

Portfolio 1 | Academic Essay

Value: **25%** of your final grade.(Assignment 1.1 = 5% + Final Draft = 19% + Comp. Ref. = 1%)

Due: *Draft*—In Tutorial, Nov 30-Dec 1, *Final*—In *Lecture*, Dec 7

Length: 5-7 double-spaced pages (approx. 1600-2100 words) exclusive of title page, works cited.

Instructions:

- ✓ Compose a full *academic essay* as per the requirements above. Your audience is a fellow scholar in the Humanities. Consult course models in matters of style but use academic voice.
- ✓ Overall, your final paper should contain **the same elements as in 1.2 and 1.3**: that is, two (or more) *themes* interrelating = *Idea*, evidence, scholarly sources available via York Library, a *thesis statement* that meets the course definition, and a *Beginning, Middle and End*. Also, don't forget your *epigraph*! Does it illustrate your *Idea*?
 - For this assignment, you are required to use at least two published scholarly sources (as per 1.2), ones that extend or complicate each *theme*.
 - Bring one copy of your **complete** draft to your tutorial on the day your draft is due.
 - Include a one page Composition Reflection, as per the instructions below.
 - Also include a title page and Works cited in MLA style. Your title page is page 0.
 - Please review “Housekeeping” in the Syllabus for formatting requirements.

Please Note:

- Your draft is not handed into or assessed by your tutorial leader. However, a hard copy **must be peer reviewed** and this draft included with all other portfolio material.
- An essay of this length should not follow the five-paragraph essay model.
- Consult the Assignment Toolkit and your notes if you need reminders concerning applicable course terms.
- **You may use material already written from 1.2 and 1.3**, and integrate it into your paper; the full draft does not have to be written from scratch.
- **Lecture material** should be cited, if applicable—consult the syllabus for information on titles and dates.
- You must hand in your **complete portfolio for Assignment 1**, including:
 - Your composing reflection (on the very top)
 - Your final version of the essay (right under your composing reflection), marked clearly “FINAL VERSION.”
 - Your peer reviewed drafts, marked “DRAFT.”
 - Your assessed exercises in reverse order: Exercise 1.1 should be at the very bottom of the portfolio. If you do not have an assessed copy, you can turn in a clean copy. However, all pre-assignments must show evidence of revision and not simply be excerpts from your final assignment.
- **Students who do not hand in the required exercises will not receive a grade. Your tutorial leader may also choose to apply late grades to incomplete assignments.**
- If you haven't completed and submitted the Academic Integrity Quiz, you must hand it in with this assignment, or the portfolio will not be graded.
- Your TA may have additional advice for success on this assignment.

Destined Dystopia: An Analysis of Ignorance in *Oryx and Crake*

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“You hold the answers deep within your own mind. Consciously, you’ve forgotten it.”

~Evanescence

Is it true that ignorance is bliss? In her novel *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood paints a picture of a world where humanity is responsible for its own destruction. Each of the characters in this novel falls victim to the already present corruption in the world. However, it is their ignorance that furthers this corruption. These characters exhibit the fact that “We understand more than we know” (Atwood 328). Knowing pertains to facts, whereas understanding pertains to the significance behind these facts. However, the problem of ignorance does not lie in the characters’ lack of knowledge about their reality. Rather, deep within themselves, the characters understand the grimness of their reality. It is their “conscious forgetting,” or, rather, cognitive dissonance – when a cognition or behaviour is followed by its conflicting behaviour (Scott-Kakures 76) – that is the true problem at hand. This cognitive dissonance leads to these characters’ distortion of boundaries, manipulation, and the devaluation of art, which ultimately results in the destruction of the world as a whole.

The first by-product of this ignorance and cognitive dissonance is Crake’s distortion of boundaries. Early on in the novel, teenaged Jimmy and Crake spend much of their free time together entertaining themselves with the easily accessible broadcasting of live executions, assisted suicides, animal snuffing, and child pornography (Atwood 76). When, one day, Jimmy mentions to Crake that humanity is inevitably doomed, Crake replies, “Jimmy, grow up” (Atwood 120). Not only is Crake desensitized by this over-consumption of ethically corrupt media; he is intrigued by what he sees and allows it to feed his ambitious mind. This small-scale

desensitization eventually manifests itself as large-scale cognitive dissonance as Crake's ethical and scientific boundaries become distorted to the extent of creating headless ChickieNobs (Atwood 203), dehumanized Crakers (Atwood 302), and, most importantly, the worldwide epidemic-causing BlyssPluss Pill (Atwood 325). According to Jimmy, "whenever there was a question [Crake] didn't want to address, he acted as if it hadn't been asked" (Atwood 194). Although Crake may understand that what he is doing is wrong, he avoids difficult truths in order to deny responsibility. He eventually stops believing in Nature with a capital 'N' (Atwood 206). Crake's boundaries are not distorted because he does not understand them, but because he does not care about them – a manifestation of his cognitive dissonance. His actions are inconsistent with his knowledge, and the cognitive dissonance between his understanding of the laws of nature and his personal manipulation of nature eventually leads to his self-deception and distorted view of the boundaries of science.

The second by-product of ignorance in this novel is seen in both Jimmy and Oryx falling victim to Crake's manipulations. Although this ignorance seems much less extreme than that of Crake, it still leads to their destruction. As a young victim of the child pornography that Jimmy and Crake entertain themselves with, Oryx becomes ignorant of the evil and corruption in the world due to her cognitive dissonance. When Jimmy asks her about her past, she answers, "Why do you care? ... I don't care. I never think about it. It's long ago now" (Atwood 117). This apparent naïvety is later taken advantage of by Crake when he uses her to distribute the BlyssPluss pill, responsible for the worldwide epidemic (Atwood 325). Oryx later apologizes to Jimmy, claiming she did not know this would happen (Atwood 325). However, Jimmy constantly wonders, "What did she have in mind ... how much did she guess?" (Atwood 323). Jimmy senses that, although Oryx did not know Crake's plans, she understood Crake's evil

nature and could anticipate such malicious actions. However, due to her cognitive dissonance, just like the corruption she experienced as a child, she forgets this grim understanding of evil, and allows herself to be taken advantage of, once again.

Meanwhile, Jimmy, too, does not know Crake's plans; "His brain was slow on logic tonight. There was something wrong with what Crake had just said, but he couldn't pinpoint it ... All the hairs on his arms were standing up. *We understand more than we know*" (Atwood 328). Although Jimmy understands Crake's unethical nature, his ignorance is due to the fact that Crake is his best friend. Jimmy's ignorance is also a result of his mother comparing him to Crake, saying, "Your friend is intellectually honourable ... He doesn't lie to himself" (Atwood 69). Therefore, he allows himself to be manipulated by Crake, to do ad campaigns for the BlyssPlus pill. At the end of the novel, Jimmy finally comes to realize his ignorance and that he had a part in allowing this apocalypse to happen. "So Crake never remembered his dreams. It's [Jimmy] that remembers them instead. Worse than remembers: ... he's stuck in them ... No wonder Crake screamed so much" (Atwood 218). Just like Oryx, Jimmy's cognitive dissonance causes him to be manipulated by Crake for the destruction of the world.

The last by-product of ignorance in this novel is exhibited in society's devaluation of art. This devaluation of art separates it from science in the education system, and as a result, society suffers the consequences. This is first seen in the separation of science from ethics, when, early on in the novel, Jimmy's mother accuses his father of manipulating helpless pigeons for the selfish advancement of biotechnology (Atwood 55). Jimmy's father sides with science while his mother sides with ethics, and as a result, they find no common ground, and their family is broken apart.

The root of the issue of the devaluation of art is that society values profit – a by-product of science – above art. In her article, *Going Wendigo: The Emergence of the Iconic Monster in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake and Antonia Bird's Ravenous*, Danette DiMarco states, “it appears that the more divided or separated or enclosed individuals become, the fewer opportunities there are for an ethics of sustenance through care to displace an ethics of flagrant profit and wide-open technological advancement” (DiMarco 180). The more art and science are separated in the education system and society as a whole, the less they can balance each other out. This balance is important because the ethical aspect of art is needed to monitor and place appropriate boundaries around the constantly advancing realm of science. In the novel, such an imbalance is seen in the case of Crake’s manipulation of science and biotechnology. He sides completely with science and disregards art, and the result is the ultimate destruction of the world. Society’s misplacement of values is, once again, due to its cognitive dissonance between its understanding of the dangers of unmonitored science and its relentless hunger for wealth and power.

However, although the separation of art and science is dangerous, the recombination of the two is all the more dangerous. Jimmy, himself, knows that his laughable degree will, at best, land him a job “decorating the cold, hard, numerical real world in flossy 2-D verbiage” (Atwood 188). In her article, *A Tale Meant to Inform, Not to Amuse*, Susan M. Squier claims that the characters’ view of “what science can do [is] at the expense of what art can say” (Squier 1155). After attending two completely separate educational institutions, Jimmy and Crake eventually are reunited to bring together their distinct skills to promote the BlyssPlus pill. The result is a worldwide epidemic. Although art consists of ethics that can monitor science, it also consists of rhetoric. This rhetoric can be much too easily manipulated for the selfish gain of science, taking

advantage of unsuspecting victims – the consumers. With the extreme separation of art and science comes the extreme manipulation of the two, which, when combined, create a relentless monster.

Society's devaluation of art is also clearly exhibited in Crake as he presents a scientific solution to an artistic problem. Crake's solution to the "flaws" – or artistic characteristics – of humanity is genetic engineering (Atwood 302). Thus, Jimmy realizes that there is little to be favoured about this dehumanized creation and that the Crakers' original "flaws" eventually begin to emerge again as they start to use art and symbolic thinking. "Next," Crake says, "they'd be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war" (Atwood 361). Evidently, art and science cannot be successfully separated (Sufrin).

This valuation of science over art can also be seen as a reflection of Atwood's feminist views. The prestigious science based-institution Watson-Crick and the devalued art-based institution Martha-Graham are, respectively, named after a male and a female. This symbolization is a reminder that males are, unfortunately, more highly valued than women in society. Likewise, the protagonist of this story is portrayed by the male Jimmy, whereas, the helpless victim is portrayed by the female Oryx. However, Atwood avenges herself in the end of the novel by exposing the despicable male, Crake's evil and cowardly intentions where he frames the female Oryx for the destruction of the world and commits assisted suicide.

Evidently, the apocalypse lies in the hands of humanity. Their choices come at a price, whether they choose to ignore that price or not. However, this ignorance only furthers the cycle of corruption already existent in the world. Crake's desensitization leads to his distortion of

boundaries. Both Oryx's cognitive dissonance toward the evil in her past and Jimmy's overlooking of his best friend's behaviour lead to their manipulation by Crake. And lastly, society's ignorance of the value of art leads to a loss of equilibrium in society.

The problem is not knowledge-based, but understanding-based. Humanity's apathy for the resources they've been given is a reflection of this poisonous cognitive dissonance. Each person must rise to the challenge and accept responsibility for their actions. This post-apocalyptic dystopian novel is an only slightly exaggerated satire "inspired by the urgent social importance of scientific fact" (Squier 1154). Atwood aims to impart to the reader hindsight bias that "informs [them] ... not amuses [them]" of what the real world will look like if the media, biotechnology, powerful corporations, and educational systems continue in their current course of action. Ignorance does nothing less than break down the barrier that protects humans from manipulation and from being manipulative, themselves. Atwood's novel is a call to action. If humanity continues in its course of ignorance, it will find itself in a catastrophe that, ironically, cannot be ignored.

Works Cited

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