

## **SURVIVAL IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ORYX AND CRAKE* AND *THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD***

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**Abstract:** In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) Atwood argues that there 'are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being' (28), thereby implying a dualist representation of the human being, which pervades much of her subsequent work. Descartes (1596-1650) was first to put forth the view of the mind and body as two different components: the mind as an immaterial substance which is distinct from the material body. Although the Cartesian model has been largely refuted in the light of neuroscientific developments, suggesting that human consciousness is a result of, and therefore reducible to processes of the brain, Atwood's fiction continues to explore a dualist approach.

This article focuses on survival in two of Atwood's recent novels: *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. In both Atwood conveys a world in which a materialistic view pervades, yet the protagonists in these novels retain a dualist conception of themselves. This results in two distinct issues where 'survival' is concerned: survival of the mind and survival of the body. As the characters struggle to live 'as anything more than a minimally human being' within their post-apocalyptic setting, fundamental questions arise as to what exactly is necessary for the survival of both the individual and the human race.

**Keywords:** Atwood, Survival, *The Year of the Flood*, *Oryx and Crake*, Dualism, Art, Science.

In 1972, Margaret Atwood published *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, in which she assessed the relationship between literary production and concepts of human survival, a debate that appears throughout her fiction and most notably in two novels: *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009). In both these accounts of human 'survival', Atwood interrogates exactly what it means to humans of the twenty-first century to 'survive'. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines survival as: 'continuing to live after some event; remaining alive, living on'. This definition may seem neat and tidy; however, the intricacies of 'survival' are complex. The term survival is open to a range of possible interpretations, from physical to psychological. In order to establish exactly what is meant by 'survival', it is first necessary to establish what is meant in the same instance by 'life', what it means to 'live'. At the heart of such a question one may find the philosophical 'mind-body' dichotomy, the fundamental anxiety about what constitutes a human being.

René Descartes (1596-1650) first put forth the dualist view: that minds and bodies are made of two distinct substances. The mind, he purports, is made of 'immaterial' substance, while the body consists of 'material' substance (Heil 1998). In *Meditation on First Philosophy* [first published 1641], though declaring himself to be 'comprised of a body and a mind' (Descartes 2009, 36), Descartes asserts, 'I am not that concatenation of members we call the human body', but defines the human mind as that which equates life and existence:

[T]hought exists, it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist – this is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking; for perhaps it could also come to pass that if I were to cease all thinking I would then totally cease to exist (ibid., 32).

Descartes' assertion that his mind was distinct from, and could therefore survive without his body, led to the 'classical' dualist view of the 'immortality of the soul' (Swinburne 2009, 50). A dualist interpretation of a human being would thus result in two distinct issues where survival is concerned: survival of the mind and survival of the body. In this case, the survival of one has arguably little or no effect on the other. In addition, survival of the mind should necessarily be considered more important than survival of a body that is viewed as a mere container.

The immortality of the soul is a concept held in various schools of religious thought, including Christianity. Within Christian doctrine, the soul is referred to as one part of the trinity: 'spirit and soul and body' (King James Bible, Thessalonians 5:23). Although Descartes makes no reference to the 'spirit', he does refer to the soul within his writing. However, he uses the term interchangeably with the word 'mind'. For Descartes the soul and the mind are one and the same; as he explains: 'I consider the mind not as a part of the soul but as the thinking soul in its entirety' (Descartes 1984, 246).

Developments in science and technology, however, mean that many now regard the Cartesian model as 'fundamentally flawed' and '[s]ubstance dualism is almost universally rejected among people who work in philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences' (Kirk 2003, 45; Himma 2005, 81). As Kirk explains, '[t]he more is discovered about the working of the brain, the less room there seems to be for any contribution from a Cartesian mind: it seems redundant' (2003, 36). Perhaps the most widely accepted view of human beings in western society today is the physicalist view that 'the world contains nothing but matter and energy' and as such, all 'mental state[s]' can be reduced to 'neural states' (Honderich 2005, 716). This view of human beings does not, of course, deny the

existence of a human sense of identity, thoughts, or emotions; it merely defines them as resulting from, and ultimately reducible to, processes of the human brain.

Whilst it may be difficult to argue against scientific evidence for physicalism and support a dualist theory (though some, such as Swinburne, have done), it is undeniable that a sense of dualism pervades the thinking of human beings today in the way in which we may continue to view ourselves: as an 'I' contained by a body which is considered as 'other'. Whether the human being is or is not a dualist being, one may feel oneself to be more than a body; one may feel oneself to be also a mind. The significance of this perceived mind necessarily complicates understanding and interpretation of survival in different instances.

In *Survival*, Atwood describes how obstacles to the survival of fictional characters have evolved from 'external', such as 'the land' or 'the climate', to what she terms 'internal' obstacles: 'they are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being' (Atwood 1972, 28). This implies a dualist being who may face challenges with regards to survival on a level beyond the physical, or 'minimally human'. It is this representation of the human being which pervades much of her subsequent work.

Sanchez-Grant notes the presence of 'the dualistic logic that insists our bodies are entirely separate from our *true* inner selves' in Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*, and asserts that '[t]he mind/body dualism is central to the lives of Atwood's female protagonists, heavily influencing their embodied experiences' (2008, 79). In *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood similarly presents the reader with protagonists who perceive themselves within the concept of dualist existence: Snowman (Jimmy) in *Oryx and Crake*, and Ren and Toby in *The Year of the Flood*. These protagonists are survivors of a viral plague in a future world. The protagonists' sense of dualism, however, at times brings into question their status as 'survivors', as they face challenges to their survival in ways beyond the physical. Yet the sense of the characters' existence beyond the material world and physical function of the body is frequently troubled and unsettled by the overwhelming presence of science and materialism in the novels, so that it becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to define exactly what is necessary for survival of the individual and for the human race.

On a physical level, Snowman, Ren and Toby conform to the definition of 'survivors'; they continue to live, in the biological sense of the word, after a catastrophic world event has resulted in the near extinction of the human race. Yet they are all portrayed, at some point in the narrative, in a situation

which denies them some essential aspect of life, beyond the sustenance that is necessary to physically survive. In *Oryx and Crake*, as Sasame points out:

Atwood demonstrates what is essential for us to survive [...] she requires the reader to think about what is necessary to be a human. Her message seems to be simple and clear: 'Man cannot live by bread alone' [Matthew 4:4] (Sasame 2010, 107-8).

The sense of the protagonists' struggle to survive is influenced by their own perceptions of themselves as dualist beings, whose minds face challenges distinct from those of their bodies. Evidence of the separation they feel between their minds and bodies can be seen throughout the two novels. Snowman makes the distinction between 'the body', and 'the mind and soul', for example, when he contemplates:

When did the body first set out on its own adventures? [...] after having ditched its old travelling companions, the mind and the soul, for whom it had once been a mere corrupt vessel or else a puppet acting out their dramas for them (*Oryx and Crake*, 76).

This seems to suggest the notion of man as a trinity, yet it does not directly reflect the Christian model of 'body, spirit and soul'. While the spirit and soul are referred to as distinct entities here, they are grouped together in opposition to the physical body, thus suggesting a link between the two as nonphysical but essential aspects of human existence. The reference to a 'soul' in addition to a 'mind' serves to emphasise the presence of a human quality that must be considered as more than a result of the physical processes of the brain. Atwood goes on to link the body's neglect of the mind and soul to the neglect of culture in Snowman's thoughts, that the body 'had dumped culture along with them: music and painting and poetry and plays' (*Oryx and Crake*, 76). What is conveyed within the novels is a strong link between cultural and self neglect.

Not only is it made clear that the body and the mind/soul are separate entities, these are also portrayed as having different functions within, and needs from, life. The concept of the body as a 'vessel' or 'puppet' for the mind and soul seems to parallel closely Descartes notion of 'a man's body as a kind of mechanism', while the notion of separate goals and functions reflects the Cartesian notion that 'even if no mind existed in it, the man's body would still exhibit all the same motions that are in it now except those motions that proceed either from a command of the will or, consequently from the mind' (Descartes 2009, 38). The notion of the mind and body as separate entities is

suggested further, when Snowman considers himself briefly as a 'caged [...] lab animal, trapped into performing [...] experiments on his own brain' (*Oryx and Crake*, 45). He goes to think to himself, 'Get me out!', only to realise, 'he's not in prison. What could be more *out* than where he is?' (ibid.). His desire to 'get out' seems, initially, to reflect a somewhat absurd desire; as he points out, he is a free man in that there are few limitations on his physical existence; there are no walls around him. If his mind is viewed as a separate entity, however, then it becomes the very 'brain' he refers to immediately before his plea, which becomes the material 'prison' within this context. His mind, therefore, the declared 'me' in this instance, claims a sense of its own existence in opposition to, and as irreducible to, the physical aspects of life it wishes to leave behind.

Similarly, Ren and Toby view themselves as dualist beings, perhaps owing to the religious influence of God's Gardeners. Religious beliefs of those such as the Gardeners, lend themselves organically to a dualist perception of the human being with its emphasis on the concept of the immortal soul. The fact that their dualist perceptions of themselves seem to have developed in response to their environment ironically supports the physicalist notion that human behaviour is entirely reducible to reactions to external stimuli. Nevertheless, regardless of how this belief arose, it is arguably the individual's own perception of him/herself which is more important than the scientific 'truth' of the issue. Atwood certainly privileges the advantages of this dualist conception of the human being in opposition to strictly materialist views throughout the novels.

Adam One suggests to Toby a possible reason why so many people cling to a belief in God in the face of science and materialism: 'the strictly materialist view – that we're an experiment animal protein has been doing on itself – is far too harsh and lonely for most, and leads to nihilism' (*The Year of the Flood*, 241). Bergthaller echoes this notion when, in relation to these two novels, he concludes that 'Faith is necessary to complement scientific insight if the latter is not to breed nihilism and despair' (2010, 740). Through the Gardeners' struggle to 'achieve their goal of reconciling the findings of Science with their sacramental view of Life' (*The Year of the Flood*, 240), Atwood highlights a wider human struggle to reconcile the physical with human meaning.

For Snowman, Ren and Toby, the existence of the mind or soul as a distinct entity seems to be a concept which is inseparable from the way they perceive their own existences. It is the quality of this mind/soul existence, however, which troubles the notion of their survival; there are mental restrictions on their lives that result from their situation as lone survivors in a hostile environment. An appropriate way to define the manner of their mental existence at these points in the novels

would be as a form of stasis; they have not ceased to function all together, either mentally or physically, yet neither have they overcome the obstacles of their situation so that they might be classed appropriately among the living. This conflict is perhaps somewhere at the root of Snowman's feelings when he laments, 'Oh torture. Is this purgatory?' (*Oryx and Crake*, 359). The notion of purgatory suggests being held neither one place nor the other, but in a temporary state where one can do nothing but wait until the situation is altered.

This state of mind is echoed strongly in Toby after the JUVE virus has hit, when she is alone in the Anooyoo Spa:

"Who lives here?" she says out loud. Not me, she thinks. This thing I'm doing can hardly be called living. Instead I'm lying dormant, like a bacterium in a glacier. Getting time over with. That's all. (*The Year of the Flood*, 95)

Her thoughts directly concern the notion of living; she feels her circumstances do not qualify as such. Though time continues to pass and she accomplishes necessary physical daily tasks, such as procuring food and maintaining her security at the spa, she nevertheless feels herself to be inactive. Her metaphor of 'lying dormant, like a bacterium in a glacier' encompasses the idea of being held waiting involuntarily, much like the notion of purgatory that Snowman considered. For Toby, as for Snowman, it is the mind and not the body which is restricted in its ability to live and, in both cases, neither regard themselves as 'surviving'.

Although Ren does not directly lament over her situation, as Snowman and Toby do, she is in a similar state of dormancy or stasis when she is locked up in the Sticky Zone. After Mordis has been murdered, she realises that she may be stuck for some time and assures herself that it is 'just a matter of waiting it out' (*The Year of the Flood*, 282). Later, when the pandemic has been revealed on the news, she is forced to concede that what she hopes for may never come. Her response is to 'take one day at a time and see what [comes] of it' (*ibid.*, 283). Thus, Ren lacks any sense of existence beyond her present state; she is caught within the same conundrum that is expressed of Toby: that she 'can't live only in the present, like a shrub', yet finds that 'the past is a closed door and she can't see any future' (*ibid.*, 96). They are in this way denied a quality of existence beyond a basic physical sense and their minds seem 'trapped' by their bodies, rather than free to experience life actively through them.

However, not all the characters in the novels perceive themselves as dualist beings; Crake openly rejects the theory. In *The Year of the Flood* he attempts to rationalise the dualist notion of the immortality of the soul:

Glenn used to say the reason you can't really imagine yourself being dead was that as soon as you say, "I'll be dead," you've said the word I, and so you're still alive inside the sentence. And that's how people got the idea of the immortality of the soul – it was a consequence of grammar (316).

Crake seems automatically to disregard the concept of the human soul. Ren notes how he would 'say Use your meat computer when he meant Use your mind' (ibid., 316) and Snowman recalls his assertion that '*God is a cluster of neurons*' (*Oryx and Crake*, 157). For Crake, the individual mind, and associated belief in God, is nothing more than a simulation resulting from the neurological processes of the physical brain and, as such, does not exist or have relevance in any material sense. Crake's views conform strongly to those of physicalism, unsurprising given his specific affiliation with science. That scientists and 'numbers people' have become the dominant power in the social orders of the novels, while art, religion and 'word people' have been forced to take a back seat, emphasises the dominance of views such as Crake's in society (ibid., 25). The reality of such a social structure is symbolised by the respective universities: the high-tech and exclusive Watson-Crick Institute, with students in science-based subjects such as 'Botanical Transgenics', is described as a 'palace' compared to the run-down arts-based Martha Graham Academy (ibid., 199). In many ways the larger world society of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* reflects Snowman's earlier self-conception, with progression of the physical being situated in favour of progression of the cultural and spiritual pursuits of the mind and soul.

Snowman remembers visiting Crake at the Watson-Crick institute when he (as Jimmy) witnessed many ground-breaking scientific experiments, including the invention of ChickieNobs, a transgenic chicken-based organism that can produce multiple chicken breasts in a matter of weeks. The organism feels no pain and has no eyes or beak, merely an opening at the top to 'dump the nutrients in' (*Oryx and Crake*, 202). Jimmy's astonished response to seeing one of these organisms was to ask, 'what's it thinking?' (ibid.). In response, the female student with Crake laughed and explained: 'they'd removed all the brain functions that had nothing to do with digestion, assimilation and growth' (ibid., 203). In a world perceived as purely physical, it becomes easy, for those with scientific knowledge, to manipulate genetic material to such ends without moral or existential questioning: all

thought processes can be reduced to 'brain function'; they understand and can manipulate all processes of the brain, thus Jimmy's question is deemed ridiculous.

At the Martha Graham Academy, once set up as an 'Arts-and-Humanities college [...] with special emphasis on the Performing Arts', Snowman reflects that 'a lot of what went on was like studying Latin, or book-binding, pleasant enough [...] but no longer central to anything' (*Oryx and Crake*, 187). The loss of focus on art and culture in society, and of human meaning beyond the present and physical, is perhaps what leads Pilar, in *The Year of the Flood*, to refer to those outside the gardener compound as '[t]he dead who are still alive' (105). The oxymoronic suggestion of people being dead whilst alive, inferring the existence of zombie-like individuals, conveys the sense of a fundamental lack in the lives of these individuals; they are not alive in the full sense of the word, they are mentally and spiritually starved. In this sense, much of the human race can be seen as struggling for survival even before the release of the JUVE virus. This aspect of human life and survival, however, is one which Crake fails to consider.

Individual survival, as explored through the characters of Snowman, Ren and Toby, is not the only focus of the novels; there remains the wider issue of the survival of the human race. Atwood has stated that '[t]he *what if* of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, *What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us?*' (Atwood 2005, 285-286). The human population in the novels, prior to the release of the JUVE virus, is faced with a multitude of challenges in ensuring its continued survival, many of which have arisen as a result of the failings of society. As Crake explains, '[a]s a species we're in deep trouble, [...] we're running out of space time. Demand for resources has exceeded supply' (*Oryx and Crake*, 295). The reader is given to understand that without serious intervention, such as Crake's engineering and distribution of the virus, the human race would have had little, if any, chance of survival. Is it possible, with this in mind, to view Crake's actions as ensuring survival rather than destruction? Does it indeed ensure that humanity has 'a better chance of swimming' in a 'sink or swim' situation? (*ibid.*, 294-5). As Labudova observes, 'the greater good' can be seen as a key motivator or, ultimately, an 'excuse' for the actions of both the God's Gardeners and Crake (2010, 142-143). The 'greater good' is a concept which necessarily denies primary significance to the survival of the individual. A 'conundrum' of Crake's is: 'can a single ant be said to be alive in any meaningful sense of the word, or does it only have relevance in terms of the anthill?' (*Oryx and Crake*, 339). Crake seems ultimately to favour the latter.

Crake asserts that 'human beings hope they can stick their souls into someone else, some new version of themselves, and live on forever' (*Oryx and Crake*, 120). This somewhat dualistic 'hope', he explains, has inevitably led to overpopulation, and thus the human race is, as Jimmy summarises, 'doomed by hope' (*ibid.*). Jimmy counters this conclusion with the ironic point that 'we're doomed without hope, as well' (*ibid.*), emphasising a psychological need for hope. Crake, however, is quick to dismiss the importance of this, as he 'cheerfully' declares that existing 'without hope' dooms people 'only as individuals' (*ibid.*). For Crake, then, the quality of the individual's existence is unimportant in comparison with the survival of the species as a whole.

These novels, as Bergthaller explains:

suggest that a rigorously pragmatic and empirical stance [...] may in and of itself be unable to respond to the fundamental question which the discourse of sustainability usually passes over: why (and under what conditions) the survival of the human race should be regarded as an ethical good to begin with (2010, 742).

Crake evidently does not see the survival of the human race as any kind of ethical good, and thus does not intend for a select number of ordinary humans to inherit the earth. He sees the human being as a 'faulty' model (*Oryx and Crake*, 166) and so creates the Crakers as his version of the perfect human to survive in place of *Homo sapiens sapiens*:

What had been altered was nothing less than the primate brain. Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesses. [...] They would have no need to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money (*Oryx and Crake*, 305).

The possibility of the greater-good arising as a result of Crake's actions here becomes questionable. Although he goes on to suggest the social benefits of certain adaptations to the human brain, such as the elimination of 'racism', his suggested elimination of aspects such as 'family' and 'symbolisms', may lead one to question exactly what, if anything, of humanity will survive through the existence of the Crakers (*ibid.*). Earlier Jimmy tried to make the point that:

When any civilization is dust and ashes [...] art is all that's left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning – human meaning – that is – is defined by them (*Oryx and Crake*, 167).

If Crake's ideal model for human civilization were to be realised, there would be no art and the sense of meaning that Jimmy refers to would be lost. As Glover concludes: 'Crake's rejection of 'culture' [...] is a rejection of part of what makes us human' (2009, 57).

In spite of these concerns about the nature of the Crakers, and the lack of certainty concerning the future prospects of the human race, there remains a pervading sense of hope at the end of the novels. Atwood herself has said, 'I tell people that I feel that *Oryx and Crake* is quite hopeful because people are still alive at the end of it compared with what we might end up doing' (Rosenberg 2011). The hope, however, comes not only from the unexpected survival of a number of human individuals, but also from the ways in which the Crakers have broken from the expectations and systems of their maker.

Although Crake rejected the notion that singing and dreaming have value, he found himself unable to eliminate them. As Jimmy recalls:

Crake hadn't been able to eliminate dreams. We're hard-wired for dreams, he'd said. He couldn't get rid of singing either. We're hard-wired for singing. Singing and dreams were entwined (*Oryx and Crake* 352).

In *The Year of the Flood*, Ren remembers that 'Adam One said music was built into us by God: we could sing like the birds but also like the angels, because singing was a form of praise that came from deeper than just talking' (129). Singing and dreaming are presented as an inseparable part of human nature and, though apparently rooted somewhere in the brain, they seem entwined with a part of the individual that is felt to have significance beyond physicality. Though Crake aims to reduce *Homo sapiens sapiens* to a species which experiences a purely physical and thus uncultured life, ultimately he is unable to do so.

Though Crake does not survive long enough to witness it, the Crakers begin to exhibit traits that he was certain he had been able to eradicate through the manipulation of their genes. Perhaps the most significant of these is religious thinking. Snowman reflects how: 'Crake thought he'd done away

with all that, eliminated what he called the G-spot in the brain. *God is a cluster of neurons*, he'd maintained' (*Oryx and Crake*, 157). Yet the Crakers begin to worship Crake and Oryx as metaphysical idols, whom they are understood to commune with. Snowman thinks, '[t]hey're up to something [...] something Crake didn't anticipate: they're conversing with the invisible, they've developed reverence. Good for them' (*ibid.*).

What remains ambiguous in the novels is whether the Crakers' development of religious belief stems from Crake having failed to genetically eliminate the so-called God gene, or whether Crake's failure lies in a false belief that all aspects of human nature can be reduced to material causes. In an interview, Atwood explains her own belief:

I think that the religious strand is probably part of human hard-wiring...by religious strand, I don't mean any particular religion, I mean the part of human beings that feels that the seen world is not the only world [...] If that is the case, religion was selected for in the Pleistocene by many, many millennia of human evolution. (Rosenburg 2011)

That Crake is unable to eradicate religion does not seem to suggest that religious belief holds any higher truth, but does suggest that qualities such as belief and hope are inseparable from human 'hard-wiring'.

The Crakers not only develop religious beliefs, they also display a tendency towards art, imagination and creativity when they create a 'facsimile' of Snowman while he is away, in order to try and bring him back to them. Upon seeing what they have done, Snowman remembers Crake's words:

*Watch out for art, Crake used to say. As soon as they start doing art, we're in trouble. Symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall, in Crake's view. Next they'd be inventing idols [...] and kings, and then slavery and war* (*Oryx and Crake*, 361).

Art is the very symbol which Snowman (as Jimmy) had equated with human meaning. The imaginative process and the desire to create seem to be concepts which Atwood is suggesting are, and should remain, inseparable from human nature. As Glover observes: '[a]lthough they may not necessarily be positive attributes, idols and funerals, kings and slavery are an intrinsic part of human nature – they are part of what separate us from animals' (2009,57).

In these novels Atwood presents the reader with a world not far removed from our own, in which physicalist logic prevails in society through science. In comparison, all qualities that one may with associate with non-material human meaning are regarded by the majority as having little or no value. In assuming to act for the greater good, Crake creates the Crakers as superior beings to inherit the Earth in place of humanity. Yet his design is flawed and, with a deep-rooted sense of irony, he wishes to eradicate those human qualities which are already facing extinction. Though Crake assumes he is acting in opposition to a societal structure that favours technological progress over environmental harmony, the flaws in his design originate from his singular affinity with Science. He, like the society he opposes, neglects to consider the necessity of art, culture and spirituality to the condition of the human being.

Atwood establishes characters in both novels that must be considered as dualist beings: individuals whose needs in life arise from both the physical and mental aspects of their existence. What is emphasised above all is the human need for mental and spiritual nourishment, and this can be found in art, culture and religion. In order for human survival to be achieved, these novels suggest that a reassessment of our own values, our own self-conception and our own goals in life is first in order, before we can face the larger environmental challenges that may arise as a result of our actions. As human beings we must first ask ourselves: what aspects of our condition are we already denying.

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