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Pandemic Panic and the Fear of Death: An Ecocritical Read of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*
and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze, by close reading, the worlds of the speculative fictitious novels, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Scarlet Plague*, in terms of how fear is portrayed as being the manifestation of irrational and selfish behavior. These fictitious worlds serve as mirrors reflecting contemporary societal concerns that we may not be aware of or simply ignore when going about our everyday life. These concerns involve matters such as the very definition of humanity and how they may alter if certain fields of science are left unquestioned. The two novels in question showcase similarities in their apocalyptic narrative, but more so, a distinctive difference in their reception of critique. In *The Scarlet Plague*, the scientists are the heroes in which all hope is being placed to keep everyone alive. In *Oryx and Crake*, on the other hand, the scientists and the field of bioengineering is what cause our absolute demise and will inevitably wipe us from existence. These aspects are then considered with the pattern of behavior experienced during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of how people and society navigated through being induced with a similar fear of death and the uncertainty of one's safety.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, pandemic, fear, dystopia, bioengineering, social structures

Table of Contents

Greg Garrard’s Ecocriticism and the Apocalyptic Topos	5
Zilboorg’s Points on the Fear of Death and the Question of Morale	6
<i>Fear and self-preservation</i>	7
Fear of Death and <i>The Scarlet Plague</i>	12
Civil Society and Social Structures in a Post-Apocalyptic America	15
<i>Mass panics and the destruction of social structures</i>	19
Context and the Evolution of the Literary Apocalypse.....	21
<i>Breaking down dystopia and utopia</i>	23
<i>Oryx and Crake</i> and the Bioengineered “Utopia”	25
<i>The title and the societal perception of nature and animals</i>	29
Societal Reflections of <i>The Scarlet Plague</i> and <i>Oryx and Crake</i>	30
<i>Examples of irrationality in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	33
The State of Being – A Concluding Remark	35
Works Cited	37

Dystopian speculative fiction takes what already exists and makes an imaginative leap into the future, following current sociocultural, political, or scientific developments to their potentially devastating conclusions (Snyder, 470)

In his novel, *The Scarlet Plague* published in 1912, Jack London depicts a fictitious post-apocalyptic world set in a wild and ravaged America in the year 2073, 60 years after a deadly virus has wiped out most of the human population. Civilization collapsed as the virus spread, and with it, the moral integrity of humankind as well. The novel delves into how the human psyche as well as our civilization deal with the absence of law and order during a pandemic. Under these circumstances, the population becomes affected by the fear of death which results in a degradation of human morals and ethics as the selfish behavior evoked by said fear indulges the individual to think only of oneself. This paper seeks to examine *The Scarlet Plague* and the embellished fear of death as it is portrayed within London's speculative fiction as well as how these aspects manifest themselves with the similarities of the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, we see within the world of *Oryx and Crake* a different kind of manifested fear which surfaces on the constant development of biotechnology that, without constant supervision, makes the line between man and God less and less clear. This will fundamentally leave human values and the very term 'human' itself in a position of less certainty and create a vacuum that is easily taken advantage of by capitalistic entities. By asserting these concerns upon the world within *Oryx and Crake* which has already been ravaged by uncontrolled corporate influenced biotechnology, ecocriticism can serve as a means of turning Atwood's "dystopian speculative fictitious"-world into a matter of ecocritical debate, thus raising people's awareness and attention toward the path contemporary biotechnology is heading.

The aim of this paper is to analyze and discuss that which Margaret Atwood and Jack London seek to convey through their speculative fictitious novels by doing a close reading and pinpointing examples which point to relevant contemporary societal concerns. The ecocritical approach will help provide a fundamental insight into how the apocalyptic narrative can function as a metaphor for humanity's flaws and inevitable self-destruction. We will then, first, have a look at Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* with the focal point being on his conception of the trope of apocalypse. As this is the obsolete outcome in both *The Scarlet Plague* and *Oryx and Crake*, it will provide an understanding of how both the post-apocalyptic narratives function as cautionary tales.

Greg Garrard's Ecocriticism and the Apocalyptic Topos

As the world in London's *The Scarlet Plague* exists in a post-apocalyptic world, it precipitates a powerful literary apocalyptic topos. Within the ecocritical theory, Greg Garrard proclaims the apocalyptic topos and the apocalyptic narrative as "the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (101). Though this paper's focal point is not centered around an ecocritical approach per se, the apocalyptic trope, as Garrard defines it in his book *Ecocriticism*, provides us with essential insight into understanding the effects of the apocalyptic narrative, and how it is perceived in a literary context.

Garrard writes that "(...) [The apocalyptic rhetoric] is 'a genre born out of crisis'" and "(...) a rhetoric that must whip up such crises to proportions appropriate to the end of time" (94). Therefore, for an event to be considered an apocalypse, a certain degree of irreversible destruction and devastation of nature, and life itself, must take or have taken place. The apocalyptic trope is, then, to be considered a severe and irrevocable trope of ecocritical thinking. Furthermore, Garrard mentions that "(...) apocalypticism is inevitably bound up with imagination, because it has yet to come into being" (4). As powerful a metaphor as it might be, it is still yet to happen, and as such is a genre influenced by fear and paranoia rather than facts and history. In relation to that, Garrard mentions that "Environmental apocalypticism, on this view, is not about anticipating the end of the world, but about attempting to avert it by persuasive means" (107). This means, by having the purpose of preventing the end of time, it cannot be overlooked as it should be in everyone's interest to prevent it. The apocalyptic topos is, however, inevitably facing the embarrassment of failed prophecy due to it not having happened yet. Despite that, apocalyptic texts fundamentally become cautionary tales for us to reflect upon regarding the path of which our ethics and morals are heading. In other words, if we continue down a pernicious path ignoring the devastations done to our surroundings, our world will suffer catastrophically because of it. Garrard states that "[t]he news media often report environmental issues as catastrophes not only because this generates drama and the possibility of a human interest, but also because news more easily reports events than processes" (113). With this idea, he suggests that the news media tend to present exaggerated versions of an environmental crisis which, then, results in drama and increased attention to the subject. An apocalyptic narrative can thus also exist within the non-fictional sphere. As we will look at news articles later in this paper regarding specific COVID-19 incidents, this will be a convenient thought to keep in mind in terms of them adopting an apocalyptic narrative. Returning to the fundamentals of Garrard's apocalyptic trope, he states that "[o]ne 'ecocritical' way of reading is to

see contributions to environmental debate as examples of rhetoric” (6), which leads to the specification of how the apocalyptic rhetoric is regarded in terms of being a necessary component to environmental discourse. It is capable of galvanizing activists, converting the undecided and ultimately influencing government and commercial policies. In the United States, especially, it can draw upon deep wellsprings of popular and literary apocalyptic sentiment (113). The purpose of the apocalyptic text, to sum up, is to create awareness on a potential environmental problem with the purpose of influencing people to take an interest in the problem thus hopefully, coming up with solutions to it. Also, as we have mentioned earlier, it draws on drama and sentiment, as well as fear and paranoia, to influence the moral standpoints of society. Garrard also points out that:

“Nevertheless, it could be argued that the real moral and political challenge of ecology may lie in accepting that the world is not about to end, that human beings are likely to survive even if Western-style civilisation does not” (107). He further specifies that: “Only if we imagine that the planet has a future, after all, are we likely to take responsibility for it” (107). The first step of solving a given problem is accepting its existence in the first place. The next step is believing it can be solved which then grants a more promising motivation to solve it. The same notion goes for the complications of the end of times in terms of motivation and accepting the devastating reality we might have to face. In *The Scarlet Plague*, mankind survived the apocalyptic pandemic, but civilization collapsed almost immediately during the outbreak of the virus. A collapse that happened as soon as it was declared to the public that scientists were unable to discover a cure for the virus. This resulted in the removal of people’s trust in the sense of safety that the structures of civilization had built up through law and order. Despite mankind surviving an apocalypse, they will become something else as a result of not having the sense of safety that civilization provided. This will, as we will investigate later, ultimately alter how we perceive humanity and the term human itself. We will now look at Gregory Zilboorg’s dissertation regarding the human psyche when faced with the fear of death. It will provide clarification on the psychological aspects which will ultimately help make sense of the behavioral patterns portrayed in Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* and Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*.

Zilboorg’s Points on the Fear of Death and the Question of Morale

In terms of the concept of the fear of death, Zilboorg notes that we may at first glance (...) “appear rather skeptical and wonder whether there is such a psychology, for the fear of death is one of those affects which we usually call 'natural' a word so frequently and so mistakenly taken to convey also the meaning of elementary, simple, irreducible to any simpler components, self-

understood and self-explanatory, possessing no 'psychology' and requiring no further elucidation" (466). Zilboorg mentions the idea that the fear of death, as a psychological concept, is not as simplistic and self-explanatory as one might think. He argues that even "The simplest natural phenomenon, no matter how directly perceived, requires considerable analysis in order to be understood" (466), and that the fear of death, as simple and natural it appears, is actually rather complex (466). Furthermore, he draws a comparison of complexity to that of the laws of gravitation: "We might as well and with the same logical reasoning and right consider the falling of an object to the ground a perfectly natural, self-evident phenomenon" (466). Despite being a debatable comparison, as one is about human psychology and the other about physics, it still raises the question of what can be considered complex and whether something is worth further elucidation. One could even argue that the human psyche, in any regard, is the most complex aspects in our existence as it differs individually depending on multiple factors.

As of understanding the psychology behind the fear of death, Zilboorg's first notion is that it fundamentally boils down to be about morale. However, he notes that morale, as an emotional or mental condition, has not yet been clearly defined. In this regard, he writes that: "in a general and rather vague way, morale means to people a state of good cheer, a state of popular optimism. It also means a certain level of tenacious courage, persistently maintained and cheerfully demonstrated" (465). High morale, as described here, is a mental state in which a person's mental state is optimistic, cheerful, and, as he will underline at the end of the following citation, having a sense of security when faced with danger and/or hardship: "Whatever angle of approach we might choose for the study of the problems of morale, we must sooner or later appreciate the fact that in the final analysis morale has to do with a general sense of security in the face of hardship and danger" (465). Zilboorg then consociates the fact that morale is fundamentally reduced to how one reacts to the fear of death as there, behind the sense of insecurity, discouragement and depression and in the face of danger, always lurks the basic fear of death (465). Furthermore, regarding the lurking basic fear of death, he mentions that: "It may appear in the form of critical disbelief in the political administration as well as a general pessimism about civilization (...)" (465).

Fear and self-preservation

The basic fear can be considered a primal instinct that both ensures our survival, but also endorses irrational and selfish behavior. This aspect is portrayed in the literary texts, but is also, as we will see later, visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Zilboorg mentions that we take it for granted that the fear of death is always present in our mental functioning (467). This claim is based

on his idea that the fear of death essentially is the ultimate instinct of self-preservation: “The instinct of self-preservation is as much a positive drive to maintain life as it is a negative one intent on mastering the dangers that threaten life. Such constant expenditure of psychological energy on the business of preserving life would be impossible if the fear of death were not as constant” (467). And that: “The very term 'self-preservation' implies an effort against some force of disintegration; the affective aspect of this effort is fear, fear of death (467). Fearing death is essential to survive as it maintains a reversed response to that of having a will to live. Despite mentioning that the fear of death is always present in our mental functioning, Zilboorg notes the paradoxical fact that it also must be repressed for us to function normally and live with comfort: “If this fear [of death] were as constantly conscious, we should be unable to function normally. It must be properly repressed to keep us living with any modicum of comfort” (467). Furthermore, on the matter of repressing the fear of death, he mentions that we very well know that to repress means more than to put away and to forget that which was put away and the place where we put it, which “means also to maintain a constant psychological effort to keep the lid on and inwardly never relax our watchfulness” (467). Civilians in warzones for example, have their lives under constant threat and will most likely not be living a comfortable life with those circumstances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a global surge of fear and doubt arose amongst the population and people would change their behavior. Furthermore, on the aspect of repressing the fear of death, he notes that it “(...) means too that every now and then we automatically open some psychological safety valve and gradually let out some of the tension, in order to avoid accumulating too much of it, too much fear” (467). By doing so, we maintain a state of balance and serenity as the repressed fear does not interfere with the business of living (467). Zilboorg refers to this process as the “return of the repressed” (467) which, fundamentally, is how we, in normal times, move about without ever believing in our own demise, as if we fully believe in our own corporeal immortality (468). Furthermore, he mentions how we are intent on mastering death as we continuously “(...) work out medical problems of longevity; we indulge in planning for the remote future of our family, our country, humanity as a whole; we marshal all the forces which still the voice reminding us that our end must come some day, and we are suffused with the awareness that our lives will go on forever” (468). For example, within the field of bioengineering, a huge amount of time and money is spent on discovering ways to prolong life, recreate life, or just to alter or master the biological aspects of living organisms in general. Some aspects in the field of bioengineering, such as finding a cure for a virus causing a pandemic, are necessary and our survival is dependent on those. However, if we consider the less “world

saving” practices of bioengineering such as cloning, gene splicing, biological weapons, etc., it is rather obvious that they can, in the wrong hands, be used with malice or be developed with the sole intent of making capital. While biological weaponry in essence can cause nothing but harm, cloning does have the potential to save lives by creating identical copies of a living being thus getting access to compatible organs for transplantation. Despite having the best of intentions, cloning yet raises the question of what is morally correct and what could potentially be malevolently misused. Furthermore, if we were to clone human beings or discover the means to immortality, these revelations would likely not even be accessible to the common man but rather befall the rich thus extending their power and influence. We are at the mercy of those who discover cures for our illnesses, but also at the risk of what they might unleash if not kept under control.

Despite repressing the fear of death, we still try to cope with it or master it through various means. Zilboorg mentions how you can cope with death through religion by fantasizing about your own immortality:

All this is of course not so simple as it sounds, nor is it as efficient. Many of us-many more than it would appear on the surface- seek solace in religion, in a communion with the eternal, thus again seeking support for the fantasy of our own immortality in our communion with God, who never dies (468)

Instead of embracing the fact that we all will die, some seek the comfort in alternative beliefs in which death is not final. Despite neglecting one’s inevitable death, Zilboorg mentions that “Even one’s religious feelings are utilized for the same self-inflationary denial of death which makes one behave as if one is full master over life and death” (470). The necessity of being able to live without worrying about one’s death is crucial to keep a high morale and thus living a normal life. Zilboorg mentions this aspect as a purely intellectual and verbal admission:

A man will say, of course, that he knows he will die some day, but he does not really care. He is having a good time with living, and he does not think about death and does not care to bother about it-but this is a purely intellectual, verbal admission. The affect of fear is repressed and lost in self-inflationary cheer. Life itself, its truths and fantasies support and feed his state of mind. For each funeral announced or attended, there are hundreds of moving picture signs and theatre marquees. The psychic economy of 'morale' is thus fully maintained on an even keel (470)

Sustaining a mental state of high morale is fundamentally dependent on either having the intellectual ability to continuously uphold a self-inflationary cheer or through religious or other

otherworldly coping strategies. Religion was of course more popular when Zilboorg wrote this article back in 1943, however, it still paints a picture of how man, if unable to cope with reality, seeks psychological relief elsewhere. As our civilized life is so replete with dangers, we devise a number of additional psychological measures to overcome the inner fears which these dangers arouse in us (468). To that, Zilboorg argues that “We must maintain within us the conviction that we are stronger than all those deathly dangers, and also that we, each one of us who speaks of himself in the first person singular, are exceptions whom death will not strike at all” (468). Much like upholding a self-inflationary cheer is this fundamental in maintaining a high morale. The paranoia and overwhelming fear, that may come because of fixating too much on all the dangers that may cause one’s death, will only spiral towards pessimistic behavior and depression, which leads to a suboptimal way of living. Despite us moving about trying to not give too much thought to the dangers that might cause our death, we are still interested in fatal accidents and executions, which Zilboorg mentions have a “peculiar fascination for us” (468). It has always been present in one form or another throughout history; from gladiators fighting in the colosseum, witch-hunting, public executions, to the present day in which “We like to read about executions, train wrecks, automobile collisions, earthquakes, and conflagrations with human victims” (468). Additionally, violence, gore and horror have become popular themes as well in both cinema, literature, and video games which further amplifies the idea that we are indeed deeply fascinated by it. So, we must repress our own fear of death to function normally, all the while we can gain gratification from the suffering of others. Zilboorg mentions that this sadistic trend derives from an egocentric self-delight which could be expressed by the exclamation: 'It is not I who was executed last night; it is not I who was killed in this automobile accident, or train wreck, or earthquake' (468). He exemplifies this with an illustration he encountered of a civilian who was once attacked by a pack of submarines as he was crossing the ocean on some important, nonmilitary business:

He was on a small merchant ship in a convoy which was attacked by a pack of submarines; some of the ships were torpedoed. A battle with the submarines ensued. The submarines remained invisible. When quiet finally prevailed, the civilian recalled a sense of relief and exhilaration, and later a thought that both thrilled and embarrassed him: 'Well, I am glad it was not I; it could not have been I' (469)

In times of danger, the ego and the selfish nature of man is evoked, and compassion, even the slightest, dwindles away as survival becomes absolute. Furthermore, the finishing line, “it could not have been I”, suggests the tendency to even neglect the possibility of death happening to oneself,

which is arguably a form of hubris in the arrogant sense. However, this ambivalent emotion changes, or variates, if the unfortunate situation were to happen to a relative or a family member. Zilboorg mentions that it is “Not until he begins to lose members of his family and friends who fall in battle does he come to grips with the fear of death by way of identification with those who were killed. And even then the fact that he is an exception becomes even more emphasized” (471). The loss of a friend or relative will produce a stronger emotional response to the dangers of war, and, even, spawn an unconscious sense of guilt about those who have fallen as well as “mounting a sense of anger and feeling of hatred for the enemy who kills” (471). As the dangers and death caused by a virus is not a tangible entity or person per se, it makes it hard to direct any blame or hate towards anyone. However, as the virus had its origin in China, we saw that e.g. Trump’s administration blamed China, particularly the Chinese Communist Party, for the COVID-19 pandemic, which is an opinion that may wrongfully spread among the population thus creating an uncalled for resentment towards the Chinese (Horsley, 1). As a last note before concluding the section on Zilboorg’s theories, it will share certain similarities of points to theories of Karl Marx regarding civil structures and society that we will briefly touch upon in a later section.

Now, moving on to the literary texts of *The Scarlet Plague* and later *Oryx and Crake*, we will look at the texts in terms of how the pandemics affect people and how the evoked fear of death affect them and the world around them. Additionally, some key aspects such as an underlying criticism of class structures in *The Scarlet Plague*, and the criticism of contemporary biotechnology in *Oryx and Crake*, will be focused on as they are arguably the main criticisms that the respective novels try to accentuate. We will start off by looking at the fictitious novel, *The Scarlet Plague*, by Jack London. Despite being published more than a century ago, it still lingers as a contemporary tale allowing readers to reflect on our ancestral fear of the dangers of infectious diseases, and the selfish and violent nature that fundamentally resides in the human race. In the novel, the scientists, whom the population placed all their trust in, fail at finding a cure in time thus leading the people to distrust the government and its capability to keep everyone safe. This spawned a rampantly chaotic uprising that, ultimately, ended up being just as contagious and deadly as the virus itself. The idea that is often presented in apocalyptic fiction is that civilization will eventually crumble if mankind does not change their current toxic and destructive ways of living, which is one of the fundamental points seen in *The Scarlet Plague*.

Fear of Death and *The Scarlet Plague*

The world in *The Scarlet Plague* takes place in a ravaged America in the year 2073, sixty years after an epidemic that depopulated and almost destroyed the US back in year 2013. We follow James Howard Smith, also known as Granser, a survivor of the scarlet plague, accompanied by the savage children of a new generation he refers to as “grandsons”. The narration switches between Granser’s nostalgic memories of a wonderful past, to the horrors that unfolded during the rise of the epidemic, to the now cruel reality of a post-apocalyptic all of which are being told as tales to his grandsons whilst they carefully listen with both awe and skepticism. Granser attains the role of a wise old sage, an artifact of the past, whose knowledge and wisdom is nothing but stories and memories. The plot is unique by being achronological. As the time of the telling is in the postapocalyptic world, we are mainly being tossed into chronological flashbacks from the time before the apocalypse and the end of civilization as to how it all unfolded. One of the first memories Granser shares is how people appeared not to be alarmed at first by the virus because they “were sure that the bacteriologists would find a way to overcome this new germ, just as they had overcome other germs in the past” (London, ch. 3). London describes that in the 21st century the public trust in science was high which is a notion that we did experience during the COVID-19 pandemic in which, especially the western culture, people blindly trusted scientists to discover a cure. However, this trust quickly changed as people got frightened by “the astonishing quickness with which this germ destroyed human beings, and the fact that it inevitably killed any human body it entered. ... From the moment of the first signs of it, a man would be dead in an hour. Some lasted for several hours. Many died within ten or fifteen minutes of the appearance of the first signs” (ch. 3). He further exerts the detailed and horrifying description of the symptoms leading up to one’s death after being infected by the virus:

The heart began to beat faster and the heat of the body to increase. Then came the scarlet rash, spreading like wildfire over the face and body. Most persons never noticed the increase in heat and heart-beat, and the first they knew was when the scarlet rash came out. Usually, they had convulsions at the time of the appearance of the rash. But these convulsions did not last long and were not very severe. ... The heels became numb first, then the legs, and hips, and when the numbness reached as high as his heart he died (ch. 3)

These precise details of how horribly you die from the virus makes the illness seem vividly realistic and significantly more frightening to the reader which is not the only time London describes something into much detail. For example, he explains lengthily on how a microscope works and can

allow you to see something not visible to the human eye, as well as, to this genre, an unusual number of professional terms within the field of biology:

The woodtick sucks the blood of the dog, but the germ, being so very small, goes right into the blood of the body, and there it has many children. In those days there would be as many as a billion—a crab-shell, please—as many as that crab-shell in one man's body. We called germs micro-organisms. When a few million, or a billion, of them were in a man, in all the blood of a man, he was sick. These germs were a disease. There were many different kinds of them—more different kinds than there are grains of sand on this beach. We knew only a few of the kinds. The micro-organic world was an invisible world, a world we could not see, and we knew very little about it. Yet we did know something. There was the *bacillus anthracis*; there was the *micrococcus*; there was the *Bacterium termo*, and the *Bacterium lactis*—that's what turns the goat milk sour even to this day, Hare-Lip; and there were *Schizomycetes* without end. And there were many others....” (ch. 2)

Despite the novel being fiction and thus being based on the author's fantasies, London seeks yet to educate his readers, or at least bring attention to his time's relevant discoveries of how germs and viruses transfer. As people still were believing that epidemics were supernatural events or divine punishments. Furthermore, by using professional language from the biological field, the novel attains some non-fictional aspects thus becoming more real and relatable. Additionally, to this point, he mentions numerous infamous diseases that have already happened and have taken countless of lives such as the bubonic plague, also known as the Black Death, tuberculosis, and leprosy, but also a made-up plague called the “Pantoblast Plague” that broke out in Brazil in the year 1984 (ch. 2). Despite being an imaginary epidemic, the Pantoblast Plague could be as likely to happen as for example the Spanish flu that did in fact break out just 6 years after *The Scarlet Plague* was published back in 1912 (Alicja, 1). Another example is when he tells them about the disease Pellagra (Morabia, 1), which historically speaking reached epidemic proportions in the southern states of America in the early 1900s, followed up, in the same sentence, by a fictitious nameless disease that arose in 1947:

And in 1910, there was Pellagra, and also the hookworm. These were easily killed by the bacteriologists. But in 1947 there arose a new disease that had never been seen before. It got into the bodies of babies of only ten months old or less, and it made them unable to move their hands and feet, or to eat, or anything; and the bacteriologists were eleven years in discovering how to kill that particular germ and save the babies (London, ch. 2)

The latter and also a fictitious disease is ruthless and, because the targeted group are infants of only ten months old, it evokes significantly more emotions than if it had been any other group of people. Additionally, by mentioning these different diseases in their chronological order, London points towards the pattern of which new diseases and epidemics will inevitably happen and without any concrete chance of foreseeing or preventing them from happening. Furthermore, he emphasizes on the complexity of this unforeseeable “invisible micro-organic world” by making an analogy to which it resembles the number of grains of sand you find on a beach (ch. 2). He also mentions that despite having a long history of finding cures for the different diseases “(...) the micro-organic world remained a mystery to the end” which, again, underlines the idea that we are indeed dealing with something that we are not meant to tinker with. The narrative London has conjured is then one that points to the fact that humanity will inevitably encounter an organism from this “invisible” micro-organic world that will be so deadly and so contagious that it will overwhelm the scientists. As a final point to this, Granser mentions how they in California were not alarmed about the spreading disease despite how serious it looked and that they “(...) were sure that the bacteriologists would find a way to overcome this new germ, just as they had overcome other germs in the past “(ch. 3) but later mentions that “(...) the trouble was the astonishing quickness with which this germ destroyed human beings, and the fact that it inevitably killed any human body it entered” (ch.3). No one ever recovered (ch. 3). The Californian public, in the novel, had accumulated a high morale as they felt safe and trusted the capabilities of the government and the field of science to contain and find a cure for the disease, just as they have done in the past. However, as mentioned earlier, as soon as people realized that the government did not have control over the disease and its contagion and that scientists were dying in their labs trying to find a cure, the sense of safety disappeared and with it, so did people’s morale. This, then, amid the chaotic outbreak, led to the loss of the social structures and the established societal hierarchies. In this vein, we will look to Karl Marx and his concepts on state and civil society. As London was an active socialist fighting for e.g., animal rights, and workers’ rights, he was a study of the theories by Marx which makes it unequivocal to look to the theories of the grandfather of socialism. In fact, London and his works were heavily influenced and inspired by some of his time’s psychological and scientific giants which is observed in Mambrol’s article on Jack London’s writing tendencies:

Popular at the time were Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, as interpreted by Herbert Spencer; Friedrich Nietzsche’s version of the superman, and, much later, the new psychology of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, as well as Karl Marx’s theories of a

new social order. All fired London's imagination and provided fuel for his characters and plots, and their presence—particularly London's version of the Darwinian “survival of the fittest” motif—lends credence to London's claim for membership in the naturalistic school of fiction (Mambrol, 1)

Mambrol mentions here how renowned thinkers were an inspiration to London and his writings. And especially the motif of the survival of the fittest plays an important part in *The Scarlet Plague*. With no further ado, we will endeavor into the next section in which some of Marx's key points on civil society and social structures will be investigated.

Civil Society and Social Structures in a Post-Apocalyptic America

In this section we will use Marx's concepts of state and civil society to help underline some key social structures in a modern America contrariwise to what have become of them in the post-apocalyptic world portrayed in London's *They Scarlet Plague*. Before using Marx's concepts of society and state, we will first investigate his idea of what humanity consists of, concerning the basics of human need. This very idea also transcends into our analysis and understanding of Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* which also deals with similar concerns regarding our perception of what humanity is or has become. Determining the core needs of humanity will help us provide a foundation to the concepts of civil society and state. To do this, Chambre and McLellan's work on Marx's interpretation of human nature will provide insight into this:

Marx's interpretation of human nature begins with human need. “Man,” he wrote in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, “is first of all a natural being. As a natural being and a living natural being, he is endowed on the one hand with natural powers, vital powers...; these powers exist in him as aptitudes, instincts. On the other hand, as an objective, natural, physical, sensitive being, he is a suffering, dependent and limited being..., that is, the objects of his instincts exist outside him, independent of him, but are the objects of his need, indispensable and essential for the realization and confirmation of his substantial powers (1)

They further elaborate on this interpretation into what is to be the essential human need:

The point of departure of human history is therefore living human beings, who seek to satisfy certain primary needs. “The first historical fact is the production of the means to satisfy these needs.” This satisfaction, in turn, opens the way for new needs and human activity is thus essentially a struggle with nature that must furnish the means of

satisfying human needs: drink, food, clothing, the development of human powers and then of human intellectual and artistic abilities (1)

This idea of human beings seeking the satisfaction of their primary needs of drink, food and clothing is what Granser and his grandsons is seen struggling with in *The Scarlet Plague*. Granser mentions how easy it was to get food and that the easier it is to obtain food, the more people there will be:

This was because it was easy to get food. The easier it was to get food, the more men there were; the more men there were, the more thickly were they packed together on the earth; and the more thickly they were packed, the more new kinds of germs became diseases (London, ch.2)

Here, he also points to the fact that the more people existing in one place, the more likely diseases will come to be, which, at the time, was knowledge not necessarily known to the common man. Furthermore, Granser speaks highly of the foods that once were available before the apocalypse and praising it to be probably mankind's greatest achievement: "I sometimes think the most wonderful achievement of our tremendous civilization was food—its inconceivable abundance, its infinite variety, its marvellous delicacy. O my grandsons, life was life in those days, when we had such wonderful things to eat" (ch.2). Gastronomy, and especially the consumption of meat is a trait in London's writings. This might be due to London reminiscing a childhood in which he felt deprived of food, particularly meat. Caleb Crain, from *The New Yorker*, writes that

Jack London never felt that he got enough meat. When he was seven, he stole a piece from a girl's basket—an incident that he called "an epitome of my whole life." Although his mother claimed that "he didn't go hungry in our house!" and a childhood friend recalled being served steak during a visit, London insisted that he had been deprived. "It has been hunger, nothing but hunger!" he wrote to a girlfriend at the age of twenty-two. "You cannot understand, nor never will." (1)

As food clearly plays a substantial role in the novel recognized by the fact that it is the subject of conversation multiple times, it is a relevant topic to cover. First off, food is one of our primary needs that is required to survive. Granser lives in the post-apocalyptic world with the limited variation of food sources and with the reminiscence of the delicious foods that once were. The grandsons, however, lack the experience and knowledge that Granser has of the old world thus making them incapable of viewing food as anything but a primary need to survive; a hunger that needs to be sated. By endeavoring into area, and by having these two different views on food, it

invites the reader to reflect on the fact that we have grown to take food for granted as it is so easily accessible to us. Granzer mentions this notion as well:

As I have told you, in those days food-getting was easy. We were very wise. A few men got the food for many men. The other men did other things. As you say, I talked. I talked all the time, and for this food was given me—much food, fine food, beautiful food, food that I have not tasted in sixty years and shall never taste again.

(London, ch. 2)

When food is no longer easily accessed at every grocery store shelf, mankind must adapt and find food elsewhere in order to survive. This is frequent theme often encountered in post-apocalyptic and dystopian literature in which there is a fight for food that often requires the use of violence or even embracing cannibalism to stay alive. For example, in Cormac McCarthy's renowned post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road*, some humans have turned to cannibalism as a last resort to satisfy their hunger. Desperate times calls for desperate measures, however, the cannibals seen in *The Road* are more organized than that, as if they have formed a new society, with their own rules. This is recognized by the fact that they are not eating each other which suggests that they have formed a new society or at least some sort of democracy with a hierarchy. When looking at this part from *The Road*: "Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant (...)" (McCarthy, 46) it clearly advocates a notion of class difference as they use human beings as cattle to do labor as well. In a resembling fashion, avoiding humans in a post-apocalyptic world due to their inherently violent nature is also the case in *The Scarlet Plague*. In a different example, from the movie, *Zombieland* (2009), the protagonist, Tallahassee, played by Woody Harrelson, has, in a zombie infested post-apocalyptic world, made it his final goal to find a Twinkie and consume it to satisfy a craving nostalgic hunger; the final taste of something pre-apocalyptic. His desire for the Twinkie is narrated as such in the movie: "Something about the Twinkie reminded him of a time not so long ago, when things were simple and not so fucking psychotic. It was like if he got a taste of that comforting childhood treat the world would become innocent again and everything would return to normal". The topic of food, the gathering of it and the inherent fear of starvation in post-apocalyptic world can be perceived as a trope within the genre due to its frequent occurrence. Returning to the notion that the lack of a government will result in the loss of a thriving society, aligns with the claim by Marx in which a society can only exist and thrive if safety for each and every member of it exists, including the safety one's rights and properties: "security is the supreme social concept of civil

society; the concept of the police. The whole society exists only in order to guarantee for each of its members the preservation of his person, his rights and his property” (Marx, 18). The absence of a functioning government will eventually dissolve the police force which will cause a society to question their guarantee of survival which then leads to chaos, mayhem and the idea of “every man for himself”, or survival of the fittest, as we have seen is the case in *The Scarlet Plague*. It is a trend in speculative fiction Marx also claims that “If freedom is located in the individual and his particular desires, then the State must appear as an external organization limiting this freedom; government is an evil, necessary to repress “the war of every man against every man”” (Marx, 13). Resembling much like what we saw with Zilboorg’s thoughts on fear and morale, Marx believed the government to be a necessary evil existing to limit particular desires of the individual as a means to keep people from harming each other. This further explains why people, during the chaotic outbreak in *The Scarlet Plague*, turned to brutal violence and arson. And where “every man is at war against every man” as Marx puts it, there is no government to limit the freedom of the individual. We see an example of this is during the outbreak in which Granser withheld himself from helping a fatally wounded person outside his house door:

I heard the rapid reports of an automatic pistol, and a few minutes later the wounded wretch crawled up to my door, moaning and crying out for help. Arming myself with two automatics, I went to him. By the light of a match I ascertained that while he was dying of the bullet wounds, at the same time the plague was on him. I fled indoors, whence I heard him moan and cry out for half an hour longer.. (ch.3)

In this example we see this notion of “every man is at war against every man”. Where we are taught to help people in need, we are also inherently selfish beings prioritizing our own survival, especially when under the pressure of a fear inducing deadly pandemic. It is under such conditions that the aforementioned survival of the fittest kicks in. Despite being a university professor and thus not being the prime candidate for surviving such an apocalypse, Granser still endured the apocalypse. He had luck on his side as had sort of a plot armor immunity to the virus which gave him a clear advantage for the survival of the fittest. However, he still had to survive the threat of his fellow rampant human beings that did seem like a greater threat than the virus. To fit the plot, the character had to have a set of overall knowledge about certain fields, such as biology, gastronomy, and psychology to appear trustworthy when telling his grandsons about said subjects.

Mass panics and the destruction of social structures

In this section, we will look at examples of how the apocalypse is portrayed in the novel and how the people and society are affected by these horrors unfolding. As Granser finds himself amidst the apocalypse and the chaotic outbreak, he describes in vivid details the world being undone:

There were numerous fires burning in Berkeley, while Oakland and San Francisco were apparently being swept by vast conflagrations. The smoke of the burning filled the heavens, so that the midday was as a gloomy twilight, and, in the shifts of wind, sometimes the sun shone through dimly, a dull red orb. Truly, my grandsons, it was like the last days of the end of the world (London, ch. 3)

The sun a dull red orb, the fires, the smoke, the scarlet plague, the description of the scenery laid before us here leaves us baffled. He describes this to his grandsons, but in doing, also the readers as we are, like the grandsons, unfamiliar with the subject. A style that is repeated constantly throughout the novel. In the novel, as soon as the public realized that medicine and science were beaten by the plague, people panicked. In addition to the aforementioned example, when Granser tells his grandsons about the beginning of the end of civilization, he makes an analogy of the mass panic by comparing the people fleeing the cities to the salmon-run that both him and the grandchildren have experienced in a, to them, known river nearby:

Thursday night the panic outrush for the country began. Imagine, my grandsons, people, thicker than the salmon-run you have seen on the Sacramento river, pouring out of the cities by millions, madly over the country, in vain attempt to escape the ubiquitous death. You see, they carried the germs with them. Even the airships of the rich, fleeing for mountain and desert fastnesses, carried the germs (ch. 1)

The global synchronized panic outrush released all the accumulated repressed fear of death thus causing a resonating and contagious shockwave of chaos and disorder. He further describes how “In the midst of our civilization, down in our slums and labor-ghettos, we had bred a race of barbarians, of savages; and now, in the time of our calamity, they turned upon us like the wild beasts they were and destroyed us. And they destroyed themselves as well”. As Jack London was a socialist, it is no surprise that he weaves in notions of class structures into the novel while also pointing to how these structures will ultimately break down if civilization collapses. The lower class, or working class, who had lived in the slums and labor-ghettos and most likely under inhumane and ruthless conditions were the most brutal and even described as wild beasts. They have survived under these circumstances simply because they had to which have molted them into these dormant

unpredictable dangers awaiting to be awoken. We also see this notion of class structures in the following sentence in which Granser tells his grandsons about how people acquired food before the pandemic: “Our food-getters were called *freemen*. This was a joke. We of the ruling classes owned all the land, all the machines, everything. These food-getters were our slaves. We took almost all the food they got, and left them a little so that they might eat, and work, and get us more food—” (ch. 2). First, Granser jokes sarcastically calling the food-getters, freemen. A joke that clearly intends to point towards the opposite, towards the fact that the working classes such of farmers and laborers are in fact slaves to the ruling classes who own everything. Granser repeats this notion to one of his skeptic grandsons: “Did I not tell you that we of the ruling class owned all the land, all the forest, everything? Any food-getter who would not get food for us, him we punished or compelled to starve to death. And very few did that” (ch. 2). The lower classes are painted as being oppressed and forced into doing the biddings of the ruling classes in order to survive. This oppression is also that which ends up creating the uprising in its violent state as the lower classes living in the slums come to this realization that the upper classes hold all the cards for surviving the pandemic. With the uprising and the global panic, law and order, money and wealth ceased to exist, or matter, which vanquished all class structures in their hierarchical sense of power. In a blink of an eye, thousands of years of established societal hierarchies of power evaporated. Granser mentions this chaos in two short sentences in chapter III: “All law and order had ceased. The bodies were lying in the streets un-buried” (ch. 3). Furthermore, during the midst of civilization’s downfall, Granser experienced firsthand how mankind turned to savages and brutes and how they used armed weaponry to unprovokedly kill random pedestrians on the street:

I heard sounds of rioting and of pistol shots, and from my windows I could see the glare of the sky of some conflagration in the direction of Oakland. It was a night of terror. I did not sleep a wink. A man—why and how I do not know—was killed on the sidewalk in front of the house. I heard the rapid reports of an automatic pistol, and a few minutes later the wounded wretch crawled up to my door, moaning and crying out for help. Arming myself with two automatics, I went to him. By the light of a match I ascertained that while he was dying of the bullet wounds, at the same time the plague was on him. I fled indoors, whence I heard him moan and cry out for half an hour longer (ch. 3)

Despite being a likeable and relatable protagonist, we see here that the fear of death and the selfish behavior it evokes brings even Granser to ignore a dying man’s cry for help. It is a dreadful and horrendous set of events that no one would ever want to experience thus making it difficult to judge

Granser's decision to not help the man as he acted based solely on his own survival, as most people would have done. Another point is that even Granser, a university professor, would arm himself with not one, but two automatic guns as a means of protection. This exerts a narrative of America's 2nd amendment of allowing any civilian to own armed weaponry as being a double-edged sword. The sense of safety a gun provides is nothing but an illusion as the person in front of you might just as well be carrying a gun thus only creating potential instances in which harm will be done. Furthermore, if the long arm of the law would be absent, hypothetically, no one would be around to punish those who are not using the gun as a means of protection. The novel has these examples of mankind turning to guns and violence as the means of protection which displays the notion that once the sense of safety is gone, and morale is low, mankind will fundamentally distrust their fellow citizens.

Context and the Evolution of the Literary Apocalypse

In the following couple of sections, the focal point will be on context as to how the two chosen literary texts portray and construe the apocalyptic topos in relation to their respective time's cultural, moral, and political values. If we look to *The Scarlet Plague* and *Oryx and Crake*, they were published nearly a hundred year apart which institutes certain distinctive divergences and developments in their reception and representation of the apocalyptic narrative. One example of such are the fictional literary terms, utopia, and its counterpart dystopia, which have traversed a varying set of meanings and definitions. These notions are fundamentally bound up to the context of reader reception and the respective author's depiction of society and the internal concerns thereof. After all, a dystopian world, to its core, is the depicting of a world becoming based on what we fear the most. On this matter, to get a basic understanding of such context, we use quotes from Fry's *Theory of Literature* to define the terms "context of production" and "context of reception". We do this to narrow down the concept of context, thus making it more tangible in the relation to this paper. To begin with, we will introduce what a text has ultimately become according to Fry, and then discuss how *The Scarlet Plague*, as a text, fits under the contexts of production and reception. Our first quote, from page 208, Fry writes:

...henceforth the world lives in the text. The text is no longer a microcosm but a medium through which the real world passes. It is as much as ever a distorting medium, but it is no longer a separable entity with a discrete ontological status (note that this follows equally from Derrida's premise that there is nothing outside the text,

properly understood); the text is an object in the world, produced, sustained and undone by social forces

In this quote, Fry states that the text is no longer just a “microcosm” to create a world of its own, but rather one now able to contain the world itself and mediate it to the reader by distorting the world that it has contained. The text is of course still just a text, but also one that is “produced, sustained and undone” by social forces, meaning the readers, critics and other groups of people who discuss the text. The world in *The Scarlet Plague* is only natural because it captures the world around it, distorts it, and mediates it to the reader. When Jack London wrote and published it, the Panic of 1907 was still fresh in the public’s mind thus leaving a lingering uncertainty and doubt in the actual capabilities of banks and the government to maintain order and balance. The newfound knowledge and discoveries within the field of biology, such as the structure and function of proteins as well as just more general understanding of the microscopic world, paired with Darwin’s theory of natural selection, makes London’s novel a relatable read at the time. In other words, if we consider the novel for a moment, it contains the element of the survival of the fittest matching the Darwinism of its time, while also involving a chaotic outbreak during a pandemic caused by a virus which ultimately shatters the social structures making the novel also encompass elements of Marxism and the field of biology. Going back to the subject of groups which discuss a text, we move on to the context of reception where we will tie the two contexts together with *The Scarlet Plague* being the metaphorical string to do so with.

... a text gradually changes as a result of its reception, and if we don’t study reception, we are left naively supposing that time has passed and that interpretation of a past text has become difficult but that the difficulty has nothing to do with historical change itself (Fry, 218)

Here, Fry states that the meaning of a text changes over time as it is reread and re-interpreted by different people in different eras, if the text is not reinterpreted it would mean that we have not changed our way of thinking accordingly to the time that has passed and the text essentially shows that we have not moved away from the same line of thinking. Looking at *The Scarlet Plague* with this in mind, we discover that, since it has more than hundred years on its back, it can be interpreted in multiple ways, and it can still be relevant today, especially if certain criteria are met. To fully fathom the scale of both *The Scarlet Plague* and *Oryx and Crake* with their dystopian portrayal, we will now look to what precedents a utopia and its counterpart dystopia as two fundamental cornerstones when dealing with both the pre- and post-apocalyptic fictional universes, and how they

reflect societal concerns within their respective period. This will provide insight into why these so called dystopian speculative fictions are so popular, and why they are not just disregarded as paranoid opinions.

Breaking down dystopia and utopia

The term dystopia is quite simple a place that constitutes horrible living conditions, but the notion does not give any indication of how such a world could be brought about. While *Oryx and Crake* is indisputably a dystopian tale, and thus, seamlessly, unfair to discuss the concept of utopia, we must acknowledge that a dystopia does not come about because it is warranted. To frame how a dystopia begins, we must look towards the opposite of a dystopia, a utopia: “What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour [Dystopian] is too bad to be practicable” (1, Mills). With utopia being coined in relation to dystopia, the circumstances for a dystopian world to arise become clearer, because the critical point to recognize is that a dystopia is largely a by-product of a failed utopia. In the case of *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood unravels a dystopian apocalyptic future to challenge the reader’s perception of contemporary technological dilemmas and possible issues, by using the thematic of biogenetics and capitalism.

Dystopian speculative fiction takes what already exists and makes an imaginative leap into the future, following current sociocultural, political, or scientific developments to their potentially devastating conclusions. In Atwood’s words, speculative fictions explore “the consequences of new and proposed technologies in graphic ways by showing them as fully operational,” [...] Yet the imaginative effects of dystopian literary speculations depend precisely on their readers’ recognition of a potential social realism in the fictional worlds portrayed therein. These cautionary tales of the future work by evoking an uncanny sense of the simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of these brave new worlds (Snyder, 470)

Snyder introduces an interesting proposition often overlooked in dystopian literature, namely the reception of it. In the case of *Oryx and Crake*, published during a time of rapid growth in the biotechnological field, its reception has its origin based on the public’s interest and perhaps worry on said field. We can see a similar and apparent tendency in the archetype dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, written by George Orwell, published in 1949, in which sensitivity is important concerning both the topic and the conveyance of said topic. At the core of any dystopian literature lies the critique of a trend in society by which we must assume the author is aware of their audience and their opinions regarding these trends. For example, in a hypothetical sense, George

Orwell would likely not have found success in selling books to a communist Soviet Russia. And if he did, could they then be seen as portraying utopian societies? An inverse angle challenges this notion of dystopia challenging the readers, which could imply that the essence of any dystopian imagination is something that is fundamentally determined by the readers and somewhat kept to its historical context. In a hypothetical universe where cryotechnology is a booming industry, the movie *Ice-Age* (2002) could be seen as a dystopian movie. In the same vein, genres were invented for the audience to recognize and be gatekept and it is then also in the hands of the ones who consume the product to decide what the experience is or should be. By this logic, most of dystopian literature falls under speculative fiction through the reflection of known fears in unknown contexts. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* portrayed its cautionary tale through a recognizable fear of communism and loss of privacy, manifested in a totalitarian government with mass surveillance. In *The Scarlet Plague*, the dystopian narrative concerns the inevitability of civilization's downfall, but more so the underlying structural weakness that exists in society. In *Oryx and Crake*, the recognizable aspects reside within the carelessness of the destructive practices of bioengineering fueled by a blind capitalism and individualism, whereas the unrecognizable lies in both a world fully realized by these two fears, and the world that follows, barren and desolate. Furthermore, the constant yearning to achieve full control over biology, and the tinkering with the microscopic world, stands in tandem with the term hubris, the act of humans overstepping their boundaries in the attempt to become godlike. A contemporary matter that shares similarities to the Ancient Greek myth of Icarus who flew too close to the sun, and fundamentally blurs the line between human and the divine. Taking all this into account, it is a key factor in the growing indifference towards nature, and if we consider the intentions of the scientists in *Oryx and Crake* to shape nature to be what they want, we see an expression of this blurred line. As it stands as a response to the contemporary lines of thought regarding climate change, the notion that once we destroy a part of nature, it can still be recreated. Atwood warns against exactly that specific notion, stating that nature is random, the nature of nature, is that it predates humanity, it is not something we can shape and then still call nature as it will no longer be natural. We can learn to understand and re-enact nature, but we can never control it to such a degree where we can claim responsibility or power over it. In the next section, we will look at Jack London's tendency to write texts with the theme of the survival of the fittest, which is an aspect also seen in *The Scarlet Plague*. The next chapter will introduce us to Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and her fear of how bioengineering will ultimately end us all. The term of dystopia, and utopia, will be put under light as well as how plot and character function within these terms.

***Oryx and Crake* and the Bioengineered “Utopia”**

In her novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Atwood points to an inevitable apocalyptic and posthuman future in which all human beings have been replaced with peaceful and harmless “Crakers” - human replicas absent of base human emotions. The suggested intent is to criticize and make us think about the responsibility that comes with bioengineering, as well as the path it is heading, which, when reflecting, is making the line between man and God thinner. This, then, leaves our human values and the term ‘human’ itself in a position of less certainty. Unlike the rather straightforward panic fear that we saw in *The Scarlet Plague*, the notion of fear that resides and is evoked in *Oryx and Crake* is one of more tangible nature. It resides in the fear of the fact that our future is in the hands of those responsible for our safety and in the top one percent sitting on mountains of money influencing the field of science to their own personal gain.

The plot in *Oryx and Crake* resembles the one seen in *The Scarlet Plague* in terms of being achronological with a chronological set of flashbacks explaining how civilization became an artifact of the past, and the post-apocalyptic world a reality. The first flashbacks bring the reader up to date on how the apocalypse referred to as the “Crakepocalypse” came to happen and serve as an introduction to the protagonist, Jimmy, his family, and the functioning world before the Crakepocalypse. The flashbacks are told in the past tense whereas, in the present post-apocalyptic world when Snowman, Jimmy’s post-apocalyptic persona exists, it is told in the present tense. The plot continues in this manner going back and forth between past and present tense as Jimmy gets older in between each switch. Atwood gives us a good reason as to why this may be:

But even a castaway assumes a future reader, someone who’ll come along later and find his bones and his ledger, and learn his fate. Snowman can make no such assumptions: he’ll have no future reader, because the Crakers can’t read. Any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past (24)

By using present tense in the post-apocalyptic part of the novel, it gives the reader the feeling of experiencing the story unfolding as it is being read which induces a more alarming sensation. If we return to Atwood’s intention of criticizing bioengineering, it is one of the major themes of the novel and the interesting counterpart that makes it differ from London’s novel. In the *Scarlet Plague*, people put all their faith in science and the scientists to solve that which threatens our extinction: They are the heroes. However, in Atwood’s novel, the narrative points to science and bioengineering as being the inevitable and uncontrollable force leading to our demise. We can view

Atwood's novel as a warning sign for us to fear, or question, the path bioengineering is heading and create awareness on how money and power influence the direction of said path.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the post-apocalyptic dystopian world is brought about by the failed development of a utopia grounded in technocapitalism which impacts the hierarchy and then alters the way of life for not only humans, but for all living animals. The underlying notion of what causes this eco- and biological dystopia is centered around a utopian desire to control and enhance the world's ecosystem, via modifying genetic material. One of the biggest implications on the conditions of life is the technological marvel of modifying animals as well as humans beyond minor conveniences, thus altering several fundamental characteristics of species. The by-product of this technological interference in nature manifests itself in a loss of hierarchy. For instance, a human can be spliced with a pig in an almost infinite number of ways, but that can also give just as many different unwanted results. The splicing and crossbreeding began with the hope of enhancing life, and not to cause an anarchic state of nature, as Jimmy's mother says to his dad after his dad is celebrating on behalf of a successful splicing of a human brain with a pigoon's body (a pigoon is a transgenic pig bred to grow replacement organs for humans):

You hype your wares and take all their money and then they run out of cash, and it's no more treatments for them. They can rot as far as you and your pals are concerned. Don't you remember the way we used to talk, everything we wanted to do? Making life better for people – not just people with money. You used to be so . . . you had ideals, then. (32)

In this sentence, we can perceive Jimmy's mom as being the embodiment of Atwood's opinions regarding bioengineering as being worried and fearing the path it is heading. At the same time, Jimmy's father and his newfound ideals can, then, be seen as the embodiment of that which Atwood seeks to criticize: That which she fears bioengineering is or will stray towards. Her underlying criticism points towards corporative biotechnology and bioengineering inevitably will be transformed from being biological progress and discovery to becoming the pinnacles of absolute power and control. This is further recognized by the fact that the focus has switched from trying to better the conditions of life and the living, to becoming a money vortexed enterprise, bettering only the conditions of certain people. The people with the money and power to afford it. Thus, a hierarchal gap is created between the humans who have access to superior conditions and those who have not, based upon wealth. While that concept is not new or foreign, it is taken to such an extreme measure in the narrative that it changes not only the perception of humanity, but the very definition.

Allison Dunlap touches upon this exact aspect in her essay, “Eco-dystopia: reproduction and destruction in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*”:

By controlling and commodifying the production and reproduction of both human beings and non-human animals, the capitalist scientists of *Oryx and Crake* diminish the possibility of human exceptionalism, reducing both non-human animals and humans to controllable commodities. At the same time that corporate science collapses human-over-animal hierarchy, however, it also strives to reinforce that hierarchy by drawing a clear distinction between a human world within isolated scientific Compounds and a savage world outside Compound walls populated by non-human and dehumanized Others (Dunlap, 3)

It appears clear that even if a disease would not have eradicated civilization, it would steadily dissolve due to the lines between the non-human and the human beings becoming increasingly blurred towards the point where the world becomes what it was before, and if not for that, capitalism would ruin it with its commodification of nature and biology. Crake explains the iron grip that capitalism holds on society with a scenario based in reality, yet he prefaces it as hypothetical only to reveal during their conversation that it was this exact scenario that sparked his father’s death:

“Now, suppose you’re an outfit called HelthWyzer. Suppose you make your money out of drugs and procedures that cure sick people, or else – better – that make it impossible for them to get sick in the first place.”

“Yeah?” said Jimmy. Nothing hypothetical here: that was what HelthWyzer actually did.

“So, what are you going to need, sooner or later?”

“More cures?”

“After that.”

“What do you mean, after that?”

“After you’ve cured everything going.”

Jimmy made a pretence of thinking. No point doing any actual thought: it was a foregone conclusion that Crake would have some lateral-jump solution to his own question.

“Remember the plight of the dentists, after that new mouthwash came in? The one that replaced plaque bacteria with friendly ones that filled the same ecological niche, namely your mouth? No one ever needed a filling again, and a lot of dentists went bust.”

“So?”

“So, you’d need more sick people. Or else – and it might be the same thing – more diseases.

New and different ones. Right?"

"Stands to reason," said Jimmy after a moment. It did, too. "But don't they keep discovering new diseases?"

"Not discovering," said Crake. "They're creating them." (Atwood, 125)

So not only do corporations manipulate the masses with their products, but they also carry out covert illegal actions such as murder to keep their secrets safe. They hold a strong visual sense of power, but need not to reinforce it through force, as their products simply prepare the docile masses for their "needed" treatment.

In the post-apocalyptic part of the novel where we follow Jimmy's persona Snowman, we notice acts that carry a resemblance to the pre-apocalyptic years of civilization. One of those being Snowman attaining a role that resembles what is found in religion. As he establishes a religious-like cult among the Crakers, based on Crake being the creator figure, he effectively attempts to unite the Crakers into a primitive form of society, much like the one we saw with Granser and his grandsons in *The Scarlet Plague*. Snowman has seen the decline of one society, which then allowed him to be the one to warn the new world of the fallacies of the old one. Unfortunately, he is also a victim of the destruction caused by the old world, leading to his incoherent and unstable state of mind. But even though he lives on in misery, he was destined to move the Crakers into the post-apocalyptic:

Crake had prepared him mentally for such a possibility, it seems. He wanted him to look after the Paradise Project, and he had even asked him if he felt able to kill someone he loved to spare them pain, but the impact of Crake's hints only dawns upon Jimmy when he is on his own with the Crakers in a deserted and destroyed world: "How could I have missed it? Snowman thinks. What he was telling me. How could I have been so stupid". He certainly lacks any idea of an educational master plan, as the stumbling and contradictory narratives he tells the Crakers show (Kuester, 84)

Snowman stands as a lingering cautionary tale, not only to the Crakers, but to the readers as well. His unreliable and fragile state reflects the result of humanity overstepping its boundaries, committing hubris. The Crakers exist as examples of perfect creatures, but we soon realize that the things that make them perfect is the absence of what essentially makes us human. As Adeline Séverac points out in her article, "Manipulation and Dystopia in *Oryx* and *Crake*":

The Crakers may be "perfect" in the fact that they live in a total harmony, without any violence, any vice, any flaw. They do not experience bad feelings, but there is a reason for that: they do not experience any feeling at all. The drawback for this

apparent genetic innovation, this leap from humans full of failures and contradictions to these “Paradise models”, is their total absence of emotions. From a utopian desire we find a totally dystopian outcome. (33)

Here is the core explanation for why any utopian envisions by the capitalistic scientists could never happen. If the perfect world is one without flaws, then there is no space for the inherently flawed human species thus making any desired dream of a utopia a paradoxical matter. Furthermore, if we were to erase feelings and emotion altogether, the endgame of having achieved the utopia would be rendered obsolete, as the entire idea of a perfect world coming to fruition is presupposed by the person who envisions it also experiencing the positivity of being there in the first place. As Séverac pointed out: if the Crakers do not feel, then the concepts of dystopia and utopia are lost upon them.

The Crakers, then, stand as a stark contrast to the society that was before, as *Oryx and Crake* tells the tale of an imperfect species trying to build a perfect world. But as told, the species will inevitably meet the obstacle that is its own imperfection, typically the obstacle which corrupts the to-be utopia. Crake realized that humanity is frail and bound to fallacies, and so the Crakers were his answer. However, where humans are imperfect and can never realize the perfect world, Crakers are a perfect counterpoint to every human fallacy, and in that sense, they do not require a society or its hierarchies to be perfect. Atwood could very well be implying the impossibility of a utopia, and perhaps she is right, such a concept should stay a concept, seeing as it cannot encompass everyone. To create a utopia for all of humanity would be impossible, as humans are simply too diverse and reflective to fit under one wing.

The title and the societal perception of nature and animals

The title of the novel, *Oryx and Crake*, is easily dismissed at first, since it does not provide any indication of having an apocalyptic or dystopian setting. However, when reading the book, it becomes apparent that it refers to the characters Oryx and Crake and plays a clever double entendre this way. The oryx is an endangered species, while the red necked crane is a bird far from any state of endangerment. The initial dismissal of the title could be argued to be a stab at the indifference that human beings show towards most animals. While that might seem farfetched, consider the alternative of the title being Cat and Dog. The equation, then, evokes an entirely different set of emotions, likely of more compassion or affectionate nature, due to cats and dogs often being considered house pets or even a part of one’s family. Regardless, the notion of an oryx and a crane does not really evoke any substantial worry, which is further amplified by the indifference being apparent toward two completely different animals, in which one of them actually being threatened

of extinction. In *Oryx and Crake*, the lack of compassion shown towards animals is reflected in combination with the lure and entertainment of videogames and the internet: “Extinctathon, an interactive biofreak masterlore game he had found on the Web. EXTINCTATHON, Monitored by MaddAddam. Adam named the living animals, MaddAddam names the dead ones. Do you want to play?” (Atwood, 47). Again, one can easily notice a disconnection in humanity towards nature and animals which we also see in contemporary western culture due to computers and machines having replaced large infrastructures and numerous routines in our lives. A bold phrasing on this matter is that the discourse of biology and evolution is, or has become, what can simply be referred to as a game or a sport, a competition of sorts about who has the most power over it. It also serves as a microcosm for the youth of today, who might grow up in the same fashion as Jimmy, a childhood riddled and bombarded with fast and meaningless entertainment, a constant stream of stimuli which is only replaced by the next entertainment. The problem arising with this trend is that the journey can easily lead to a disconnection to nature, and perhaps even humanity itself; through forum boards, and image or video sharing, it has become easier than ever to demonize not only nature, but also people or animals. They become examples of what Margaret Atwood is addressing regarding developments that are currently existing at the time of writing, instead of addressing developments at a potential stage of development, and perhaps that might be a core constituent to the answer as to why her works are as successful as they are; they have deep roots into ongoing issues. None of the problems presented in *Oryx and Crake* feel marginal, as they all exist to be core parts of both our world, and the world within *Oryx and Crake*. But it would be reductionistic to define the effectivity of her conveyance solely on that fact. The next section will go deeper into how aspects of both *The Scarlet Plague*, and *Oryx and Crake* are reflected in society.

Societal Reflections of *The Scarlet Plague* and *Oryx and Crake*

In this section, we will look at examples of real-life aspects and concerns that have been reflected in a literary sense in both *The Scarlet Plague* and *Oryx and Crake*. This includes examples of panic and irrational behavior seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as examples of bioengineering of which have strayed too far towards what Atwood criticizes and fears.

In terms of bioengineering, J. Brooks Bouson mentions a couple of interesting remarks by Atwood herself. First, a comment regarding Atwood’s previously mentioned “inevitable fate” of our world: “Atwood, who insists that *Oryx and Crake* is “fact within fiction”, states that “[w]e’ve taken a path that is already visible to us” (140). Atwood believes that the path we are on is one already and unmistakably moving towards a post-apocalyptic and post-human destination like the one shown in

Oryx and Crake. Additionally, she mentions how the novel, despite its seemingly absurd examples of gene-splicing, "(...) invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent" (140). This suggests that her novel is something more than "just" a fictitious sci-fi and can indeed be considered as dystopian speculative fiction. Katherine V. Snyder mentions that

[t]hese cautionary tales of the future work by evoking an uncanny sense of the simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of these brave new worlds. The future as imagined in dystopian speculative fiction must be simultaneously recognizable and unrecognizable, both like and not-like the present (470)

We must be able to see a resemblance or reflection of what is portrayed in the fictitious world to that existing around us in the real world. And, as Atwood claims to only use biotechnology that already exists from the real world, we get this uncanny sense of familiarity that is followed by a realization which is quite strange when reflecting on the of path contemporary biotechnology. To look further into this idea, in her article "Crossing Human Boundaries: Apocalypse and Posthumanism in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*", Valeria Mosca also takes this concept into consideration with a Freudian approach: "Sigmund Freud defined the uncanny as something that evokes a feeling of familiarity and yet, at the same time, comes across as strange, frightening and ultimately incomprehensible" (40). If we look to an example of this uncanny and frightening notion, Barbra Streisand, got her dead dog cloned twice into two new biologically identical dogs. In the article "Barbra Streisand Cloned Her Dead Dog Because She Can" by Shannon Barbour, the part of the title, "Because She Can", provides a disturbing thought on this matter. Are we discovering how to clone to save lives and is it necessary? Or do we do it simply because we are able to or for convenience's sake? According to an article from The New York Times, Matt Stevens writes that the first cloning of a dog happened in 2005, just two years after the publishing of *Oryx and Crake*. Additionally, it is mentioned that it costs at least 50.000 dollars for the cloning. Of course, the love for one's pet might be unquestionably high, but the price of cloning is undeniably high, especially for average person. Take all this into consideration, Streisand still got the same dog cloned twice. One might think that it does not matter, but the message it delivers that a famous person can draw the line of what is morally and ethically correct simply by handing over a fat pile of cash, is an unsettling thought, especially since it also promotes the normalization and popularization of doing it. Fans, or even the average mainstream consumer, might conclude that this is now a perfectly normal and acceptable thing to do. A PETA representative has a point on this matter:

Animals' personalities, quirks, and very 'essence' simply cannot be replicated, and when you consider that millions of wonderful adoptable dogs are languishing in animal shelters every year or dying in terrifying ways when abandoned, you realize that cloning adds to the homeless-animal population crisis (Barbour, 1)

The point being that we must realize what cloning actually is before heedlessly heading towards it. Despite our best intentions of reviving a beloved pet, it is nothing but a physical and biological replica which is cloned, and actually that which made it one's pet. If this becomes a popular method, we get, as mentioned above, more homeless animals and, additionally, a decrease in genetic diversity. Furthermore, we can foresee this as becoming a market in which you can buy the DNA and thus getting a pet belonging to your biggest idol. This can potentially push the global acceptance of act towards the idea of cloning people for similar reasons.

Going back to Atwood, she points to the dilemma of who, if biotechnology continues down this path, can or will stop us: "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?" (Bouson, 40). The interesting part is the phrasing of the last sentence: "Who's got the will to stop us" which suggests that we are at least able to stop it but, more importantly, that we require a desire and a will to do so. However, as Atwood realizes, and as we mentioned earlier, we are slowly normalizing and mainstreaming biotechnological procedures which then automatically and gradually leads to a public subconscious acceptance of cloning and said procedures. Into the future, as a result of this, cloning humans for various reasons might as well become the norm. In the aforementioned reading of *Oryx and Crake* uploaded on YouTube by the user Sam Johnson, Atwood brings attention to the fact that we have to be careful with how humanity will perceive and make use of the powerful potential residing within modern and future biotechnology, stating that it is not inherently going to cause disaster, but we have to be responsible and not give the power to malicious capitalist practices, but respect it and be wary of its potential as a weapon of mass destruction and control, feeding into a self-perpetuating market income via biochemistry (08:07 - 09:17). Disclosing this discussion, we can safely say that bioengineering is a subject that should not be left unchecked for if not, we may wander into deep waters. In this regard, Atwood disagrees with those who only see positive benefits from bioengineering: "If you're going to do gene-splicing, you're going down a very strange path indeed. If you're going to do it on humans, what you have to ask yourself is, do you want the human race to remain human?" (Bouson, 140).

Examples of irrationality in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic

The discussion leading this section will be on the visible behavioral changes evoked in people during a mass panic such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the fear of one's safety in context to how it is reflected in specifically in London's *The Scarlet Plague*. In the novel, people turned to violence and primality because of the widespread panic founded in people's fear of death. We saw examples in which groups of people would unprovokedly assault pedestrians with guns or other weaponry just for the sake of causing violence because of not having an active long-arm-of-the-law and governmental safety measures in general. People turned to the possession of guns and other weaponry to "feel safe" and protect themselves which may only end up creating more tensity that may eventually lead to more incidents of violence. In the US, we saw a similar pattern regarding the public's acquirement of guns during the COVID-19 pandemic. An article published by "The Guardian" news-website shows that "[g]un sales, which spiked sharply during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, have continued to increase in the United States, with first-time buyers making up more than one-fifth of Americans who purchased guns" (Helmore, 1). A similar article from the U.S.News shows that between January 2020 and April 2021, 5.1 million Americans bought their first gun, which is a significant increase in new gun owners when comparing to the past (Norton, 1). Furthermore, it is mentioned that Americans, early in the pandemic, were "panic buying" firearms, and that there was a surge in background checks, and a noticeable increase in online firearm sales alongside it. The point being is the fact that we saw the public change behavior under the threatening circumstances of a contagious virus. Change that, in America, only lead to more threatening circumstances. In the news article the journalist mentions that Miller, who co-directs the Harvard Injury Control Research Center in Boston, said that "[m]ost people who buy a gun think they're protecting themselves, their family and their property" (1). And further exemplifies this with the fact that "(...) in reality, he said, most gun owners will never use it in defense. They are, however, putting themselves and every household member at increased risk of harm" (1). The possession of a gun gives the holder a false sense of security as it may allow that person to potentially scare away any intruders. However, this culturally embedded 2nd amendment in the US of allowing citizens to bear arms as a means of protecting oneself is of late being criticized and proven to have the exact opposite effect. Additionally, to the point of excessive buying, it is mentioned that "[t]here was just as much a run on guns as on toilet paper in the beginning of the pandemic" (Helmore, 1). In this regard, alongside the increased sales in guns, we saw an increase in purchases of e.g. dry yeast and other long lasting food products. These panic

purchases are an outcome of people's fear and would have a severely more chaotic, extreme, and violent nature if the COVID-19 pandemic had been more contagious and more lethal than what it was.

The State of Being – A Concluding Remark

As Zilboorg stated, the fear of death is a complex matter. It provides us with the mental tools to deal with life threatening dangers. On an individual level, it may seem an insignificant and harmless reaction. However, as the basic response of this fear is based purely on self-preservation, it can cause an uncontrollable and chaotic outbreak if multiplied by many as we saw in *The Scarlet Plague*, and with the examples of panic purchases of guns and specific products during the COVID-19 pandemic. In *The Scarlet Plague*, London points to how civilization ultimately will fall, not just due to the incapability of scientists to solve future viruses, but also due to the chaos and violence spawned during the friction of the mass panic caused by people's fear. The sense of safety that order and law provide in our everyday life vaporizes and mankind's suppressed sinister nature awakens in the absence of no societal control. London shows this notion by comparing the lower and the working class to "wild beasts" destroying everyone including themselves as well (London, ch. 4). They become beasts committing atrocious acts thus destroying what humanity was left within them. A notion that Atwood shares in her novel regarding how we are letting bioengineering tinker with humanity and altering it into becoming something else.

In *Oryx and Crake*, we saw how Atwood depicts, in her boldest fashion, a deceptive and inverted telling of the supposed end of mankind, revealing a future that appears bleak to most, but a utopian world to the Crakers and Crake himself. Atwood's fear of where contemporary bioengineering is heading is resonating within her detailed descriptions of how corporations through money can influence the ethical boundaries of contemporary and future biotechnological research. It would be audacious to claim that this book could be perceived as displaying a utopian society, but that is not the objective of the story, instead, it evokes the underlying problems of contemporary bioengineering and its potential to deprave us of our humanity and what it means to be 'human'. In turn, the portrayed dystopia exposes the reader into taking a critical look at the world in which they live, and reflect and fear the dystopia that currently exists in their time and space. Thus, *Oryx and Crake* is a novel that exceeds its reputation, by serving as a microcosm for bigger concepts than bioengineering and dystopia such as the very meaning of what it means to be human and the conditionality of the term itself. If we sway too far from our perception of humanity by tinkering with genes, some, mainly the rich, may attain Godlike attributes, thus being able to control a post-human stage through absolute biological control and the notion of the extension of life itself. Even in contemporary society, 16 years after the novel's release, its warnings of biotechnology and capitalism are as relevant as ever. For instance, the fact that Barbra Streisand got her dogs cloned

twice sends a dangerous signal about the state of our docile response and carelessness when equipped with the, at first glance, “wonders” of contemporary biotechnology. We should all share Atwood’s skepticism and fear of where biotechnology is heading as she effectively reflects the fundamental issues of the field while also showcasing just how quickly we are to embrace new technology, without considering its potential consequences.

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