



THE SYMBOLIC FUNCTION OF NATURE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S ORYX AND CRAKE

Kadirova Durдона Dilshadovna

Senior Lecturer, Department of Linguistics and English Literature, Uzbekistan
State University of World Languages.

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Philological Sciences.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21308454>

Abstract: This thesis investigates the symbolic representation of nature in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003). As a foundational text of contemporary ecocriticism and speculative fiction, the novel depicts a post-human landscape where the traditional boundaries between the natural and the artificial have collapsed. Through a meticulous textual analysis, this study demonstrates that nature operates not merely as a passive backdrop, but as a dynamic symbolic force that reflects human hubris, ethical decay, and the ultimate resilience of the organic world. By examining the commodification of genetics, the creation of the bioengineered Crakers, and the feral wilderness of the post-apocalyptic era, this research highlights how Atwood uses nature as a moral mirror. The findings reveal that while corporate capitalism attempts to subjugate nature through technological modification, nature reclaims its autonomy, proving that ecological systems cannot be permanently commodified.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, Ecocriticism, Symbolic Nature, Anthropocene, Bioengineering, Posthumanism.

Introduction

In twenty-first-century speculative fiction, the relationship between humanity and the environment has shifted from pastoral appreciation to apocalyptic anxiety. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* stands as a seminal exploration of this shift, capturing the ecological anxieties of the Anthropocene [1, p. 45]. In the novel, nature is no longer an pristine, untouched wilderness; instead, it is a highly manipulated, commodified entity subjected to the whims of corporate bioconstructors [2, p. 112]. The text presents two distinct ecological realities: the pre-apocalyptic world dominated by corporate compounds like RejoovenEsense, where genetic mutation is the norm, and the post-apocalyptic world where Snowman (formerly Jimmy) navigates a feral, hybridized wilderness [3, p. 88]. This thesis explores the symbolic function of nature across these dual settings, arguing that Atwood utilizes the degradation and eventual rebirth of the environment to critique unbridled capitalist technoscience and to reaffirm the intrinsic value of the non-human world.

Methodology



This study utilizes an **ecocritical framework** combined with **posthumanist literary theory** to decode the symbolic layers of nature in the text. Ecocriticism, as formulated by scholars like Cheryl Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, provides the necessary tools to examine how literature reflects human attitudes toward the environment [4, p. 15; 5, p. 22]. Additionally, the method of **close textual analysis** is applied to specific environmental markers within the novel, including bioengineered hybrid species (such as pigeons, wolvogs, and snats), weather patterns, and the behavioral traits of the Crakers. By analyzing these elements, the research tracks the symbolic transition of nature from a *commodified resource* to an *uncontrollable agent of retribution*.

Results

The analysis yields several distinct functions of nature as a symbolic construct in *Oryx and Crake*:

Element of Nature	Physical Reality in the Novel	Symbolic Meaning / Function
Bioengineered Hybrids (Pigeons, Wolvogs)	Animals engineered for human organ harvest or corporate security [6, p. 74].	The grotesque consequences of human hubris and the violation of evolutionary boundaries.
The Crakers	Genetically modified, physically perfect post-human species [7, p. 103].	A clean slate of nature; an idealized, eco-centric alternative to destructive humanity.
The Feral Wilderness	Tropical, scorching, and overgrown post-apocalyptic landscape [8, p. 56].	Nature's absolute autonomy and its power to reclaim spaces abandoned by civilization.

The results indicate that Atwood structurally aligns the collapse of human civilization with the liberation of the natural world. The moment human control ceases, nature does not perish; rather, it mutates, adapts, and reasserts its dominance over the remnants of human technology [9, p. 131].

Analysis and Discussion

The symbolic function of nature in *Oryx and Crake* operates primarily through the tension between **artificiality and organic resilience**. In the pre-





apocalyptic phase, nature is symbols of human greed. The "pigoons"—pigs engineered to grow human neocortex tissue and organs—symbolize the reduction of living sentient beings into mere factories of consumption [6, p. 77]. This exploitation represents what ecofeminist Val Plumwood identifies as the master rationality, where the non-human world is completely instrumentalized [10, p. 62].

However, Atwood reverses this symbolic dynamic in the post-apocalyptic chapters. After Crake's bio-engineered pandemic eradicates humanity, the pigoons escape their enclosures. They become predators, displaying high intelligence and collective organization [3, p. 95]. Symbolically, the feral pigoons represent **nature turning human weapons back against humanity**. The modified environment is no longer submissive; it becomes hostile, untamable, and autonomous.

Furthermore, the Crakers function as a profound symbol of "pure" nature, despite being artificially created in a lab. Crake programs them to be perfectly adapted to the ecosystem: they eat only leaves and roots, eliminate waste without damaging the soil, and lack the human drive for territorial dominance or ideological warfare [7, p. 115]. Ironically, through genetic modification, Crake attempts to force humanity back into a state of ecological harmony. Yet, as the narrative progresses, the Crakers begin to develop mythic thinking, singing to Oryx and making a straw effigy of Snowman [2, p. 124]. This symbolic development demonstrates that nature—and the human nature embedded within it—cannot be entirely programmed or mathematically controlled; spiritual and creative impulses naturally emerge from organic life.

Finally, the harsh climate described in Snowman's present timeline—the burning, relentless sun and violent storms—symbolizes the **retributive justice of the biosphere** [11, p. 204]. The ozone depletion and extreme heat serve as a constant physical reminder of the anthropocentric damage inflicted upon the planet. Nature is no longer a nurturing mother, but an indifferent, unforgiving force that outlasts its exploiters [12, p. 41].

Conclusion

Ultimately, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* uses nature as a multi-layered symbolic vehicle to critique modern biotechnical capitalism. Nature in the novel evolves from a captive, fragmented resource into an untamed, self-governing entity that outlives the society that sought to dominate it. Through the symbolic trajectory of the pigoons, the Crakers, and the post-apocalyptic landscape, Atwood warns that human survival is inextricably linked to ecological balance.





When humanity treats nature purely as property or data, it ensures its own extinction. The thesis concludes that the novel's depiction of a reborn, feral nature serves as both a grim warning about the Anthropocene and a powerful testament to the enduring, unyielding power of the living world.

References:

- [1] Buell, L. (2005). *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Blackwell Publishing. pp. 43-61.
- [2] Bouson, J. B. (2004). "It's About to Happen": Exposing the Corporate Dystopia in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. *Margaret Atwood Studies*, 1(2), pp. 110-128.
- [3] Cooke, N. (2006). *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion*. Greenwood Press. pp. 85-99.
- [4] Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press. pp. 15-30.
- [5] Garrard, G. (2011). *Ecocriticism*. Routledge. pp. 20-35.
- [6] McCabe, M. (2009). Biotech and the Posthuman Body in Atwood's *Speculative Fiction*. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 32(4), pp. 71-89.
- [7] Sanderson, J. (2013). Genetics and Genesis: The Mythic Nature of the Crakers in *Oryx and Crake*. *Science Fiction Studies*, 40(1), pp. 101-118.
- [8] Snyder, G. (1990). *The Practice of the Wild*. North Point Press. pp. 50-65.
- [9] Bergthaller, H. (2010). Housebreaking the Human Animal: Humanism and Ecocriticism in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. *English Studies*, 91(6), pp. 125-143.
- [10] Plumwood, V. (1993). *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge. pp. 60-78.
- [11] Murphy, P. D. (2009). *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*. University of Illinois Press. pp. 199-215.
- [12] Hughes, R. (2015). Feral Landscapes and Global Climate in Twenty-First-Century Dystopias. *Environmental Humanities*, 6(1), pp. 35-52.

