

Humanity Cast as the Other in the Tragedy of Life: An Ecocritical Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *MaddAddam* Trilogy

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Abstract:

This article aims to analyze Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *MaddAddam* Trilogy from an ecocritical perspective. Establishing the recognizable pattern of error and guilt as the point of departure, we contend that the root of the tragic understanding of human existence is environmental. Drawing on an unorthodox take on the concept of Othering in ecocritical discourse, we posit that humans perceived themselves as the marginalized Other in the tragedy of life. In this way, nature became the ultimate opponent to be feared, fought, and conquered. The exiled humanity's perception on planet earth as adversarial catapulted them to an ultimately self-destructive path most notable in Atwood's apocalyptic literature. Finally, we argue against an absolute sense of tragedy. Atwood's stance is ultimately one of paradox: she is as much as a pessimist that she is an optimist as hope inevitably is the everlasting concomitant of tragedy.

Keywords: ecophobia, Othering, ontological fall, tragedy, evolution, *phusis*, apocalypse

Of Man's First Disobedience: Humanity's Ontological Fall from Grace

Surfacer, building on the notion of German collective guilt, confesses that the "trouble some people have being German ... I have being human" (Atwood, 1998: 131). Margaret Atwood, in an interview with Graeme Gibson, asserted that her narrator in *Surfacing* "wishes to be not human, because being human inevitably involves being guilty." But, what is the source of this sense of guilt and culpability which seems to be an integral part of human condition? "It all comes back to original sin... It depends on whether you define yourself as intrinsically

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innocent, and if you do, then you have a lot of problems, because in fact you aren't", Atwood clarifies (2006: 11). Her claim is one that has wide credence among human beings: we were born, therefore we are guilty. We believe wholeheartedly that we have lost our innocence somewhere along the way, that we are guilty of a crime/mistake for which we were never forgiven, that we are tainted through *mea culpa*, and that we are being punished, disproportionately I might add, for our unpardoned sin.

The pain of existence is articulated in the story of fall and the lost paradise. The biblical version has Adam and Eve live in perfect harmony with nature in the Garden of Eden where there is no labor or adversity, up until they commit the sin of disobedience. As punishment, they are thrown into a hostile world where they have to labor and struggle to survive (Genesis 4.17–9). The Gardeners believe that they could have been happy and led an "Animal life in all simplicity", yet they "craved the knowledge of good and evil". That's why they are cursed now (Atwood, 2010: 52). In the totalitarian theocracy of Gilead, it seems "shameful" to see women give birth free of pain as Eve's sin has condemned them to a state of sorrow (Atwood, 1985: 146). At the end of the day, all that Adam One can hope for is that the Waterless Flood has created a new Eden, another *locus amoenus*, for the survivors (Atwood, 2010: 345).

Tragically, it seems that we have a tendency to take refuge in the nostalgic reminiscence of this fantasized past that is now lost to us. The exiled humanity has attached a strong sense of nostalgia to the prelapsarian existence, and the lost harmonious relationship they enjoyed with their environment. Our longing for this lost golden past and our *locus amoenus*, does not manifest itself only in the Judeo-Christian "lost paradise". The Golden Age of ancient Greece, the Achaemenid era of Persia, the *Satya Yuga* of Hinduism, and so forth are all now long gone periods associated with harmony, stability, peace and prosperity. However, the historical evidences suggest that such a perfect past, relatively near or quite ancient, probably never existed. Stephen Hawking avers that people in modern times dream of "a purer and simpler age". However, he explains that "the past was not that wonderful. It was not so bad for a privileged minority, though even they had to do without modern medicine, and childbirth was highly risky for women. But for the vast majority of population, life was nasty and short" (1994: 27). Offred nostalgically remembers their land as the pure realm of "air sprays, pine and floral" (Atwood, 1985: 214). It is indeed fascinating "how quickly the past becomes idyllic" (Atwood, 2014: 30). Jerome Seymour Bruner observes that memories "serve many masters aside from Truth" (2002: 23). It might be true that the plasticity of

memory can help us cope with certain situations; however, this flawed nostalgic urge would divert our attention from the pressing problem of the contemporary world in the most unproductive manner. Obsession over the idyllic yet fabricated images of the past does not solve any of our “here and now” problems, and definitely would not teach us how to dwell more equitably and sustainably on this planet.

The original sin is the Judeo-Christian term for the human belief in their own culpability in bringing about their tragic existence. However, the concept of man’s ontological fall from grace and the subsequent sense of onus and contrition are not exclusive to the Judeo-Christian tradition. In Greek mythology, men lived a life of perfect bliss throughout the Golden age until Prometheus aroused the ire of the god of gods. Zeus took his revenge by creating Pandora, the first woman, and the infamous box through which all evils and misfortunes entered the world (Hamilton, 1942: 87–88). Steiner sees a similar pattern of fall from innocence in Marx who postulates “a stage in human relations in which the primal exchange of trust for trust, of love for love, became fatally one of property and of money, dooming our species to the treadmill of labor and class conflict”. Similarly, the culpability of human psyche is once again put on display in Freudian concept of Oedipal complex, “one of original parricide”. Due to such recognizable pattern of error and guilt, Steiner defines human condition as ontologically tragic (2004: 4–5). I am inclined to agree with Steiner in that, from humanity’s standpoint, life is a tragedy, and human beings the tragic heroes. However, I believe, to a considerable extent, we owe such perspective on life to our environment.

The root of our tragic understanding of human existence is environmental. We were overwhelmed when we found ourselves all alone on this planet as unwelcomed guests. Nature with all its might stood as a formidable enemy against us; an anxiety that is still with us even after all our technological advances. To Jimmy, universe seems like a “big shark’s mouth,... Row after row of razor-sharp teeth” (Atwood, 2003: 260). Just imagine an insignificant frail human being against the rugged unconquerable mountains, the untamable tempestuous seas, the dark mysterious forests replete with dangerous animals, the vast waterless deserts, the deep darkness of the night, the merciless coldness of winters, the cruel hotness of summers, the capricious weather that either ends in flood or draught, the execrably tyrannical hurricanes, the terrorizing tornadoes, the horrifyingly destructive earthquakes, the life-threatening avalanches, the detrimentally devastating volcanic eruptions, the apathetic and perplexing viruses, diseases, germs, bacteria and so forth.

Surfacer acknowledges the frailty of humanity against the unpredictable and antagonistic natural environment: “it’s not unusual for a man to disappear in the bush... All it takes is a small mistake, going too far from the house in winter, blizzards are sudden, or twisting your leg so you can’t walk out, in spring the blackflies would finish you” (Atwood, 1998: 43). She compares living in the city and living in nature. At first, she clings to the more fashionable response to the dilemma by rejecting the urban environment and all its problems. However, she quickly adjust her comment by acknowledging her fear of the adversarial nature: “it is a lie: sometimes I was terrified, I would shine the flashlight ahead of me on the path, I would hear a rustling in the forest and know it was hunting me, a bear, a wolf or some indefinite thing with no name, that was worse” (Atwood, 1998: 70). Similarly, Toby sees the natural world as a hostile, unpredictable force: “She’d like to avoid going in there [forest], among the trees. Nature may be dumb as a sack of hammers, Zeb used to say, but it’s smarter than you” (Atwood, 2010: 366). This perceived binary of human/nature is easily detectable in the narrative of the advertisements created to undermine the “ecofreaks”: they “featured stuff like a cute little blond girl next to some particularly repellent threatened species... with a slogan saying: *This?* or *This?* Implying that all cute little blond girls were in danger of having their throats slit so the Surinam toads might prosper” (Atwood, 2014: 182).

It is exactly in this context that we might be able to uncover the motivation behind our seemingly “motiveless malignity” toward the natural environment. What “fiends,” indeed, plague the ancient Mariner, with whom Snowman identifies himself (Atwood, 2003: 10), to pick up his crossbow and shoot the Albatross (Coleridge, 2005: 79–82)? What sort of profane impulse drives the Mariner to kill the sacred bird which has proven to be nothing but the omen of good fortune for the sailors (Coleridge, 2005: 71–74)? Coleridge does not give us a single reason for the Mariner’s temporary bout of insanity; however, can the motivation behind his odd behavior be traced back to humanity’s ecophobic tendencies? Similar questions can be posed for Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Why doesn’t Ahab have no other choice than to kill the white whale? Why does he so obsessively seek revenge on an animal? Why indeed is he willing to sacrifice everything for this violent, pointless pursuit? We might be able to find the answer to our inquiries if we scrutinize Ishmael’s explanation of the source of their fear and hatred. Ishmael insists that what invested the whale with “natural terror” was that “unexampled, intelligent malignity which, according to specific accounts, he had over and over again evinced in his assaults” (1892: 174).

In her search for her father, Surfacer finds a dead heron strung up like a “lynch victim”. She wonders why the killer had to string the bird up in that manner instead of just throwing it away. She comes to the conclusion that they have done it not because of any utilitarian reason, but because they wanted to assert their agency and power over their formidable enemy (Atwood, 1998: 117–118). The narrator confines in us that the death of the bird is more disturbing to her than human “wars and riots and the massacres”. The reason behind her rather unusual disposition, she believes, is the fact that “for the wars and riots there was always an explanation, people wrote books about them saying why they happened” whereas no one has ever tried to explain why the heron had to be lynched (Atwood, 1998: 131). Surfacer, quite like the Mariner and his crew, is at a loss to see the “fiends” that plague humankind. Probably, that’s why Estok so adamantly pleads for theorization of our ecophobic tendencies. Even now, with all our technological and scientific advancements, we often find ourselves at the mercy of a harsh adversarial nature, and we resent it for that exact reason. We imagine “agency and intent in nature” and then we squash that “imagined agency and intent” (Estok, 2009: 210).

In ecocritical discourse, it is highly common to vilify human beings, justifiably I might add, for the crucial part they have played in bringing about the environmental crisis; a sentiment shared by the “artists” of the Martha Graham Academy (Atwood, 2003: 243). After all, every good story needs a good villain. However, not every malicious villain started as one. For a brief moment, let’s turn the table on nature to see how these monstrous human beings were created in the first place. Nevertheless, within every victim is a potential victimizer not unlike the Painballers of Atwood’s story (Atwood, 2014: 9). In the story of humanity vs. nature, human beings were the initial victims, or at least that’s how we perceived the situation. I intend to use the concept of Othering not to show how nature is the marginalized Other but to explain the root of our ecophobia, the fear and contempt we feel toward the natural world.

I Rather Tell Thee What Is to Be Feared: Othering the Human

On this planet, we felt like the Other. We were being oppressed by a malevolent enemy called the natural world. The violence and cruelty that we inflicted upon nature was a response to the hostility and loneliness we experienced on this planet. In this way, nature became the ultimate opponent to be feared, fought, and conquered. David offers Surfacer to restock the woodpile. When Joe and David return from the forest, their body language and the way they have cut the tree down are suggestive of

triumphant soldiers and warfare: “They were proud, they’d caught something. The log was notched in many places as though they’d attacked it” (Atwood, 1998: 80). David is so proud of his triumph over nature that he wants to immortalize the moment by taking “some footage of both of them carrying the log” (Atwood, 1998: 80–81).

In order to survive, we had to fight back to satisfy our immediate needs. Estok explains that our ecophobia “must be seen as an adaptive strategy” (2015: 31) to ensure our survival in a decidedly antagonistic world. Therefore, our exploitative attitude toward nature is not exactly a modern disposition: “it had been game over once agriculture was invented, six or seven thousand years ago. After that, the human experiment was doomed, first to gigantism due to a maxed-out food supply, and then to extinction, once all the available nutrients had been hoovered up” (Atwood, 2003: 242–243). It started from there and continued with a relatively slow pace up until the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. Even Offred experiences a deep sense of uneasiness when she is exposed to movies in which people are struggling against a hostile natural world to provide themselves with necessary means of survival without any technology to aid them in the process: “I liked watching these people when they were happy, not when they were miserable, starving, emaciated, straining themselves to death over some simple thing, the digging of a well, the irrigation of land, problems the civilized nations had long ago solved. I thought someone should just give them the technology and let them get on with it” (Atwood, 1985: 152).

The Industrial Revolution consolidated control over nature: it redefined nature “from participative subject and organism in an organic community to the status of pure object, a machine that ideally could be intimately and infinitely controlled and forced to spit out products in the service of an increasingly utilitarian capitalist economy” (Estok, 2009: 211). Therefore, we understand nature in terms of our mastery over it and our possession of it. Emerson, writing in first half of nineteenth century when the Industrial Revolution was still in its early stages, optimistically argues that “Nature” is so massive and magnificent that the insignificant human operations cannot change it (1849: 3). However, a twenty-first century outlook on the matter would suggest that we have proved him decidedly wrong. In one unique moment, amidst all horror and destruction, the beauty and joyfulness of nature catches the eye of Snowman; he sees a beautiful caterpillar coming down a thread, “Watching it, he feels a sudden, inexplicable surge of tenderness and joy” (Atwood, 2003: 41). Ancient Mariner undergoes a similar experience when he sees the beauty of sea creatures in their celebration of life. When he blesses them “unaware”, his journey toward the

expiation of sin and eventual salvation begins (Coleridge, 2005: 272–291). However, Snowman is granted no such absolution no matter how severe his penance or how pure his expression of love are at that moment. The cause for “these flashes of happiness” is explained away as “a vitamin deficiency” (Atwood, 2003: 41). It seems that the imagination of a twenty-first century writer, unlike that of a nineteenth-century poet, cannot allow for such an easy way out as our crimes against nature are far more daunting than ever.

It is true that our ecophobic propensities began to take strong hold of us as a strategy for survival. However, as Estok suggests, our ecophobic tendencies are “now perhaps as useful for our survival as other long obsolete adaptations: the appendix, the tailbone, wisdom teeth, and so on” (2015: 31). Estok’s argument can be taken one step further: ecophobia is not only obsolete in terms of survival strategy, but also has evolved into a threat of monumental proportions in itself. We have moved way passed our immediate problems that threatened our survival, and have ironically put ourselves in genuine danger of extinction by ruining our habitat. As Adam One explains, now we have reached a point where “We can feel the symptoms of coming disaster as a doctor feels a sick man’s pulse” (Atwood, 2010: 91). Gradually, our more sinned against than sinning mentality got us in deep trouble: “modern industry and technology have at first detached us from our close and immediate dependence on the natural world, though without eliminating our sense of emotional connection to it, but they have then also created new dangers” (Carroll, 2004: 91).

To Be or Not to Be, That Is the Question: Obsession with Immortality

What is the fundamental driving force behind human behavior? I believe the answer to this most significant and complex of humanity’s query could be essentially environmental. Many have tried to answer this question: Freud calls it libido, Nietzsche calls it the will to power, Darwin calls it survival. The terms may be different but it seems that most of them share certain commonalities. In search of a better terminology and hopefully a more comprehensive outlook, I propose that the guiding principle underlying human behavior is “obsession with immortality”, a desire our environment denies us. The perennial quest for eternal life, the relentless desire to defeat death, degeneration and passage of time, the unyielding need to “be” defines much of our endeavors in life. We might try to deny it, rationalize it, or disparage it; but, we can never escape it. After all, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the oldest tale ever written (that we know of), is primarily about a hero who fails in his quest of eternal life.

Offred, on her walk with Ofglen, passes by an old church which was built hundreds of years ago. Her description of the churchyard serves as a reminder that there is no escaping the overbearing presence of death, mortality and passage of time: “The old gravestones are still there, weathered, eroding, with their skulls and crossed bones, *memento mori*, their dough-faced angels, their winged hourglasses to remind us of the passing of mortal time” (Atwood, 1985: 40). When Crake takes Jimmy to the RejoovenEsense Compound for a preliminary tour, the latter is astonished by how spectacular everything is. Jimmy wonders how they can afford such an establishment: “‘Grief in the face of inevitable death,’ said Crake. ‘The wish to stop time. The human condition’” (Atwood, 2003: 291–292). Toby, stuck in hostile post-apocalyptic world, reflects upon the unwelcomed and quite feared concept of death: “Any death is stupid from the viewpoint of whoever is undergoing it... because no matter how much you’ve been warned, Death always comes without knocking. Why now? is the cry. Why so soon? It’s the cry of a child being called home at dusk, it’s the universal protest against Time” (Atwood, 2010: 326).

This obsession finds its apotheosis in alchemy, the alluring quality of the promise of an afterlife in religions, modern Life extension science and so forth. The apocalypse of Atwood’s trilogy is a child begotten of this obsession: “Glenn was vague about what they were working on. *Immortality* was a word he used – Rejoov had been interested in it for decades, something about changing your cells so they’d never die; people would pay a lot for immortality, he said” (Atwood, 2010: 305). Cryonics is yet another offspring of this preoccupation. CryoJeenyus, not unlike the real Alcor Life Extension Foundation, profits from people’s fear of “not being”: “What a scam that place was. You paid to get your head frozen when you died in case someone in the future invented a way to regrow a body onto your neck” (Atwood, 2010: 293). Crake believes what makes human beings different from animals is the fact that they “hope they can stick their souls into someone else, some new version of themselves, and live on forever” (Atwood, 2003: 120). If God is not prepared to give us the means to live forever in this world “naturally,” we have no problem playing Him: “There’d been a lot of fooling around in those days: create-an-animal was so much fun, said the guys doing it; it made you feel like God” (Atwood, 2003: 51).

It is not only the survival of the individual that is of paramount significance to us; but, on a quite larger scale, we are preoccupied with the survival of humanity as a species. The unparalleled value of the Handmaids rely on the sacred nature of the service they provide by their rare viable ovaries. The Republic of Gilead prides itself on having taken

the necessary measures so that women now “can fulfill their biological destinies in peace” free from all the worries that haunted women and mothers of the past (Atwood, 1985: 248). The Marthas and the Handmaids live in a merciless Darwinian world where senility or any sign of weakness or disease that would hinder their productivity can prove to be lethal: “You don’t see that many old women around anymore” (Atwood, 1985: 198). Sterile women such as Serena Joy are considered “defeated women” because they cannot procreate (Atwood, 1985: 62). Atwood herself defines the value of her craft, i.e. storytelling, from an evolutionary perspective. Storytelling is important because it warrants our survival as a species by the evolutionary advantage it provides us. In a 2014 article, entitled “Why Readers and Writers Are So Fixated with Dystopian Visions”, for the *Financial Times*, Atwood asserts that by telling stories, we are in fact passing on crucial information that can be used to increase our odds of survival. Atwood explains, “if you can tell the kids a story about how Fred got eaten by a crocodile, they don’t have to discover the child-eating propensities of crocodiles first-hand, and may live to pass on their DNA”. The stories give us the chance to “to choose between complex alternatives, and to act together to achieve a common goal”. In this sense, her cautionary tales of future should be taken as a guide that can help us to choose a better path if we are to continue living on planet earth. The destruction of the natural environment is synonymous with self-eradication. Though essentially anthropocentric, I believe such perspective can potentially de-center humanity of its presumed dominant position. In other words, it is not the earth that needs saving but us. We are not doing anybody any kindness but ourselves if we treat our environment better.

Analogously, the few who have weathered the Waterless Flood consider seriously how they can continue the human race now that a large population of *Homo sapiens* has been eradicated. When Ren is pleading with the crew to find a way to rescue Amanda, the best excuse that she can come up with is that Amanda can really help “rebuild the human race” (Atwood, 2010: 389). Later on, Ren, faced with the challenges of the post-apocalyptic world, begins to wonder if bringing a baby into this brave new world of theirs is such a good idea. Swift Fox interestingly observes that they may not have much of a choice in the matter. It is how we are programmed to behave: “‘Not sure you’ll have that option,’ says Swift Fox. ‘In the long run. Anyway, we owe it to the human race. Don’t you think?’” (Atwood, 2014: 157). The Surfacers, dealing with the guilt of having an abortion, holds herself accountable for her failed marriage as she construes that what her husband wanted (i.e. procreation) was just what any “normal” man would want (Atwood,

1998: 44). After all, the arguably cruelest curse of literature, i.e. that of infertility, is cast upon an individual culpable of the most horrendous crime, i.e. leaving a loved one unprotected in the natural world. King Lear is thrown from the civilized world and the safety of his palaces into the untamed world of nature by his daughters. In response, he demands the utmost punishment for the deadliest sin. He wants his daughter to be robbed of her fertility (Shakespeare, 2005: 1.4.273–279).

We desperately seek constancy, permanency and longevity: we seek to be immortal. It is due to this preoccupation with death, aging and mortality that we are resentful of natural processes of change. However, the natural world operates in the exact opposite direction of what we yearn for. *Phusis*, the Greek word from which the word physical is derived, contains in itself the idea of change. Trevor Norris, considering Heidegger’s argument of pre-Socratic understanding of the natural world, explains that *phusis* “is a dynamic conception of the natural world that stands in distinction to the conventional attitude toward nature which imagines it as the material substrate of being, as mere matter awaiting the purpose and utility of man” (2011: 116). In this sense, being is dual: “Beings change. Beings emerge into being. Beings cease to be. ...being as *phusis* contains as its essential nature both *coming to presence* or *absencing*, or ceasing to be” (2011: 123). Therefore, *phusis* stands against Heidegger’s metaphysics of presence which privileges constant presence to endless plays of absence and presence. We even try to preserve our dead bodies from the natural processes of decay or rather changing: “The reason they invented coffins, to lock the dead in, preserve them, they put makeup on them; they didn’t want them spreading or changing into anything else” (Atwood, 1998: 151).

The laws of nature not only subdue human bodies but also human creations. Snowman, after an afternoon storm, upon seeing a sign of Men at Work, laments the human civilization that is being taken over by the destructive, malicious natural world. It seems that nothing we build, no matter how sturdy, can stand forever: “Strange to think of the endless labour, the digging, the hammering, the carving, the lifting, the drilling, day by day, year by year, century by century; and now the endless crumbling that must be going on everywhere. Sandcastles in the wind” (Atwood, 2003: 45). Surfacer is puzzled to see that her father would use a fast-decaying wood to build a house. Her bafflement stems from a human necessity; we and whatever we create are here to remain: “Cedar isn’t the best wood, it decays quickly. Once my father said ‘I didn’t build it to last forever’ and I thought then, Why not? Why didn’t you’ (Atwood, 1998: 30)? Toby remembers Adam One preaching about this

exact phenomenon: “Once the tree roots get in ... once they really take hold, no human-built structure stands a chance” (Atwood, 2014: 31–32).

Shakespeare, in his sonnet 55, expresses a similar sentiment pertaining to the statues and the monuments we build just to disclose the fact that he has conceived of a better plan. He proudly believes that his poetry is his salvation: “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme” (2005: 1–2). In his sonnet 18, Shakespeare admits the impermanency of this world; yet, he offers his beloved the gift of immortality through his poetry as placation: “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (2005: 13–14). But his plan is decidedly flawed. His poetry might survive longer than marble and gilded monuments; yet, this does not mean in any way that his rhyme will go on living forever. He might have an upper hand over kings and princes; however, if human civilization is to be thoroughly annihilated along with all records of it, then there would be no Shakespeare’s rhyme to read. After the long-feared Waterless Flood occurs, Snowman has only fleeting memories of bits and pieces of different books. It seems that it may take a long time; but, eventually, everything, even our ideas, books and Shakespeare’s rhymes, will perish from the surface of the earth: “For all works of Man will be as words written on water”, as Adam One predicts (Atwood, 2010: 312). To add insult to injury, Atwood has set her stories in near future to reinforce the sense of immediacy. Such end is not only quite possible but also far closer than we might like to believe.

One last issue to be considered regarding to human obsession with immortality is behaviors that work against such preoccupation. Undesirability of immortality depicted in many works of literature, I believe, is a response to the unattainability of such state. We imagine that our wild fantasy of living forever has come true; then we look for ways to sabotage it as we know that fulfillment of such desire is beyond the bounds of possibility (at least until near future). We cheerily conclude that eternal life is synonymous with eternal torment labeling it a curse rather than a blessing. The plight of *struldbrugs*, an immortal race among Luggnaggians in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, is a brilliant case in point. Gulliver is in raptures at the prospect of the *struldbrugs* who are “born exempt from that universal calamity of human nature” (1819: 184). He believes that as an immortal, he would become “a living treasury of knowledge and wisdom ... the oracle of the nation” (1819: 185–186). However, nothing is ever that easy when it comes to human drama. Although *struldbrugs* do not die, they continue aging. Eternal life without eternal youth renders them miserable, absent-minded and reviled creatures who have to suffer the infirmities of old age for all eternity.

Gulliver stands corrected: “I grew heartily ashamed of the pleasing visions I had formed; and thought no tyrant could invent a death into which I would not run with pleasure, from such a life”. He believes that if he could send a few of these *struldrugs* to his country, he would arm his people “against the fear of death” (1819: 191). In this way, Gulliver turns death, the foulest of notions, into something much sought after. The king of terrors, the most terrible of all terribles as Aristotle puts it (2009: 49), becomes a blessing in disguise.

Examples of this type of disparagements abound in literary works. We live in a world where even our so-called “invincible” heroes are not so invincible after all: Achilles and his heel, Esfandiyār and his eyes, Superman and kryptonite. Imagining a perfect, happy world where we do not have to die is just too unrealistic. In Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles*, unlike *struldrugs*, the vampires are ageless; however, they feel cursed because they find it strenuous to cope with the fast changes taken place in the world. Samuel Johnson, in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, cautions that “life protracted is protracted woe” (2015: 258). He claims that even if you enjoy a moderately peaceful life free from the plagues of maladies and misfortunes, you will eventually be left to bear witness to the death and sorrow of the people you most love (2015: 301–302). In “El Inmortal,” Jorge Luis Borges tackles yet another downside of immortality; that is the state of inertia and feeling of apathy when faced with a never-ending existence: “They knew that in an infinite period of time, all things happen to all men” (1964: 114). The hero of the story unequivocally laments his decision to become “immortal”, and jumps at the chance to drink from a river that offers the sweet taste of death. To put it shortly, we never come short of imaginative ways to come up with a worthy reason why we should steer clear of immortality. It seems that we are just trying too hard to prove to ourselves that we do not desperately crave immortality. However, the more we try, the more we betray our hidden desire of self-preservation. Such portrayals are reminiscent of Aesop’s fable of the sour grapes in which the unfulfilled fox, with an “air of dignity and unconcern”, remarks, “I thought those grapes were ripe, but I see now they are quite sour” (1994: 23). Or rather these imagined situations create a safe place where we can exercise choice rather than succumbing to death as destiny.

However, our plan to defeat death is much more extensive than the relentless concoction of excuses of its desirability. If immortality cannot be achieved in its literal sense, we seek to realize it figuratively. We are indeed immortal if we are remembered by people after we die. Fame is a good way out for us, and curiously, it seems that it is of no grave import for exactly what we are remembered: there is no such thing as bad

publicity, as they say. H.H. Holmes, Aileen Wuornos, Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy, Richard Ramirez, Ed Gein and so forth are all too familiar names that seem to have mesmerized us regardless of their notoriety. The weight and gruesomeness of the atrocities they have committed serve as a perfect mnemonic aid to ensure their retention in the memories of the generations to come. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise if we are faced with individuals trying to follow in their well-known footsteps. Indeed, there is virtually nothing from which we would shy away if our survival, may it be literal or figurative, depends on it. When the Surfer and her search squad are on a canoe trying to catch a fish, she is relieved to know that their lives do not depend on their success: “Starvation, bite your arm and suck the blood, that’s what they do on lifeboats; or the Indian way, if there’s no bait try a chunk of your flesh” (Atwood, 1998: 60). Self-cannibalism is a revealing testament to the lengths we are willing to go to ensure our survival.

A similar case can be made regarding mass shootings. James Holmes, who opened fire on hundreds of moviegoers at a *Batman* premiere in 2012, did indeed manage to etch his emotionless face adorned by a bright orange-dyed hair in our memories. Intriguingly, researchers have come to believe that we can diminish the frequency of rampage shooting events by curtailing the amount of exposure the shooters enjoy in the media as apparently these events, like viruses, are contagious. The mass killers crave the infamy; therefore, it’s best we keep their faces and identities concealed. By depriving them a legacy, we take away at least one of their strongest of motivations. Schulman, writing on the subject of rampage shooting in the November 8, 2013 issue of the *Wall Street Journal*, reports that “Dr. Mullen spoke to a perpetrator who ‘gleefully admitted that he was going for the record’. Investigators found that the Newtown shooter kept a ‘score sheet’ of previous mass shootings. He may have deliberately calculated how to maximize the grotesqueness of his act.” This is exactly the point Atwood makes regarding the people who hanker after a grand finale to their obscure, miserable lives. Jimmy and Crake visit nitee-nite.com which is an assisted-suicide site. This site is a telling example of human beings’ desperate attempt to make a mark of their own on this world. As the narrator reports, there is a positive correlation between the amount of attention people are paying to this site and the number of people willing to participate (Atwood, 2003: 83–84). It seems the only event worth remembering when it comes to these people’s miserable lives is their final act of self-eradication which Crake sadistically enjoys probably due to its exposure of the depth of humanity’s desperation.

One might ask, what about the rest of people? What about the ordinary people who are not willing to commit atrocities or make a fool out of ourselves on Instagram? How may they make their own mark in this world? How do they manage to immortalize themselves? The ordinary people whose words and deeds will never “fork lightning” find their little piece of immortality in reproduction. We, or rather our genes if not our names, survive through our children. While struggling to come into terms with her abortion, Surfacer acknowledges that losing a child is like losing a part of yourself, or rather literally a part of your own flesh: “A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget” (Atwood, 1998: 45). Even the almighty green-eyed Crake makes the eyes of all his “children” the same color as if he wants to pass on a part of himself in the next generation. Moreover, the Crakers are named after prominent historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Simone de Beauvoir, Marie Antoinette, Picasso, Napoleon, Sojourner Truth and so forth as if Crake wanted to retain bits and pieces of human civilization if not the whole of it. It is true that Crake takes drastic measures to ensure that all human flaws are corrected in his own version of humanity; yet he is not free from the potentially destructive impulse of self-preservation.

Richard Dawkins, in *The Selfish Gene*, dauntlessly asserts that “We are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes” (1989: xxi). The gene seeks immortality by any means necessary and the individual follows in its footsteps. On a similar note, Richard D. Alexander maintains “ethics, morality, human conduct, and the human psyche are to be understood only if societies are seen as collections of individuals seeking their own self-interest” (1987: 3). While struggling to survive in a post-apocalyptic environment, Toby remembers one of the most important rules of Zeb’s Urban Bloodshed Limitation classes: “the first bloodshed to be limited should be your own” (Atwood, 2010: 22). However, Dawkins adds that “there are special circumstances in which a gene can achieve its own selfish goals best by fostering a limited form of altruism at the level of individual animals” (1989: 2) probably building upon Hobbes’ notion of enlightened self-interest as philosopher Mary Midgley suggests. In this sense, human beings at least possess “the mental equipment to foster our long-term selfish interests rather than merely our short-term selfish interests” (1989: 200). Nonetheless, “pure, disinterested altruism” does not have a place in nature (1989: 201). Even Lucerne questions the sincerity of the Gardeners who are doing their best to lower their impact on the environment as much as possible. She sees their efforts as a result

of their masochistic tendencies rather than their biophilic impulses (Atwood, 2010: 114).

“The problem with art from Crake’s perspective”, Bergthaller, with an eye on humanity’s tendency towards unbridled violence, argues, “is that it fails to effectively countervail the destructive aspects of human nature, which stem *not* merely from a failure of the imagination, but have their roots in human biology” (2010: 735–736). Dawkins’s proposed solution to this predicament is rebellion against our nature and creators: “Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs, something that no other species has ever aspired to” (1989: 3). Dawkins’ proposition seems scandalous; going against our “natural” inclinations does not seem to be the proper response at first glance. However, natural/artificial hierarchy is another constructed binary opposition to which there is no inherent truth. Stanley Milgram’s experiment revealed to us that we are indeed inclined to obey authority figures at expense of our own personal conscience, and go as far as condemning millions of innocent people to death. Solomon Asch’s experiment demonstrated that we tend to conform to the majority view even when there is clear proof that they are decidedly mistaken in their assessments. Whatever comes “naturally” to us should not necessarily dictate our actions. It is human nature to seek immortality heedless of consequences; however, we should ask ourselves to what point it is to our (and others’) long-term interest to continue? If we are fully conscious of the operations of our natural inclinations, especially our worse tendencies that can potentially lead to our extinction and destruction of the world, then we are much better equipped to manipulate them for the greater good.

We Hope, Therefore We Are: Hope as an Evolutionary Concept

In Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone*, the chorus sings: “*Et puis, surtout, c’est reposant, la tragédie, parce qu’on sait qu’il n’y a plus d’espoir, le sale espoir*” (And then above all, tragedy is restful as we know there is no longer any hope, that rotten thing) [*my translation*] (1960: 63). Is “*le sale espoir*” a fitting apposition? Is hope really a nasty, foul thing that contaminates us to aggravate our misery? Is April indeed “the cruellest month” (Eliot, 2010: 1) that just sets us up for more and more disappointments? Or is hope a necessity in any human drama, tragic or otherwise? I have to disagree with Steiner who claims that an authentic tragedy evades any sense of hope (2004: 4) if the yardstick of authenticity is a truthful representation of human condition. Hope is the very thing that is begotten of humanity’s tragic existence. In Pandora’s

Box, the only good thing amidst the innumerable plagues, sorrows and mischiefs is dear old “Hope” itself (Hamilton, 1942: 88). Even the uniquely woeful and gloomy world of Norse mythology does not entirely relinquish a sense of hope. The prophecy of a time of happiness, however infinitely remote, makes the oppressive anticipation of *Ragnarök* bearable (Hamilton, 1942: 462). No matter how bleak the situation is, humans always find a way to see the light, however flimsy, at the end of the tunnel as that very quality of being “strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (Tennyson, 1994: 69–70) is essential to our survival.

The characters of Atwoodian fictional world are not prepared to forgo hope either. In fact, they see hope as the eternal tool for survival: As Adam One would have it, “Let us remember: It is better to hope than to mope” (Atwood, 2010: 89)! Offred explains that the very act of hoping for a better future is an art in itself that they have mastered: “We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the air; and it was still in the air, an after-thought, as we tried to sleep” (Atwood, 1985: 4). She also avers that the Aunts manipulate the Handmaids by playing the hope card. The promise of a better future is the carrot they dangle in front of the fertile women to keep them in check (Atwood, 1985: 209). Through *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* ‘Historical Notes,’ Atwood opens a window into future. Utilizing dystopian prophesy, Atwood points poignantly to near future dangers. However, the fact that humankind have weathered the environmental devastation to hold such a symposium for the study of past generations is an evidence of her ultimately optimistic vision. Atwood’s stance is one of paradox: she is as much as a pessimist that she is an optimist as hope inevitably is the everlasting concomitant of tragedy. Environmental activists themselves are no stranger to such a paradoxical standpoint. They ardently magnify how we are laying waste to everything around us only because they believe we can reverse our impending doom. Therefore, Atwood’s apocalyptic vision is to be construed as more of an attempt to avert the environmental decline by persuasive means rather than a dire prediction of the end of the world: “If we cultivate our Mother’s garden”, as Sharon Rose Wilson suggests, “the book implies the possibility of rebirth” (1993: 294).

“If fungus, one of the ‘lowliest’ of forms on a humanistic scale of values, were to go extinct tomorrow”, Christopher Manes argues, “the effect on the rest of the biosphere would be catastrophic,... In contrast, if *Homo sapiens* disappeared, the event would go virtually unnoticed by the vast majority of Earth’s life forms” (1996: 24). This is exactly the point Atwood makes in her trilogy. Planet earth will survive; however,

this survival may not include *Homo sapiens*. Toby notices that after the “Waterless Flood” almost all human life has been destroyed. However, annihilation of humanity is not synonymous with termination of all life on earth. She even wonders if planet earth with all its other creatures is better off now that humanity for all intents and purposes is out of the picture (Atwood, 2010: 3). Although the relevance of humanity’s survival is debatable with regard to the overall order of things, Atwood is not willing to forgo her innate desire of survival, at least in her earlier fiction. However, in *Maddaddam* Trilogy, we are faced with a strong possibility that the flawed *Homo sapiens* will be replaced by the genetically modified Crakers. Humanity’s likely extinction helps us better understand that “there are genetic dead ends in evolution,” Harland explains, “and that humans like us are likely candidates for extinction, given our lack of stewardship of the planet” not unlike the replaced Neanderthals (2016: 1). Therefore, it is safe to assume that Atwood is taking a more pessimistic approach in her recent fiction; however, I argue against a total abandonment of hope. If we are not to continue as *Homo sapiens*, at least some version of us will survive in Crakers. Besides the inter-species procreation, it is evident that the Crakers are increasingly becoming more “human” toward the end as they begin to learn to read and tell stories.

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