



Research Article

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Words of Worlds in Atwood’s *MaddAddam* Trilogy

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Abstract: This article examines Margaret Atwood’s trilogy, comprising *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *MaddAddam*, through the lens of ecologically oriented postmodern thought and aims to reveal that the trilogy encompasses both textualist and realist orientations. The primary focus is to underline Atwood’s unconventional choice of placing language and its related concepts at the heart of her speculative fiction and demonstrate that she uses its dual role as a tool for both postmodern manipulation and ecocritical awareness regarding our perception of realities. The trilogy navigates scientific, environmental, and literary themes and shifts the focus from facts to narratives emphasising the centrality of language and ultimately underscoring the significance of stories in discovering and shaping our worldview. Embracing an ecocritical postmodern stance, Atwood’s trilogy underlines the need for a re-evaluation of nature/culture and human/nonhuman dichotomies and a reconstructive approach to adopt in the intricate process of meaning making.

Keywords: Postmodernism, ecocriticism, speculative fiction, Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, *Maddaddam*, narratives

Postmodern ecocriticism is a theoretical approach that combines the elements of postmodernism and ecocriticism to analyse nature, culture, and literature. It is “the deep questioning of all hierarchical systems [...] shifting attention from the position of authority to the idea of relationality” (Oppermann 116). Ecologically oriented postmodern thought has both textualist and realist orientations, promoting a reconstructive rather than a deconstructive literary criticism. Within this direction, the objective of this article is to argue that Margaret Atwood (1939-) adopts an ecocritical postmodern stance in her trilogy, comprising *Oryx and Crake*¹ (2004), *The Year of the Flood*² (2010) and *MaddAddam*³ (2014), contrary to the common criticism that views them either from a stark postmodernist or a sheer eco-centric perspective. In this respect, it is aimed to study why Atwood places language at the heart of her speculative fiction and to explore how she reveals it as a tool for both postmodern manipulation and ecocritical awareness of our perception of realities. By this way, Atwood

¹ Henceforth *OC*.

² Henceforth *YF*.

³ Henceforth *MA*.

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encourages a reconsideration of nature/culture and human/nonhuman dichotomies in the process of meaning making.

The trilogy presents a dystopian world grappling with bioengineering and societal collapse. In *Oryx and Crake*, the story follows Snowman, once known as Jimmy, reflecting on his past and the catastrophic events orchestrated by his brilliant but morally ambiguous friend Crake. The narrative explores themes of corporate power, scientific hubris, and the consequences of unchecked technological advancement. Snowman struggles to survive in a world where he may be the only one left on Earth after a devastating epidemic decimates mankind. He mourns the loss of his beloved friend, Crake, and the beautiful Oryx whom they both loved. In his quest for answers, Snowman begins a journey – accompanied by the green-eyed Children of Crake, the bioengineered quasi-human beings – navigating the vibrant wilderness that had once been a bustling metropolis until ambitious corporations led humanity into a chaotic genetic engineering venture. *The Year of the Flood* runs parallel to *Oryx and Crake*, introducing us to Toby and Ren, from the few fortunate survivors of a biological apocalypse. The novel illuminates life inside the God's Gardeners, an eco-religious group critical of corporate greed and genetic engineering. Toby and Ren navigate this shattered world, offering insights into resilience, faith, and the indomitable human spirit. In the wake of the long-feared catastrophic waterless flood, Earth undergoes a transformative upheaval, resulting in the devastation of human civilization. In a world shadowed by corrupt governing forces and the emergence of genetically engineered life, Ren and Toby cope with crucial decisions for their survival, realising that remaining in seclusion is not a sustainable option. *MaddAddam* continues intertwining the perspectives of various characters as they grapple with their post-apocalyptic reality. In the aftermath of the devastating waterless flood pandemic, Ren and Toby find themselves among other survivors including Jimmy. As the remnants of humanity, they establish a camp to rebuild the civilization with the Crakers, facing the complexities of coexistence and reconciliation. As Toby narrates the origins of their existence to the curious Crakers, expected to inherit the transformed Earth, her storytelling weaves into a brilliant oral history, chronicling humanity's past and offering glimpses into its potential future. Atwood's trilogy examines the inherent fragility of humanity and the clash between technology, nature, and the essence of being human, fostering critical reflections on our own societal trajectory.

The trilogy uncovers man-made catastrophic outcomes encompassing extinction, overpopulation, depopulation, drought, famine, and bioterrorism. Atwood elucidates the prevailing Western paradigm where culture is prioritised over nature, illustrating how the rapid trajectory of technological and scientific advancement may cause mass destruction and widespread environmental loss. By this way, she attempts to dismantle the dominant anthropocentric mindset and disrupt human exceptionalism. On the one hand, there are high-class elites and scientists who live in total isolation within an extreme capitalist society like Prometheans who believe that human innovation can overcome any problem. Embracing a technocratic ideology, they place unwavering faith in scientific prowess and position themselves as the saviour and destroyer of everything, wielding power over all facets of existence ostensibly for the benefit of humanity. Engaging in primitive acts such as mass-burning, slaughter, and even cannibalism, they derive profit, pursuing a twisted quest for so-called immortality and an ideal beauty. Their actions extend to the ruthless exploitation and manipulation of animals, reducing them to domestic "human-puppets", either to eradicate natural wildness or merely for recreational pursuits, an endeavour described as "an after-hours hobby [making them] feel like God" (*OC* 51). Consequently, laboratories and corporate entities represent the modern artificial domains where scientists and proprietors become the new dominators over both the consumed and the consumer, in a very imperial and new-colonial way. On the other hand, in contrast to this anthropocentric picture, biocentric Gardeners pursue a sustainable living with their own religious doctrines, ethical system and mutually respected beings. Like radical environmentalists, they believe in the miracle and spirituality of nature, adopting Heideggerian "let beings be" philosophy, and behave not like the lord but like the shepherd of beings (Garrard 47). They perceive other organisms in nature as companions, as fellows in their own unique way like social ecologists. As a result, Atwood's text becomes home for scientific explorations and ecological ramifications, creating metadiscourses such as Science and Nature, Technology and Ecology each of which has their own validity and dominance in shaping our understanding of the world. These totalized forms of knowledge produce their own discursive constructs and make the novels in the trilogy become an organic environment that allows for the alliance of those manufactured Realities. Different dominant discourses are expressed by the vernacular (Gardeners in *OC* 189), eschatological (Adam One in *YF* 113), secular (corps in *OC* 27) and official (homo sapiens in *OC* 99) narratives, just like a collection of complex views

on the complex web of nature (Howarth 73). In addition, they mirror the historical development of the multiplicity of discourses through the references to Darwinian evolution (the primates in *OC* 182), to Linnean taxonomy (Latin names of animals in the video game in *OC* 80) and to Mendelian genetics (giant pigoon in *MA* 3), by making ecology become a lingua franca and create a multistoried world. While engaging with scientific and technological pursuits, acquiring power in such domains, possessing the capability even to create a new race, Atwood's people paradoxically found themselves overwhelmed beneath the weight of these "Grand Narratives" (Lyotard 60). Crake and other biotech experts, called new cultural superheroes, offer disease protection but intend to eradicate humanity through a hidden virus to form a futuristic and complex society. They start to modify various aspects of life, from cosmetics and medications to organisms, plants, insects, and animals and design the world through hybridization, mutation, gene-manipulation, and transplantation thus becoming, in Haraway's words, cyborg-like political animals, making living in a chaotic city no different than living in a jungle (149). Atwood blurs the distinction between human and nonhuman, emphasising the ambition and wildness of mankind. Amidst the chaos, all that remains is the primal instinct for survival, leaving ethical and moral considerations behind and losing their human qualities, and consequently going back to their basic needs under harsh moments in contrast to the ease of maintaining civility in favourable conditions. As Hammill maintains: "Even Jimmy, lonely survivor of Crake's biological warfare, used to live in a luxurious hi-tech compound and now living in a semi-animal state, unwashed, dressed in a sheet, and scavenging for food, feels that he has become his friend's creature" (531).

He unwraps the warm fish from its leaves, trying to keep his hands from trembling. [...] The people [Crakers] keep their distance and avert their eyes while he crams handfuls of fishiness into his mouth and sucks out the eyes and cheeks, groaning with pleasure. Perhaps it's like hearing a lion gorge itself, at the zoo, [...] – a rending and crunching, a horrible gobbling and gulping – and, like those long-gone zoo visitors, the Crakers can't help peeking. The spectacle of depravity is of interest even to them, it seems [...] When Snowman [Jimmy] has finished he licks his fingers and wipes them on his sheet, and places the bones back in their leaf wrappings, ready to be returned to the sea. (*OC* 101)

This scene in *Orxy* reminds Berger's idea about the imperial eye on animals at zoos (19). Jimmy, eating fish savagely, is exhibited under the superior gaze of the Crakers who feel both disgust and interest while watching him. He is as if confined and put on display for observation which reduces him to an object of spectacle. With this scene, Atwood clearly depicts the objectification of a human being by his human-crafted replicas. Once dominant with unique intelligence, behaviours, and abilities, he is now objectified by these creations. Thus, Atwood unbounds the nature/culture binaries here and destabilises the positions of the seen and the seer in nature, prompting us to question whether there is a hidden primitivity within civilization.

As a new kind of human, free from the flaws and vices of the old humanity, Crakers are designed by Crake to be a perfect, peaceful, and environmentally friendly form of life. Toby teaches literacy to Blackbeard (one of the Crakers), but it is known that the Crakers are coded with the ability to express only a limited number of feelings through a limited number of words. Despite being in "the prisonhouse of language", the Crakers still sense an inherent void and cannot suppress their inquiries, reflecting the innate nature of human(like) beings which is thinking (Waugh 53). Their epistemological questions about their origins, or about the meaning of their existence demonstrate that fundamentally, humans are beings driven by a thirst for truth and a compelling urge to seek knowledge (Sheehan 25). We understand this most from the Crakers' desire to know what lies behind the scenes despite their limited vocabulary, restricted imagination, and few emotions. Although lacking concepts that can trigger their thinking and questioning abilities, they aspire to learn everything and find themselves, in a way, subject to self-imposed conditions. They create their own stories, or as Butler puts it, "myths", and build knowledge and truth as objective and universal realities (32): "A story is what they want [...] they're demanding dogma" (*OC* 102-4). Therefore, they start to be defined in and through language and all reality turns into a linguistic construct. In time, Jimmy, Toby and then Blackbeard become the storytellers who transfer the task to the next generations to keep the tradition among the Crakers alive, as a way to connect their past and present to future, because, as Eco profoundly asserts, "[m]an is a storytelling animal by nature" (13):

“That’s consistent with what you’ve been telling them. It’s Gospel as far as they’re concerned.”
 “I know [...] They wanted to know the basic stuff, like where they came from and what all those decaying dead people were. I had to tell them something.”
 “So you made up a nice story [...] that’s the story we’ve got,” says Toby. “So we have to work with it [...]”
 “Whatever,” says Jimmy. “It’s over to you. Just keep doing what you’re doing. (MA 321-2)

The act of telling in the trilogy is constantly passed from one character to another, becoming both a form of storytelling and a narrative style. The stories undergo a continuous shift in perspective, but the task persists, a constant waiting to be fulfilled. Life transforms into narratives, and to live is to engage not only in storytelling but, more importantly, in storycrafting. When Blackbeard realises that “[t]elling the story is hard, and writing the story must be more hard”, he starts to learn the basics of writing from Toby because she has been a regular writer of all times, even after the chaos when there is no one around (MA 456). She continues writing without knowing if there will be anyone to read what she has written: “What kind of story – what kind of history will be of any use at all, to people she can’t know will exist, in the future she can’t foresee?” and she affirms, “I am writing the story [...] The story of you, and me, and the Pigoons, and everyone” (MA 249-456). The theme of writing and the continuity of the written word are woven into the fabric of the narrative, reflecting the idea that storytelling and preserving knowledge are fundamental to (post)human existence. At some point, Blackbeard takes on the task of writing from Toby, ensuring that the story continues incessantly:

And Toby gave warnings about this Book that we wrote. She said that the paper must not get wet, or the Words would melt away and would be heard no longer, [...] And that another Book should be made, with the same writing as the first one. And each time a person came into the knowledge of the writing, and the paper, and the pen, and the ink, and the reading, that one also was to make the same Book, with the same writing in it. So it would be always there for us to read. And that at the end of the Book we should put some other pages, and attach them to the Book, and write down the things that might happen after Toby was gone, so that we might know all of the Words about Crake, and Oryx, and our Defender, Zeb, and his brother, Adam, and Toby, and Pilar, and the three Beloved Oryx Mothers. And about ourselves also, and about the Egg, where we came from in the beginning. (MA 469)

and adds that he “will go one day, then Jimadam and Pilaren and Medulla and Oblongata will teach these things to the younger ones” (MA 469). In this way, the recording of Culture “(with a capital C and in the singular) has become cultures (uncapitalised and plural)” with its beings and things as becomings, with the realities of life hidden in the continuity of the storytelling and making (Hutcheon 12). Here, with a postmodern attitude, Atwood demonstrates the construction of the Crakers’ world within language and highlights how they interpret this world based on their own perception. She reveals that it would not be sufficient to code what is wrong and what is right to people, and in some way, truth is constructed either spontaneously or intentionally, in a designed or a given society. This idea takes us to Luntley’s discussions in his *Reason, Truth, and Self*. Embracing a postmodern philosophical perspective, Luntley states that the world is not dominated by the “Big Ideas” like truth, rationality, and self, and thus it does not have a single, universal, and self-contained narrative (8). Instead, there are intertwined but distinct stories in contrast to “the world’s own story” and “[t]here is no such thing as the whole truth. The only stories to be told about the world are local stories” (12). Then, it can be argued that the stories in the world may be similar or the same, but their heroes and heroines will always be different. That is precisely why stories hold a central position in Atwood’s trilogy. Regardless of their nature, be it human or posthuman, individuals adhere to words, to stories. There is always a narrator, always a narrative.

In Atwood’s trilogy, it is implied that whether humanity ceases to exist and posthumanity emerges, the only thing that endures is, and always will be, language, continuously shaping new worlds and realities. This is evident from the very first book of the trilogy. Crake, as one of the “number people” and Jimmy, as one of the “word people”, do not quite share the same worldview. While Crake aims for scientific breakthroughs and financial success, his friend Jimmy chooses to attend an art school and attaches his life to the words, especially to “[t]he odds words, the old words, the rare ones” (OC 68). One day, in an argument with Crake, Jimmy tries to prove how language determines meaning to him: “‘When any civilization is dust and ashes,’ he said, ‘art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning – human meaning, that is – is defined by them. You have to admit that’” (OC 167). In the aftermath of the destruction, Jimmy’s connection with words is

disrupted just as humanity's bond with nature is: "From nowhere, a word appears: *Mesozoic*. He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can't reach the word. He can't attach anything to it. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space" (*OC* 39) (emphasis original). Still, Jimmy realises over time that even in challenging times, there is an opportunity to reconnect with words and a potential for art, not merely through verbal definitions, but through meaningful relationships. Aware of this fact and unable to entirely suppress the construction of the narratives in life, Crake, and his friends, at the very least, choose to suppress the questioning of these narratives by avoiding the presence of any artistic inclination. They design the internal framework of the human-like Crakers intricately and present their external environment like a user manual or a prescription, deliberately guiding them to a fundamental state devoid of curiosity in art, thereby limiting their capacity for creativity and critical thinking: "*Watch out for art*, Crake used to say. *As soon as they start doing art, we're in trouble*. Symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall, in Crake's view" (*OC* 361) (emphasis original). That may be why the trilogy brings together language and literature, theory and practice in order to reflect the place and power of art in our lives. The trilogy sometimes becomes metafiction by incorporating statements like "this is the Book, there are the Pages, and here is the Writing", or "this is my voice [...] you're hearing in your head and that's called *reading*"; or historiographic metafiction by fictionalising prominent figures in science, politics, nature and literature like calling the Crakers Simone de Beauvoir, Madame Curie, Eleanor Roosevelt, and by having the names attributed to the saints like "Saint Jan Swammerdam [...] Saint C. R. Ribbands"; it also becomes intertextual by referring to biblical verses such as "Genesis 8:21" and including Bunyan and Blake style poems, quotations from the masters of literature such as Shakespeare and Woolf in addition to songs and hymn lyrics (*MA* 467, 460; *OC* 160-1; *MA* 187; *YF* 109, 111) (emphasis original). By this way, Atwood captures a sense of unifying and inclusive language that evolves, as opposed to a language that constructs and separates Culture from Nature. She presents the nature/culture composition arena as a space where Grand Narratives are questioned in an ecocritical postmodern manner, and literature makes the language bridge the human and the nonhuman, science, and technology.

"Homer", says Snowman, [...] "*The Divine Comedy*. Greek statuary. Aqueducts. *Paradise Lost*. Mozart's music. Shakespeare, complete works. The Brontës. Tolstoy. The Pearl Mosque. Chartres Cathedral. Bach. Rembrandt. Verdi. Joyce. Penicillin. Keats. Turner. Heart transplants. Polio vaccine. Berlioz. Baudelaire. Bartok. Yeats. Woolf". (*OC* 79) (emphasis original)

Across the trilogy, Atwood underscores that amidst an impending chaotic world, despite the prevalence of advanced science and technology, literature stands as the enduring constant—the words, stories, and narratives persist unchanged, affirming their timeless resilience. As Eco states, "books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told" (20). Atwood uses this integrated way of expression by adding an ecological and postmodern touch to her works, reminding that "we know nature through images and words" (Howarth 77). By this way, she presents language both as a part of the issues within a dystopian environment and as a place that plays a role in finding solutions for these issues. The hymn lyrics in the Gardeners' oral hymnbook, for example, raises an awareness on having a sense of gathering while at the same time nourishes and fuels readers within a poetic cycle, as Whitman asserts, creating a "poetic atmosphere" (in Rueckert 118):

With Creatures all, in harmony
I'll pass my mortal days,
While each in its appointed voice
Sings the Creator's praise. (*YF* 111)

In an ecocentric postmodern way, Atwood combines nature, which is generally silent as a linguistic construct, with language which is, for Lewis Thomas, "the core of life, mechanical and organic way to transfer the energy" (in Howarth 80). It seems like there is energy stored in the poems and hymns released from Atwood that flows towards us then to a larger community in an endless circulation, like the process of becoming in the biosphere because for Rueckert, what sun means to nature, so does literature to humans as such a source of energy (109). As John Cooley states, texts are like the biospheric environment; with their diverse features like intertextual or metafictional qualities, they mirror the richness of biodiversity, becoming "organic communities of interrelated

entities” (in Oppermann 121). In this sense, Atwood foregrounds the power of words more than the power of anything else and adopts the belief that “we live by the word and by the power of the word” (Rueckert 115). Therefore, Atwood’s text can be considered as an environmentally aware postmodern work of art in which nonhumans take their place with their own value, at least as much as humans:

God must have caused the Animals to assemble by speaking to them directly, but what language did He use? It was not Hebrew, my Friends. It was not Latin or Greek, or English, or French, or Spanish, or Arabic, or Chinese. No: He called the Animals in their own languages. To the Reindeer He spoke Reindeer, to the Spider, Spider; to the Elephant He spoke Elephant, to the Flea He spoke Flea, to the Centipede He spoke Centipede, and to the Ant, Ant. So must it have been. (YF 15)

Without reducing all reality to language construct, Atwood establishes a connection with the essence of (non)humans through language which is not divisive but binding. In this way, the trilogy becomes highly dialogical in a Bakhtinian way where “the number of interactions between entities is infinite, which enables a ‘polyphony’ of interacting voices within any given text” (in McDowell 375). Jimmy’s words as an obsession, Toby’s diary as a form of talking to her old self, Pilar’s bees as her messengers, and the Crakers’ stories as essential to their existence may all imply the active participation in life and experiencing this through words is described by Bakhtin as a state achieved “mentally, spiritually and physically by interaction with other beings and things” (in McDowell 375). Atwood lets multiple voices speak in her texts with “no language centre” and no “monopoly on truth”, referring to the coexistence of multiple perspectives, languages, and discourses within a single text or within society in a carnivalesque manner (in McDowell 380, 376). It is observed that Atwood’s text is like a rich and pluralistic representation of biodiversity including bees, dandelions, caterpillars, and rivers in it. As if in alignment with McDowell who advocates that “all entities [...] deserve [...] a voice”, Atwood emerges as one of the “ego[less]” writers he mentions in his work (372).

In *Oryx*, it is first explained that what is left outside the language to those who cannot perceive is that life actually speaks:

[...] the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they’d eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can’t talk. (96)

Then comes the reason why some words are unseen and unheard by humans in *Maddaddam*:

Crake thought that you had eaten all the words, so there were none left over for the animals, and that was why they could not speak. But he was wrong about that [...] Because when he was not looking, some of the words fell out of the egg onto the ground, and some fell into the water, and some blew away in the air. And none of the people saw them. But the animals and the birds and the fish did see them, and ate them up. They were a different kind of word, so it was sometimes hard for people to understand the animals. They had chewed the words up too small. (352-3)

Atwood underlines the importance of a consciousness about the reality behind the representations within the (non)human world. She uses her literary platform to promote a deeper understanding of life in all aspects. Throughout her trilogy, she incorporates language skilfully integrating it within scientific, ecological, and literary domains seamlessly. Atwood crafts a thought-provoking narrative that blurs the lines between nature and culture. The motivation behind connecting these widely apart areas of life could be the purpose to emphasise the significance of understanding how to communicate with nature against (un)intentional difficulties, threats, and disasters. Underlining that “we [should] learn to translate the messages of nature with fidelity”, Toby, in *Maddaddam*, thinks that “we’re too stupid that we cannot understand their language so there has to be a translator” (Howarth 77; MA 328). She believes that they, as the human survivors in the post-pandemic world, (the Maddaddamites) need to be in cooperation with the genetically modified neohumans (The Crakers) and animals and plants (Pigoons or Happicuppa coffee bush) “to make a good and safe place for us to live” (MA 436). By this way, Atwood underlines the significance of interconnectedness among beings and things and

believes that it is possible to establish a shared understanding through mutual respect and empathy, which can only happen by literature, like an intellectual, up-to-date sort of belief system, offering a unity between nature/culture and science/technology: “Thank thee, Oh God [...] for the knots of DNA and RNA that tie us to our other fellow creatures” (YF 64). Interlinking the fundamental dynamics of life, Atwood calls for an urgent necessity of a consensus among these seemingly opposite poles.

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