATWOOD, 2003, p. 303). Paradise had also developed an UV resistant skin with insect-repellant characteristics and immunity from microbes. Ethnicity, and above all racism, would be eliminated since Paradise did not register skin colour.

In the first book of her MaddAddam trilogy, Atwood sets the background of the events that may lead to the extinction of the homo sapiens as a species. The various options that Atwood suggests are not far-fetched: deadly viruses that lead global pandemics or natural disasters such as floods, fires, etc. might and do happen rather frequently, especially after the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nothing that Atwood suggests is fantastical or beyond imagination. In the words of Alan Northover (2017, p. 122): “everything is based on current social trends such as technological developments, economic practices leading to environmental degradation”. As Northover suggests, Margaret Atwood’s speculative science fiction heavily draws on and extrapolates from current events to show humanity the possible consequences of their actions and behaviours. In other words, Atwood aims to show us, in bold colours, what *might* happen if humans continue along their present trajectory. Another recurrent trope in Atwood’s trilogy, as suggested by Northover, is her frequent use of the animal gaze. In an ironic reversal of roles, “Animals gaze, arguably an extreme experience of defamiliarization, since through it, humans are decentered as subjects and become subject to the animal gaze, that is experience themselves being viewed as objects by a non human animal agent” (2017, p. 123).

It is very telling that the Apocalypse in question is not brought about by a non-human agent but rather by humans who tragically become the engineers of their own demise. Although it is possible to blame the “mad scientist” Crake for the disaster that unfolds, since he is the mastermind behind the catastrophe, that would simply curtail the larger issues, namely that humans had been acting in both destructive and self-destructive ways especially since the onset of the Anthropocene era. Despite the numerous *monstrous* creatures that populate the post-apocalyptic world, the real monster in the picture and in the background seems to be human monstrosity. According to Chung-Hao Ku, there are two kinds of human monstrosity in *Oryx and Crake*:

on the one hand, Snowman becomes a monster when his human form and human superiority are questioned by the pigeons, the Crakers, and above all by himself; on the other, the conspiracy between transgenics and capitalism engenders a monstrous form of *homo faber*, who would sacrifice any life for scientific breakthroughs (KU, 2006, p. 125).

From this perspective, humanity - with its *monstrous* ambitions that has turned it into a destructive force – must be destroyed in order to save the world. Crake’s ‘ingenious’ plan simply puts this theory into action. As Uygur (2014, p. 43) suggests, the evil force in the novel is humanity itself and the villain to be destroyed for salvation is man: “In this sense, Atwood apparently attributes a utopic aspect to the destruction of humanity and civilization”.

Crake rationalizes his decision to destroy humanity by pointing out that humans themselves have been *the plague* on this planet. They had recklessly destroyed the

environment with their greed, selfishness and rampant consumerism. In this sense, Crake audaciously *plays God* to create a species that is clearly an upgrade on the original human: his children are attuned to the cycles of nature and are *programmed* to live in alignment with it. They seek to live in harmony with nature rather than try to impose their dominance over it. In the words of Vieira:

A world without humans would be considered utopian exactly because humanity's systematic destruction of its environment, of the *topos* that is the planet we inhabit, would come to an end. Our ability to imagine the globe without *Homo sapiens* as utopian can also be seen as a coming of age of humans, who finally get over the narcissistic belief that they are god(s)'s gift to the Earth, and realize that they turned out to be more of a curse. But a post-human world such as the one created by Crake is just one possible scenario, a "what if" among others (VIEIRA, 2020, p. 362).

Atwood's novels move and shake readers to their core because they present a world that is eerily both familiar and unfamiliar. The post-apocalyptic or pre-apocalyptic worlds that she portrays in her novels could actually materialize right in front of our eyes in the not so distant future. From this perspective, *Oryx and Crake* depicts how Crake, who believes that humanity poses an ecological threat to the planet, created a virus to destroy *Homo sapiens* and to replace them with the Crakers – peace-loving, nature-friendly humanoid creatures. As Vieira (2020, p. 354) suggests: "[...] utopia and dystopia are pre-eminently political literary genres that hinge upon societal criticism and a desire for social change. It is therefore safe to assume that utopian and dystopian fiction and thought at least refract, if not reflect, the vicissitudes of collective existence and the spirit of the times".

Literature serves as a seismograph for the technological and cultural changes in the world. There are two major ways of approaching such change: if we adopt the utopian approach, we can see the advancement of technology as a positive factor that will bring positive changes to our life, and if we adopt a dystopian approach we can think that the advancement of technology will destroy our traditional and accepted life style and bring unforeseen, drastic ways. In our present era, the disciplines of science and the humanities have become increasingly intertwined because the humanities have always reflected changes in society. Utopians consider the development of technology as positive for humans, whereas dystopians reflect a cultural fear of such technology. The dystopian projections reflect fear of the future by elaborating on various hotly debated subjects including cloning, genetic engineering, motherhood, posthumanism, etc.

*Oryx and Crake* presents Snowman (Jimmy) as the last survivor in the post-apocalyptic world. Why does Crake choose Jimmy as the 'the last man'? Although we are never offered any solid insight into the inner workings of Crake's mind, it is highly probable that Crake chooses Jimmy to be the survivor/caretaker of the Crakers not only because he is his friend, but also because he has several traits – such as compassion, kindness, empathy – that make him eligible for the job at hand. The Crakers are presented in the book as a beautiful new race of humanoids with medium intelligence, devoid of such feelings as jealousy, envy, greed, etc. In his attempt to curb human passions that might lead to conflict and destruction, Crake tries to eliminate concepts



such as art, religion and myths. By the end of the novel, however, the Crakers seem to turn more to worshipping arts, religion and origin myths. Towards the end of the book, Jimmy discovers footprints in the sand, steps into the unknown musing to himself: “But no, he has nothing to trade with them, nor they with them. Nothing, except themselves. They [...] hear his tale, he could hear theirs” (ATWOOD, 2003, p. 432).

It is certainly ironic that “a better world” – a “utopia” – can only come to being with the near-extinction of human species. In this regard, it is possible to suggest that the trilogy foregrounds the human subject as the real “dystopian” element, and offers the elimination of that element as a possible solution for the restoration of natural order. This seemingly anti-humanist stance is grounded in the belief that human beings have become dangerously out of sync with nature. What is more, they have also become stunningly blind to the fact that their destructive behaviour and attitudes are also self-destructive. “Yet Crake’s fixation on extinction is thoroughly satirized in the novel, and his apocalyptic solution to environmental damage is never completely endorsed” (GRIMBEEK, 2017, p. 124). As Grimbeek further points out

Despite his dogmatic valorization of logic, Crake therefore seems blind to the inherent contradictions of his project [...] While supposedly valuing nonhuman nature over humanity, Crake simultaneously reinforces his own superiority, thus emphasizing the distinctions between humans and nonhumans and also sharpening the distinctions among humans. It is only because he is human and has access to advanced biotechnology that Crake can try to destroy humans altogether (GRIMBEEK, 2017, p. 126-127).

In this respect, Crake’s man-made apocalypse serves to perpetuate human exceptionalism and repeats anthropocentric conventions of thought.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood speculates about the conditions of a possible future world. As Hope Jennings suggests:

If one of the primary tensions in Margaret Atwood’s work is between survival (for the individual or humanity as a whole) and the question of whether survival is even merited, exemplified by the author’s recurring interest in exploring the end of the world, then Atwood has become one of contemporary literature’s most rigorous demythologizes of the Apocalypse, while at the same contributing to its tradition of prophetic warning (JENNINGS, 2010, p. 11).

In this sense, Atwood warns the reader that if we continue to act irresponsibly towards nature, our planet will soon turn into an uninhabitable place. It is, thus, our duty towards humanity and towards the planet of which we are an integral part to be aware of our mistakes and ensure that we correct them. In this regard, Atwood’s works can be cited amongst what Vieira (2020, p. 353) calls critical utopias that “conversely, avoid the hopeless, conservative position of texts that remain at a destructive level, by pointedly criticizing the problems of our age at the same time as they offer at least a glimpse of possible solutions”. Atwood’s call for caution is especially poignant at a time when we are faced with unprecedented challenges on a global scale. At the time of

the writing of this article (April 2020), people in many parts of the world are devastated by the spread of a novel virus, Covid-19, that originated in China. This example alone is enough to show that existential risks of various kinds can only be contained, if not averted, by global collective action. As Atwood repeatedly suggests, we need to wake up as a global collective and shift dominant paradigms in order to leave the world as a habitable place for the future generations.

## THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT: (POST)-APOCALYPTIC IMAGINATION IN MAGGIE GEE'S *THE ICE PEOPLE*

Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* (1998) is a science-fiction novel that deals with the devastating effects of escalating environmental problems. Gee has always been concerned with environmental issues as can be observed in her other novels such as *The Flood* (1956), *Light Years* (1985) and *Where are the Snows?* (1991). Set in London in the year 2050, *The Ice People* depicts how global warming gradually leads to the second ice age. As Sepetoğlu suggests, this claim has scientific validity. While there are some scientists who reject the future coming of ice age, there are also others who claim otherwise: "If global warming were to boost the hydrological cycle, enhanced fresh water discharge into the North Atlantic would shut down the Atlantic Meridional Turning (AMO), the North Atlantic component of global ocean overturning circulation. This would result in downstream cooling over Europe, leading to the slow growth of glaciers and the next onset of the Ice Age" (WEAVER; MARCEL quoted in SEPETOĞLU, 2014, p. 30).

Written as a cautionary tale, the novel warns the reader that if we do not carefully consider the possible consequences of technological developments, we can soon start to experience outcomes beyond our control. In the novel, "the very issue of human responsibility for the climate is superseded when anthropogenic global warming is replaced by a new ice age, leading to the collapse of European civilization" (TREXLER, 2015, p. 30). The story is narrated by Saul, now living in a deserted airport in England, who recounts his past life when England was suffering from the effects of global warming. He tells of his life with his wife Susan, their son and their efforts to maintain a relatively normal family life under such challenging conditions. In the first part of the novel, Saul tells of an England where all ecosystems have been irreversibly damaged (GEE, 2008, p. 31). Most of the animals have become extinct and families have fallen apart, with men and women living in separate households. Since homosexuality has become the norm, there is a drop in the fertility rate and children have become scarce.

The ice age that follows global warming further disrupts the socio-political system and brings unrest and riots to the country. The family system and private relationships are also disrupted by the negative changes in the environment. The nature-loving Sarah wants a house in the country, hoping to find some peace there, yet nature is no longer what it used to be. Techno-capitalist society has wreaked havoc on nature, and everything has become artificial. Being a nanotechnologist, Saul still supports the advance of technology. Unlike Sarah, who seeks shelter and solace in nature, Saul still finds comfort in technology which has actually become a juggernaut. They try to keep their family intact, but unfortunately the conditions are incredibly adverse. Taking their son, Luke, with her, Sarah finally moves to an all-women society, Wicca World. Saul, on the other hand, starts frequenting gay clubs and enjoys the company

of men. Wicca eventually wins the national elections since their promise of a “caring revolution” resonates with the masses. As Johns-Putra (2014, p. 137) maintains: “This ecomaternalist appropriation of care – effectively rejecting the burden of caring for men but purporting to care for everything else is expressed in Wicca’s promises of ‘revaluing nature’, ‘nurturing the future’, ‘the future is green’”. However, Wicca’s ideological stance is itself strongly partisan and simply perpetuates gendered power play and the battle of the sexes. Although the Wiccans rightfully associate environmental degradation with anthropocentrism and masculine impulses, they fail to articulate an alternative discourse that is more constructive and less alienating.

In brief, *The Ice People* critically examines how the ravaging consequences of ecological damage lead to a terrible upheaval and deterioration in society. With the onset of the ice age, England descends into chaos, the established order breaks down, governments lose their power, people fight with each other for food, and laws are broken. Written in a speculative vein, the novel depicts various subjects including existing systems, gender roles, advancement of technology, heterosexuality, homosexuality and cruelty to animals. It also questions the advance of fertility-enhancing technologies (SEPETOĞLU, 2014, p. 32). As Sepetoğlu (2014, p. 32) observes: “[Gee] contests the taken for granted notions of what it means to be human in the age of changing technologies, and blurs the boundary between living and nonliving, human and non human and body and mind through Doves as evolving robots”. Within the context of exponential technological change and development, the novel thus draws attention to multiple issues of increasing contemporary significance by addressing the blurring of species boundaries, the pitfalls and short-sightedness of anthropocentrism, posthumanism and transhumanism. Gee accurately suggests that the age of “the human” as the subject of liberal humanism is drawing to a close as the environment and living conditions change. It is also significant to note that humans seem to have become much more mechanical and thus less “human” in a world where humanoid robots are becoming increasingly more human-like.

The waning of affect in the posthuman era is once again manifested in the cruelty people manifest towards animals. Saul remembers how his dog was killed during a mass massacre of dogs, which were thought to be infected with rabies. Saul observes: “We had a dog, a cocker spaniel, with crooked silky ears and tail. Sally she was called, panting, adoring, before rabies came through the Channel Tunnel and the whole dog population was destroyed. Thousands of people thronged Whitehall and pelted the politicians with dogshit” (GEE, 2008, p. 274). The dramatic drop in fertility rates for humans is accompanied by the human desire to control the reproductive processes of animals, especially cats, which are reproducing at an alarming rate. The “human” solution to this problem is to sterilize cats. Saul muses: “Mom liked our cats. Two fluffy, white Persians. Not practical, really with the heat. They were neutered males, we couldn’t have coped with kittens” (GEE, 2008, p. 47). Saul also mentions how some animals have become extinct while others have changed on a deep level and have become wild, even destructive, thus presenting a threat to humans. As these examples illustrate, the so-called superiority of humans over non-human animals is used to rationalize and justify the maltreatment of animals and the denial of animal rights. In this regard, humans *impose* their will over other living beings they share the planet with and remain unable to go beyond their selfishness and self-centeredness.

According to Adeline Johns-Putra (2014, p. 134) *The Ice People* is “characteristic of Gee’s fiction in its exploration of ‘average’ family life devastated by environmental, social and political change”. It is, at the same time, “a rare example of a climate change

dystopia that actively evaluates the environmentalist ethic of care and its use as a counterpoint to a debased notion of techno-scientism” (JOHNS-PUTRA, 2014, p. 129). Gee believes that issues of gender relations, ethnicity, class distinction and culture are intimately linked with other factors, especially climate change and ecological decline. In this sense, *The Ice People* is a cautionary tale that is written to warn the public about the unprecedented troubles and dangers awaiting them if they ignore the many ominous signs. Saul, the protagonist, states that the first signs of global warming were apparent at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He observes: “I was born in a small town on the border of London and the Tropical period was just starting. The only thing people talked about was the shortage of water and the heat. At the age of twelve all this was confusing my brain. On the one hand there wasn’t enough water to water the garden and to water your garden from the tap was considered a murder, on the other hand sea levels were rising” (GEE, 2008, p. 16).

Gee first warns the reader about global warming, but also states that an Ice age may follow global warming causing unforeseen difficulties and hardships. Saul remarks how people’s indifference and complacency paved the way for the unfolding disaster. At first, the government assured the people that they would take all the precautions against global warming and the new ice age. Preparations for the future included a big budget that would be exclusively reserved for these problems when they occur. Saul observes that, at first, twenty years seemed a long time to prepare for the Ice Age, but several years were wasted without people taking any real precautions. Governments thought of various methods to preserve the solar energy, but no one could think that the sun’s rays would soon not be sufficient to keep humans warm. Saul observes: “When the sun was warming us, we thought he would never leave us. We angered him... but now that the ice is surrounding us, I started seeing the Sun as our God” (GEE, 2008, p. 148). When the onset of the ice age starts to affect other European countries, they decide that the population should move to Africa, where the climate was warmer. This “move” is admittedly ironic, given the racist and imperialist history of Europe and the brutal colonisation of Africa by several European Powers. When disaster strikes, it obviously has no concern for assumed superiority of white people over the non-white people of the world. In this regard, a catastrophe of this scale is portrayed as an “equalizer” that cuts across racial, class, and gender differences.

Financial wealth, economic prosperity as well as military power are not enough to keep anyone safe in the face of such natural disasters. Saul stresses that technological advancement, especially different technologies used to increase fertility also affected the human genes. As a result of such biotechnological intervention, more and more children, including Saul’s son, were unfortunately born with physical defects. Saul mentions that his son was like a glass child – thin and pale – his heart valves were not working properly, he also had asthma and allergies.

Dropping fertility rate and the increasing difficulty people started to experience in trying to conceive also led to more and more separation between the sexes, with women preferring to stick together with the same gender and men likewise. Saul wants to take his son to a warmer climate, but his wife does not agree with this decision. He observes that his wife could not understand that “he wanted to take his son away from nanomachines, the noisy earphones, the talking buildings, techno-births and the sick children that were born in few numbers away from the lonely men and women and away from the ice people and the damage they had caused” (GEE, 2008, p. 302).

When Saul describes the white people who are trying to go to Ghana, we understand that racial differences have been significantly altered and subverted by the recent developments. Throughout recorded history, white people had considered themselves superior to blacks, but on their way to Ghana, this time as refugees and not imperialists, white people are made to feel inferior to the black policemen who survey them with amusement.

In this context, *The Ice Age* offers a strong political critique of socio-economic inequalities along the axis of the North-South divide. The imaginary template of the science fiction genre allows Gee to explore alternative future scenarios in which tables are turned and the European citizens are made to feel and experience what it means to be on the losing end of the global system. Thus, the novel encourages the readers to empathise with the underprivileged by reminding them that the seemingly secure position they hold is in fact very fragile and could fall apart.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to venture outside the boundaries of this article's focus on prose and finish with the wonderful poem "Singularity" by Marie Howe (written as a tribute to Stephen Hawking):

Do you sometimes want to wake up to the singularity  
we once were?  
so compact nobody  
needed a bed, or food or money —  
nobody hiding in the school bathroom  
or home alone  
pulling open the drawer  
where the pills are kept.  
For every atom belonging to me as good  
Belongs to you. Remember?  
There was no Nature. No  
them. No tests  
to determine if the elephant  
grieves her calf or if  
the coral reef feels pain. Trashed  
oceans don't speak English or Farsi or French;  
would that we could wake up to what we were  
— when we were ocean and before that  
to when sky was earth, and animal was energy, and rock was  
liquid and stars were space and space was not  
at all — nothing  
before we came to believe humans were so important  
before this awful loneliness.  
Can molecules recall it?  
what once was? before anything happened?  
No I, no We, no one. No was  
No verb no noun  
only a tiny tiny dot brimming with  
is is is is is  
All everything home.



Howe's poem brilliantly captures the gist and spirit of all I have been trying to say with reference to many scholars, poets and writers. The problems we are currently facing in the age of the Anthropocene cannot be understood or dealt with as long as we – as Homo sapiens – see ourselves as being separate from nature. As Howe suggests, we have to go back to the time “before we came to believe humans were so important”, a time when we were an indistinguishable part of an interconnected whole. It is only by letting go of anthropocentric hubris and narcissistic self-indulgence that humanity and our “home” planet can be saved. The women writers included in this article – Shelley, Atwood and Gee – employ different stories and contexts to highlight similar points regarding human short-sightedness, (self)-destructiveness, and the catastrophic consequences that might follow. They all call for the dismantling of the anthropocentric perspective and emphasize the very important point that human agency has done a lot of damage to planet Earth, which is its home. In this respect, their works continue to resonate with contemporary readers for whom environmental problems have increasing urgency. Problems ranging from climate change to global pandemics cannot be addressed with the same mentality that produced them in the first place. It is high time that we respond to the wakeup call, and give an attentive ear to all the artists, poets and writers who have been warning us all along.

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## NOTES

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