

## **“Egg Full of Words”: Language & Power in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake***

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### **Abstract**

Margaret Atwood’s speculative fiction novel *Oryx and Crake*, published in 2003, examines complex issues of environmentalism, genetic engineering, social inequality, gender and violence through a near-future, post-apocalyptic narrative. *Oryx and Crake* is often read through the lens of these themes, but a more nuanced reading considers the role of language and communication in the novel. Specifically, the novel addresses both the power and impotence of words in their capacity to enlighten as well as to deceive. Although the novel is a work of speculative fiction, the world Atwood creates is firmly grounded in many cultural and scientific developments found in current society. Against this dystopic backdrop, Atwood presents a culture in which science is unfettered and the arts and humanities are ignored. By critiquing elements of modern life, *Oryx and Crake* can be regarded as a cautionary tale against a possible bleak future. Through alternating flashbacks between the past and the post-apocalyptic world, the novel follows the story of Jimmy, also called Snowman, as he tries to survive and protect a genetically engineered race of humans called Crakers. Before the apocalyptic events portrayed, Snowman is a wordsmith, charged with finding ways to communicate in order to sell products, but later uses this same skill in order to maintain order and sanity. Atwood portrays a world in which language is twisted to suit the interests of those in power as well as the dissolution of language in the absence of others to communicate with. Despite these binary aspects, she emphasizes the importance of language and communication as an intrinsic part of the human experience and a means to avoid the dystopic future represented in the novel. This work suggests that the trivialization of words precedes the insignificance of humanity.

**Keywords: Language, Power, Dystopia**

### **1. Introduction**

*A word after a word  
after a word is power.*  
—Margaret Atwood

Much of the scholarly discourse on the works of Margaret Atwood focuses on feminist theory and post-colonial perspectives, as well as eco-criticism and techno-criticism. While these thematic elements are certainly prevalent in Atwood’s work, beneath them lies a leitmotif on which these oft-discussed themes are staged: Atwood’s ongoing fascination with language and communication, particularly the way in which they function within society. In a 1979 interview for *American Poetry Review* Atwood, with her characteristic wit, argues “A word isn’t separate from its context. That’s why I say language is a solution, something in which you’re immersed, rather than a dictionary. There are little constellations of language here and there and the meaning of a word changes according to its context in its constellation”.<sup>1</sup> This interview neatly coincides with the work of theorists Michael Halliday as well as Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge. Published only a year before Atwood made her remarks to *American Poetry Review*, Halliday’s

1978 book *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*, offers a functionalist theory of language, in that the function of communication shapes the form of language. Hodge and Kress expand on Halliday's work in their 1979 text *Language as Ideology* as well as the 1988 return to the topic in *Social Semiotics*.

Atwood positions her novel *Oryx and Crake* within this framework. Set in a dystopian near future, the novel follows the protagonist, Jimmy — or Snowman,<sup>2</sup> as he renames himself, alternating between his past and present. The former is a bleak, commodity and technology driven society and the latter a post-apocalyptic world in which he is the only human survivor. Crake, a brilliant but sociopathic mad scientist and Jimmy's best friend, causes a global bioterrorist attack leaving Jimmy as the only human survivor. As a scientist in the pre-apocalypse narrative, Crake's experiments are unchallenged and even encouraged. Crake sees humanity as a doomed race and, as a remedy, develops a new humanoid race — his Paradise models — devoid of particular human traits. In addition to the inclusion of certain physical characteristics, Crake attempts to genetically strip these creatures of any desire to worship a higher power, interest in art and literacy, and knowledge of death. He then enacts his radical plan to destroy humanity and leave the planet to his new species. The post-apocalyptic episodes of the novel depict Jimmy as the protagonist, with all his failings, as he tries to foster the emergence of this new race and adjust to a world devoid of human life.

These two scenarios represent very different contexts for the representation of language and communication. The way language functions must therefore be adapted to the social context. The concept of social semiotics examines the ways people communicate with a focus on the relevance of social context and its influence on language. Hodge and Kress state:

We see communication essentially as a process, not as a disembodied set of meanings or texts. Meaning is produced and reproduced under specific social conditions, through specific material forms and agencies. It exists in relationship to concrete subjects and objects, and is inexplicable except in terms of this set of relationships. Society is typically constituted by structures and relations of power, exercised or resisted; it is characterized by conflict as well as cohesion, so that the structures of meaning at all levels, from dominant ideological forms to local acts of meaning will show traces of contradiction as well as cohesion, ambiguity, polysemy in various proportions, by various means.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the various modes in which communication occur are not built upon a structured set of rules, but rather develop in response to the way these modes accomplish particular functions in society. The social element is intrinsic within language and communication, dependent upon the interaction and interrelation of those who are communicating, both in an individual model and within a society at large. Further, this suggests something of a symbiotic relationship between language and society. Language is shaped by the role it functions within a society, but it can also be manipulated to shape society itself.

Atwood's juxtaposition of these pre- and post-apocalyptic settings highlights this reciprocal relationship between semiotic systems and society. She creates a narrative which examines the way language functions in society to create meaning, and through meaning, maintain or create structures of power with varying levels of success. Social semiotics suggests that various modes of communication have meaning potential and that potential is only developed within context. Meaning is constantly in a state of fluctuation as language is modified for specific social realities. Atwood places Jimmy in these juxtaposed scenarios to consider what happens to language and communication in two very different social environments: a pre-apocalyptic, exaggerated version of today's society which ignores language's intrinsic value and instead manipulates communication to maintain power and a post-apocalyptic world in which those power structures no longer exist. Through Jimmy, the novel offers an understanding of current modes of communication and a consideration of a world in which those modes are stripped away. In both scenarios, language and communication function as a means to obtain or maintain power, even though the context changes.

## 2. Pre-Apocalypse

### 2.1 language and class

In the pre-apocalypse episodes of the novel, there is a distinct class division between those who are scientifically gifted and those who are talented in less desirable skills, such as the nearly-defunct arts and humanities. This culture privileges those who, like Crake, have the ability to excel in those fields which further the advancement of technology. Crake and those like him certainly hold positions of power within this society, largely because of their particular skill

set. The disparate classes of individuals within the novel are separated into their specific station in life principally on their ability to contribute to this technology-driven society. Those whose skills can be used in service of commodification of scientific advancement live a life of relative luxury and comfort inside safe, corporate run compounds, separated from those who are not a part of this intellectual elite. This is highlighted early in the novel during an exchange between Jimmy and his father, himself a member of this scientific cultural elite. Atwood writes:

Long ago, in the days of knights and dragons, the kings and dukes had lived in castles, with high walls and drawbridges and slots on the ramparts so you could pour hot pitch on your enemies, said Jimmy's father, and the Compounds were the same idea. Castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside. "So are we the kings and dukes?" asked Jimmy. "Oh, absolutely," said his father, laughing.<sup>4</sup>

Jimmy and his family live, in comparison to those outside the compound, like modern day versions of royalty. While power and influence are relegated to those who fit this specific skill set, those termed "numbers people," there is an implied understanding of the way communication factors into maintaining that power and privilege. Rather than teaching language as having any intrinsic value, it has become commodified and twisted into a tool of manipulation, wielded by powerful corporations. In "What Makes a Crake? The Reign of Technique and the Degradation of Language in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*," Christina Bieber Lake examines the impact privileging scientific acumen — what she calls technique — has on language and the arts in the novel. Lake writes, "For Atwood, reliance on technique and process has been concomitant with a disintegration of language that can be seen in the degradation of the arts. This cultural change forms a society in which someone like Crake, a narcissistic technocrat with no regard for others, no capacity for love, can be elevated into a position of influence."<sup>5</sup> While Lake's argument acknowledges the power hierarchy present in the novel and its capacity to create an individual devoid of human empathy, it fails to fully address the space and power language is actually given in this society. Language is certainly devalued, but that devaluation occurs specifically in terms of language as an art, devoid of any inherent power or meaning. Instead, language is only useful to maintain power.

## 2.2 Education And Commodification Of Language

Society *seems* to have little need for someone like Jimmy, skilled in the use of words. His high school testing labels him as "a mid-range student, high on his word scores but a poor average in the numbers columns."<sup>6</sup> In the chapter titled "Applied Rhetoric," Jimmy recalls his experience at Martha Graham Academy, a university "set up by a clutch of now-dead rich liberal bleeding hearts from Old New York as an Arts-and-Humanities college."<sup>7</sup> The narrator displays a negative tone when considering the roots of this type of education, insinuating its frivolity. In comparison to other universities that focus on science and mathematics, the school is derelict. At this crumbling university, Jimmy reluctantly studies "Problematics," or "Spin and Grin" as it is colloquially and derisively known among the students. As the child of scientists employed at a major corporation, his experiences have taught him that the only useful application for a wordsmith is in the marketing of products and technologies. He is learning the vocabulary of a career, but nothing about the depth of language through an education in literature or the humanities. Atwood writes:

Jimmy had few illusions. He knew what sort of thing would be open to him when he came out the other end of Problematics with his risible degree. Window-dressing was what he'd be doing, at best — decorating the cold, hard, numerical real world in flossy 2-D verbiage. Depending on how well he did in his Problematics courses — Applied Logic, Applied Rhetoric, Medical Ethics and Terminology, Applied Semantics, Relativistics and Advanced Mischaracterization, Comparative Cultural Psychology, and the rest — he'd have a choice between well-paid window-dressing for a big Corp or flimsy cut-rate stuff for a borderline one. The prospect of his future life stretched before him like a sentence; not a prison sentence, but a long winded sentence with a lot of unnecessary subordinate clauses.<sup>8</sup>

Atwood's dry wit and critical eye are evident in this passage. This utilitarian approach to language is shallow, and yet still holds power. A career in window-dressing is a valid, if not particularly desirable, life choice for Jimmy considering his place in a power structure that favors "numbers people". It is the vehicle that allows powerful corporations to maintain and ensure a society in which they will continue to profit. In "*The Handmaids Tale and Oryx and Crake* 'In Context' Atwood notes that George Orwell was a "direct model" for her works of dystopian fiction and this passage

echoes his critique on language in the political realm.<sup>9</sup> Orwell, in his essay “Politics and the English Language,” writes, “The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms like a cuttlefish squirting out ink.”<sup>10</sup> Jimmy, when considering the remainder of his life working as a spin-doctor for a corporation, imagines himself very much as one of Orwell’s ink-squirting cuttlefish. The things he will write have no intrinsic value and are bloated or twisted to serve those in power.

Through Jimmy’s course of study and its curriculum, Atwood presents a powerful critique of the manipulation and commodification of language. Rather than study language as art, Jimmy’s courses are all designed to teach the ability to deceive and manipulate the public through the shallow, utilitarian use of language. Lake writes, “while Crake is clearly designed to stand for the utilitarian scientist type, Jimmy is not some simple savior of human language, the English major’s hero. Though Jimmy is inclined more naturally toward language, he, too, has been shaped by a culture that does nothing to encourage it.”<sup>11</sup> Much of that formative shaping occurs during Jimmy’s experience at Martha Graham. The listed course names seem fairly innocuous individually, but when considered as a collective, a pattern emerges: his education is wholly in service to the salability of products. He will need an understanding of medical terminology to discuss scientific medical advances effectively. Rhetoric and logic will serve to skillfully convince consumers of those advancements’ superiority over competitors. Applied Semantics, particularly in conjunction with Comparative Cultural Psychology, teaches Jimmy to understand the nuances of language, the relationship between denotation and connotation of words and phrases, as well as how those relationships vary depending on culture. Atwood reminds the reader that words carry power and, if misused, that power can deceive the public.

The courses listed are recognizable as part of conventional academic disciplines, with one notable exception: Relativistics and Advanced Mischaracterization. Unlike the other elements of the curricula, this course focuses on ways to mischaracterize information. It is telling that Jimmy’s education includes ways to mischaracterize ideas or products with clever phrasing. This field of study will hone Jimmy’s talent with words, fashioning it into a tool that can be wielded to influence the thoughts of the public. All of these skills assist Jimmy as an agent of what Hodge and Kress call “media constructions of power and solidarity.”<sup>12</sup> In their book *Social Semiotics*, they suggest “The mass media act like communication technologies of the past, including writing, art and architecture, in having to construct communication exchanges that bind distant participants into an effective community, so that they can be subject to effects of power.”<sup>13</sup> After Jimmy completes his education, the powerful corporations manipulate Jimmy’s skill with words to create a public narrative, allowing the existing systems of power to maintain their hold on the citizens. For people in Jimmy’s profession, the aim of language is not truth but a reinforcement of the powerful corporations who fund the scientific research. Those researchers have a significant advantage over those individuals like Jimmy. While they are recruited to the best colleges and corporations, those who are scholars in the arts and humanities spend their careers creating elaborate fabrications in order to maintain some relevance in this society. Atwood’s social critique here is powerful. It may seem outlandish to teach a course in what is, in essence, lying; however, in our reality, corporations use these tactics, though perhaps not as blatantly as depicted in Atwood’s novel, in modern advertising. Through Jimmy’s experiences, the author criticizes consumerist behavior and critiques an educational system that uses language as a tool for creating cogs in a corporate machine rather than thinking individuals.

Jimmy and his skill with words are important components of the machine that allows those in power to maintain that power through control and commodification of language. Jimmy himself is an example of the power of this type of advertising. Atwood writes, “His hair was getting sparser around the temples, despite the six-week AnooYoo follicle-regrowth course he’d done. He ought to have known it was a scam – he’d put together the ads himself – but they were such good ads he’d convinced even himself.”<sup>14</sup> Although Jimmy is intimately familiar with the way language is manipulated, it is beyond his control and he cannot help but believe his own spin. He has been so formatively influenced by the representations of these products that, even with his insider knowledge, he finds himself unable to break from the controlling narrative produced by the corporations. In order to have any relevancy or power, an individual like Jimmy must eschew even what they know to be true and instead fabricate on a daily basis. Jimmy is so talented at this that, in the end, he succumbs to this controlling lie.

Advertising is also, at least in part, responsible for the implementation of Crake’s plan to destroy mankind — specifically advertising developed by Jimmy, though he is unaware of the full nature of Crake’s scheme. Jimmy, working for Crake, creates marketing for the aptly named BlyssPlus pill, focusing on three selling points: human longevity, protection against all sexually transmitted diseases, and enhanced libido. This is the narrative sold to the public. A fourth, more insidious effect of the drug, only revealed to investors, is that it causes sterility in users, providing yet another means of control over the populace. Finally, unknown to anyone other than Crake, the BlyssPlus pill is the delivery system for what will eventually be termed JUVE, or Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary, a quick acting disease that devastates the global population. Therefore, there are three primary narratives surrounding this drug, depending on the level of information provided: The agent of human life enhancement, the agent of control, and

the agent of death. None of these narratives are untrue, but each serves the purpose of fostering varied views on reality, ultimately to sustain varied levels of power and control.

## 2.3 Language As Resistance

In a world so hyper-focused on science and technology, it is unsurprising that art as a profession is poorly represented. Perhaps the single truly artistic figure in the novel is Jimmy's college girlfriend, Amanda Payne. Amanda is not from the same background as Jimmy; she grew up outside the compounds in the "Pleeblands," Atwood's portmanteau term combining plebian and land, and attends Martha Graham on scholarship. She holds a vastly different worldview from Jimmy and she seems more in touch with the way language is devalued. Her conceptual art projects, which she titles "Vulture Sculptures," involves staging simple, four-letter words — pain, whom, guts, love — in large scale using discarded animal parts. She waits until vultures descend on the grotesque scene and then takes aerial photographs of the word. Atwood writes, "Vulturizing brought [the words] to life, was her concept, and then it killed them. It was a powerful process — 'Like watching God thinking.'"<sup>15</sup> Amanda's art represents a way in which words *can* hold intrinsic value, and additionally how that value can in and of itself have power. The suggestion that this process is similar to an act of divine intelligence indicates these words, writ large, have value beyond their utilitarian use. In her essay "Postapocalyptic Vision: Flood Myths and Other Folklore in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*" Sharon R. Wilson suggests that Amanda's artwork "emphasizes how important words and stories are in this novel" and goes on to state this presentation of words "makes viewers pay attention to how their actions affect lifeforms."<sup>16</sup> Amanda represents the way language can function as a means to resist power. She is distinctly outside of the established power structure and, as such, words and language take on a different context. She has no political or social capital with which to resist the oppressive and hierarchical society, and yet she resists these structures through the art of language. Amanda represents a liminal space between those with power and those without. She is an outsider at Martha Graham, and even after college she lives in the Modules, something of a suburban intermediary between the Compounds and the Pleeblands. Her existence in this liminal space allows her some latitude to resist the existing power structure through language as an art. However, the impact of this resistance is limited. Her art is a powerful metaphor for this society's abuse of language but she is not impacting the balance of power on any significant scale. Corporations, using people like Jimmy, enact their own vulturization as well, scavenging for words they can twist to their own uses and leaving behind something empty of life.

Despite his education on the superficial and utilitarian use of words, Jimmy holds a certain reverence for them and mourns and fears their loss. Words and their depth of meaning is central to who he is. As a student, archaic phrasing fascinates him and he mentally collects words that have fallen from use. Jimmy "developed a strangely tender feeling towards such words, as if they were children abandoned in the woods and it was his duty to rescue them."<sup>17</sup> He becomes the caretaker of forgotten words; there is a kinship and solace in this act, as he feels forgotten as well. In this way, Jimmy reclaims some of the power inherent in language. He uses language, even if it is only within his memory, as a means of resistance. He resists the corporatization of language through his own personal reverence for it.

After Jimmy's graduation from Martha Graham, he accepts a position at the cosmetics and health company AnooYoo, creating marketing copy for their products. Atwood writes, "It was his task to describe and extol, to present the vision of what — oh, so easily! — could come to be. Hope and fear, desire and revulsion, these were his stocks-in-trade<sup>18</sup>" In this position, Jimmy finds opportunity to subvert this corporatization of language by surreptitiously slipping nonsensical words into his work: "Once in a while he'd make up a word — tensicity, fibracionous, pheromonimal — but he never got caught out. His proprietors liked those kinds of words in the small print on packages because they sounded scientific and had a convincing effect."<sup>19</sup> However, Jimmy knows this resistance is impotent and becomes frustrated in the knowledge that those he works for — those in power — have so little knowledge of real words and their influence that they are willing to accept any language, even nonsense, if it supports their aims. With no one to appreciate his cleverness, this resistance of power is meaningless. Without a context of understanding, Jimmy is unable to effect any meaningful change in the structure of power and he is acutely aware of this powerlessness.

## 3. Post-Apocalypse

### 3.1 Mythmaking And Meaning-Making

Similarly, in Snowman's present, the archaic words he loves and other less outmoded ones begin to slip from his memory in the absence of another human being with whom to converse. Again, context is crucial. Snowman needs an

audience with which he shares some commonality in order for language to have power. Atwood writes, “From nowhere, a word appears: *Mesozoic*. He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can’t reach the word. He can’t attach it to anything. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space.”<sup>20</sup> As the only remaining human being, he knows that the words only exist in his memory, and this dissolution terrifies him. He fears the loss of an important part of himself, as well as the remaining vestiges of humanity. Beyond that, he recognizes that without the commonality of language, he has no position of power in this new society, and so sets about to create that power hierarchy himself.

In the post-apocalyptic episodes of the novel, myth plays a significant role in meaning-making and the development of a power structure through language. In the essay “Mythmaking in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*,” Carol Osborne suggests the novel “offers an additional commentary on the power of words, on the omnipresence of myths in our cultural mindset, and on the inevitable pull of narrative in our desire to understand ourselves and our world.”<sup>21</sup> By considering the role of myth in Snowman’s reality, the reader is empowered to better understand the role of stories and myth in our reality. Snowman is tasked with the care of the emerging humanoid species developed by Crake as a replacement for humanity. Despite Crake’s attempts to genetically strip these creatures of any desire to worship a higher power, interest in art and literacy, and knowledge of death, Jimmy constructs a mythos for these Paradise models, or Crakers as he terms them, to answer their growing questions about remnants of human society they encounter. In defiance of Crake’s plans, Snowman places Crake at the center of this mythos through storytelling. Snowman is well aware of Crake’s attempts to remove myth and religion from his creation, but his one true skill is the weaving of stories. He spins an elaborate origin myth for the new species, the Children of Crake. This myth also explains the presence of animals, which he terms the Children of Oryx, collectively named for the woman both he and Crake loved. Atwood writes:

*Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually, she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they’d eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can’t talk.*<sup>22</sup>

The Crakers are curious by nature and come to Snowman for explanations of the world around them. Given evidence of a world beyond their experience — in the form of human artifacts found by the Crakers — their curiosity is reasonable. Snowman uses the only skill truly at his disposal — storytelling — to give the Crakers context. He attempts to rescue these childlike, innocent creatures in his own way, just as he tries to rescue abandoned words. By doing so, he is salvaging a piece of himself and something of his humanity in the process. Though fraught with difficulties, Snowman attempts connection via language in his interactions with the Crakers. However, this myth-making is not as altruistic as it may initially seem. Because Snowman is visibly different from them, the Crakers rather naturally believe his fabrications about their origins and further, come to believe that Snowman has the ability to speak to their new deities on their behalf. He uses this myth for his own benefit. As the only intermediary between the Crakers and the newly deified Crake, he has an advantage. He uses this advantage to convince the Crakers, who are infinitely more equipped for survival, to catch fish for him, facilitating his own continued existence.

However, in the absence of anything familiar, Snowman’s existence becomes insubstantial and he finds himself seeking to connect in some fashion with the Crakers in order to give his own life meaning. According to Kress “*Linking* of entities — humans with humans, with places, objects; objects with objects; objects with processes; processes linked with processes — is a major resource for making meaning. Much of semiosis is about *linking* of various kinds: linking by and through actions; by adjacency and proximity, temporal or spatial.”<sup>23</sup> It is notable that, as integral to their origin myth, Snowman chooses to explain why they have language and the animals do not. From his perspective, this skill makes him and the Crakers similar; it is the trait that makes them most human. It links him, at least in some marginal way, to the Crakers and in the absence of others who share his experiences, this connection gives meaning not only to the Crakers, but, more importantly, to Snowman himself. However, this places the Crakers, hierarchically, above the animals, but not above Snowman. Additionally, he projects humanity’s greed onto the Crakers even though they have no real sense of greed or ownership. In his myth, they devour the words because of their hunger, leaving nothing for the other creatures. This shows Snowman’s own disillusion with humanity. Snowman builds into the Craker’s sense of self, through their defining mythology, a natural hierarchy in which they hold some superiority to the animals. According to Osborne “As a writer, Jimmy is a lover of words, a natural storyteller, but he is also a product of a society that has devalued the humanities and elevated the sciences, a society in which words have lost their meaning, so he vacillates throughout the narrative, as his impulse to relish the power of language vies with his profound

disillusionment and cynicism.”<sup>24</sup> The myth truly reveals more about Snowman than it does the Crakers. He seems to instinctively need to create a society that holds certain ideas of power and superiority so that he can have context, meaning and a position of power and influence. The power of words was used in his former life to skew humanity’s perception of the world; after the fall of man, he uses his skill of storytelling to enable the Crakers to understand their place in the world. But, more than that, he uses this skill to carve himself a position of power and meaning.

The Crakers constantly bombard him with questions about objects they find and do not understand. They have no context to place the objects into their own worldview. He recalls advice about interactions with indigenous peoples from a book he read that specifies, “you must attempt to respect their traditions and confine your explanations to simple concepts that can be understood within the contexts of their belief systems.”<sup>25</sup> As such, all explanations must adhere to the mythos of Oryx and Crake that he has already engendered in these beings. He explains what objects may be harmful to the Crakers, and tries — often unsuccessfully — to avoid words or phrases that would need further explanation. He frequently becomes frustrated with this process. In one particular instance, he tells the Crakers they ask too many questions and they should go away or they will “be toast.”<sup>26</sup> He is asked immediately to define toast, and finds himself unable. Snowman internally considers the mental gymnastics necessary to explain what would seem to be a simple concept, revealing the nuance and context necessary for connection through language. In doing so, the language seems to collapse upon itself, throwing Snowman into something of an existential crisis:

*Toast is when you take a piece of bread — What is bread? Bread is when you take some flour — What is flour? We’ll skip that part, it’s too complicated. Bread is something you can eat, made from a ground up plant and shaped like a stone. You cook it...Please, why do you cook it? Why don’t you just eat the plant? Never mind that part — Pay attention. You cook it, and then you cut it into slices and you put a slice into a toaster, which is a metal box that heats up with electricity — What is electricity? Don’t worry about that. While the slice is in the toaster you get out the butter — butter is a yellow grease made from the mammary glands of — skip the butter. So, the toaster turns the slice of bread black on both sides with smoke coming out, and then this “toaster” shoots this slice into the air, and it falls onto the floor...<sup>27</sup>*

He finds this mental exercise futile and instead creates alternative definitions, including a torture device and a sexual fetish item, before finally settling on the idea that, “*Toast cannot be explained by any rational means. Toast is me. I am toast.*”<sup>28</sup> This passage shows the complex context clues and nuance required of language as a means of connection and communication. Snowman, despite his efforts, does not have that connection with the Crakers. He is unable to fully and meaningfully communicate with them because of a lack of shared experiences. Like the word toast, he has lost all context. Every explanation requires more and more complex explanation. So many things from his previous life, including Snowman himself, cannot be explained rationally to the inheritors of the earth, and yet they are drawn to Jimmy’s stories. Despite Crake’s attempt to genetically eliminate literacy and a need for religion or mythos, the Crakers seem inevitably captivated by stories as a means to explain both the smallest things, like toast, as well as the large questions humanity has always contemplated: Why are we here? Who or what made us?

Snowman no longer has context in the vacuum created by the collapse of humanity. In the creation of myth, he creates a position of power for himself, however limited. In the worldview of the Crakers, he becomes the intermediary between them and their creator, a “cross between a pedagogue, soothsayer, and benevolent uncle.”<sup>29</sup> He is both too self-aware and too broken to attempt to place himself at the apex of this myth, but even in the creation of the story he becomes important. The adoration the Crakers exhibit toward Crake both amuses and frustrates Snowman. He finds a delicious irony in the fact that Crake, who dismissed the idea of divinity, has become divine. However, Snowman also resents the Craker’s response to the concept of the absent Crake, even if he created it himself. Atwood writes:

*If he were here. But he’s not here, and it’s galling for Snowman to listen to all this misplaced sucking up. Why don’t they glorify Snowman instead? Good, kind Snowman, who deserves glorification more — much more — because who got them out, who got them here, who’s been watching over them all this time? Well, sort of watching. It sure as hell wasn’t Crake. Why can’t Snowman revise the mythology? Thank me, not him! Lick my ego instead!<sup>30</sup>*

Snowman traps himself in his own narrative. In seeking to order the world around him, a world that has become largely alien and alienating, he builds a myth in which he has context and power. He regrets the specifics of the myth, wishing he had placed himself in a loftier position but fears making any revisions to his narrative because “he’d lose his audience.”<sup>31</sup> Snowman resigns himself to being a prophet rather than a god, realizing that it is “That, or nothing. And he couldn’t stand to be nothing, he needs to be heard. He needs at least the illusion of being understood.”<sup>32</sup> The idea

of an audience is central to Snowman's sense of self, and in service of the preservation of self, he uses myth-building to give himself power.

### 3.2 Power Of Naming

Atwood employs a significant use of portmanteaus, neologisms, and invented names for characters — such as Oryx, Crake and Snowman — as well as for the numerous products and corporations depicted in the novel. Again, the context of this naming shifts considerably between the juxtaposed time frames, but in both scenarios, naming represents ways in which power is constructed through language. Much like the name “Pleeblands” used to represent the lower class levels of society outside the Compounds, the names of powerful organizations in each Compound are primarily portmanteaus such as OrganInc and HealthWyzer. Jimmy's parents work for a bio-engineering company that develops, among other things, animal food products as well as genetically modified animals designed to grow organs for human transplant. The corporation's name, OrganInc, is deliberate and both represents the actual work the company does — the creation of organs — and creates a healthy and safe connotation. Presumably someone educated about the power of manipulated language — someone like the person Jimmy will become in his early adulthood — designs this name to read and sound like the word “organic”, when what the organization actually does is markedly not natural. Additionally, the genetically modified organisms created at this organization are similarly named in an effort to make the work seem more palatable and even ethical to the public. Creatures such as the rakunk and the snat describe hybridized experiments combining the raccoon and skunk as well as the snake and rat, respectively. Their new names are literally combinations of their respective parts, but the naming expresses the unbridled power science has over nature in the novel. Not only are the organisms fundamentally changed, but much like the biblical creation story in which Adam names the animals, the creators of these new creatures control their narrative through naming. However, also like Adam, these creators are human and therefore flawed. Their use of naming serves to help them maintain power, but it is imprecise. In an essay examining Plato's *Theory of Language* Morris Henry Partee argues:

While a name can serve as a tool to teach and to distinguish, words are treacherous guides to any higher knowledge. Since different names can be applied to the same object, the legislator of name must have been some fallible human agent. The gods would not thus contradict themselves. Both the original maker and the current user of a word apply language to an immediate practical use. Thus, human limitations and ignorance will flaw individual words.<sup>33</sup>

The naming process speaks to the malleability of representation in this society. These creatures and the scientific prowess they represent are proof of the power these corporations hold. Even before the reader learns of Jimmy's eventual career in advertising, the way names are used to exert control over the public is clear. Kress argues that the process of naming depends largely on the intended audience. He writes, “A sign/metaphor made for a ‘lay’ audience with the purpose of quick, rough-and-ready communicability cannot possibly serve for the needs of a professional audience in solving a problem or accomplishing a task; nor for the purposes of carefully establishing understanding.”<sup>34</sup> But the intent of those in power is, as Partee suggests, never to establish any higher understanding. Indeed, the names are intended to be simple and attention-grabbing: Perfectababy provides genetically engineered embryos, Happicuppa sells coffee and AnooYoo develops health and beauty products. Even the devastating virus — JUVE — is given a catchy name in the brief period before humanity fully succumbs in order “to make it seem more manageable.”<sup>35</sup> Whether it is to sell products or stave off impending panic, names in this society are intended to control the reactions of the public.

The marked division between the pre-and post-apocalyptic society is highlighted most significantly in the renaming of the characters. Many of the characters in the novel take on different names at various points of the novel and this renaming symbolizes significant changes. Atwood applies this naming to secondary characters, such as Amanda Payne whose given name is Barb Jones and the Crakers whom Snowman names after famous historical and pop culture figures, as well as the trio of primary characters — Oryx, Crake and Jimmy. This idea is introduced early in the novel as the reader learns that Snowman was once Jimmy; he is very intentional in the selection of this new moniker. He alludes to Crake's rule forbidding the use of names of imaginary creatures. Jimmy, in his new role as Snowman, takes “a bitter pleasure” in breaking this rule.<sup>36</sup> Although it is too late for this demonstration to have real value, it is significant that, even in his terribly dejected state, Snowman tries to take control of his own narrative through this name change. Atwood writes, “The Abominable Snowman — existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumors and through its backward pointing footprints. . . . For present purposes he's shortened the name. He's only Snowman. He's kept the *abominable* to himself,

his own secret hair shirt.”<sup>37</sup> Snowman, like the mythical abominable snowman, hovers in a liminal space between his old world and the new paradigm that has been thrust upon him. He struggles to understand and come to terms with his place — his context — within the community of the Crakers. His choice of name reflects his attempt to regain control of his own story — leaving behind a name and a person who had been controlled all of his life. And yet, he is still secretly controlled by the guilt he bears.

The act of renaming begins with Crake, whose given name is Glenn. In childhood, both Jimmy and Glenn play an online “interactive biofreak masterlore game” called MaddAddam.<sup>38</sup> The game’s load screen reads “*Adam named the living animals, MaddAddam names the dead ones.*”<sup>39</sup> Players attempt to identify extinct animals based on the information provided by their competitor. All players assume a code name within the game. Atwood writes, “Crake had picked their code names. Jimmy’s was Thickney, after an Australian double-jointed bird that used to hang around in cemeteries, and — Jimmy suspected — because Crake liked the sound of it as applied to Jimmy. Crake’s codename was Crake, after the Red-necked Crake, another Australian bird.”<sup>40</sup> There is some foreshadowing in the name Thickney, as Jimmy will eventually inhabit a world that has become grave site for the human race, but this name does not catch on and Jimmy eventually drops the moniker. Crake, fully in charge of his own narrative, dons the new name, making it his own. Jimmy only mentions Crake’s given name a single time in the entire novel. However, neither Oryx nor Crake, named after extinct animals, survive the events of the novel. And Jimmy, despite his reluctance to assume the name Thickney, becomes the bird that inhabits the space of the dead.

Oryx, the love interest of both Jimmy and Crake has a unique naming process in the novel. Whereas both Crake and Jimmy have a “real” name, Oryx is only ever known as a series of names *given* to her by others. As a child, Oryx is unnamed, though presumably she had a name in her original home before she is purchased by Uncle En, a human trafficker who eventually leads Oryx into sexual exploitation. She has no real identity outside the perceptions of those who control her. Atwood writes, “Oryx had been given a new name by Uncle En. All the children got new names from him. They were told to forget their old names, and soon they did. Oryx was now SuSu.”<sup>41</sup> This naming allows the slaver to exhibit his power over Oryx, and language becomes a central part of that control. In this way, Oryx becomes representative of the destabilizing and intrusive power of language. Her life and experiences are negated through the language of her captors. Oryx “couldn’t remember the language she’d spoken as a child. She’d been too young to retain it. That earliest language: the words had all been scoured out of her head.... she’d had to learn a different way of speaking. She did remember that: the clumsiness of the words in her mouth, the feeling of being struck dumb.”<sup>42</sup> Atwood creates a narrative that considers the power of language within the context of colonization. Not only are the people of Oryx’s childhood village exploited, but Oryx’s body and identity are colonized as well and this pattern continues with both Jimmy and Crake. Her relationship with both men hinges on sexuality and her real identity remains largely ambiguous. Despite this representation of colonization in Oryx, she does demonstrate her own type of power, largely through discursive silence. In response to Jimmy, who constantly tries to learn of her past, she offers very little information and Jimmy is forced to create his own narrative for her. Atwood writes, “There was Crake’s story about her, and Jimmy’s story about her as well, a more romantic version; and then there was her own story about herself, which was different from both, and not very romantic at all.”<sup>43</sup> Jimmy attempts to understand Oryx much in the same way he later tries to connect with the Crakers: he builds a cohesive narrative *for* her but, in doing so, he takes away her own autonomy to represent herself through her own words.

#### 4. Conclusion

Atwood creates two very different social realities, and yet showcases the ways language is pivotal in both contexts as a means to create, maintain and even resist power. Jimmy lives in a world of controlling language in his youth and that has a fundamental influence on the way he approaches a world absent of existing power structures. As Snowman, he cannot resist utilizing language and communication as a means to empower himself. Language no longer has any real context, since context requires the mutual understanding of all parties. Jimmy’s desire to be understood leads him to attempt to create context in order to give himself meaning. In doing so, using the same tools of language manipulation, he creates a new power structure so that he can have context within it. In both scenarios, language and communication function, through meaning-making, as a way to obtain or maintain power, even though the context changes.

Through *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood herself engages in this discourse between language and power. The novel has power in its ability to communicate the complex and nuanced relationship between language and authority. Set against this bleak dystopian backdrop, Atwood’s own role as storyteller and mythmaker is key. Lake writes:

Because Jimmy lives in a world of devalued words, Atwood's novel is itself an effort to demonstrate what is sacrificed thereby. Atwood's language glimmers in contrast to that of this flattened, colorless world. Jimmy's reflections on his dissatisfaction with language become, ironically, an opportunity for her to show the real power of language through the concrete edges of metaphor.<sup>44</sup>

Atwood's novel stands as a cautionary tale on multiple levels. Her critiques of unchecked technology, consumerism, and greed are all intrinsically bound by the underlying connections of language and authority, suggesting that a world which devalues language — a world without the very platform she uses as a novelist — cannot endure. Works such as *Oryx and Crake* become, thereby, the antidote to the possible future Atwood depicts.

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